

Midlands Voices: Rich learning environments needed

By Blane McCann | Posted: Wednesday, February 18, 2015 1:00 am

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School choice continues to be at the forefront of education reform.

I and the other superintendents of the Metropolitan Omaha Educational Consortium expect school choice conversations to take place during the current session of the Nebraska Legislature. My colleagues asked that I share my experiences with school choice. These experiences include all forms of school choice.

What I have learned is that the factors driving the success of any choice program are similar to what drives the success of a public school.

Achievement begins with highly qualified and committed teachers who engage students in a rich learning environment. The governance structure of a school rarely influences student achievement by itself.

While structure is important, to transform schools, we must set high expectations for all students to aspire to; provide comprehensive readily available systems of support; and develop and implement best learning practices that deepen students' understanding of content and strengthen their ability to be independent lifelong learners.

Recent studies at Stanford University's Center for Research on Educational Outcomes, along with results in Michigan and Wisconsin, indicate that charter school outcomes are mixed at best.

Last year, a Detroit Free Press investigation highlighted that more than \$1 billion paid into charter school opportunities had not resulted in increased student achievement. The Free Press also found that Michigan's charter schools, as a whole, fared no better than traditional public schools in educating students in poverty.

Just as troubling, the Wisconsin State Journal reported that during a 10-year period, Wisconsin taxpayers paid \$139 million to schools that were ultimately terminated from a voucher program for failing to meet expectations and state requirements.

In my experience, the most successful charter schools were created by existing school districts and university systems. My former district embedded a successful charter school within its high school.

In contrast, I have not seen positive results when municipalities or outside agencies not regulated in a similar fashion to public schools were allowed to create charters. Too often, charter schools siphon away funding and students from an already cash-strapped public school system.

When charter schools first were created, they were designed to be incubators of educational innovation. The hope was that the best ideas discovered at charter schools could eventually be replicated in public schools, leading to transformation throughout an entire system.

Unfortunately, charters instead ended up competing with public schools. Sharing best practices, while a noble intention, simply did not occur in either direction. Further, charter schools have frequently failed to change the basic model of educating students, perpetuating an outdated model of learning.

Fortunately, through the Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties, a vehicle exists — called the Focus School concept — that allows Learning Community districts to collaborate and develop innovative ideas.

Regrettably, only one focus school has been created since the Learning Community came into existence. It is now supported by Omaha Public Schools.

Likewise, Learning Community school districts are collaborating with local hospitals, businesses, community colleges and the Henry Doorly Zoo to create rich learning environments through a variety of choice opportunities for students.

With cultivation and proper funding mechanisms, additional focus schools and student academies could be created, and charter and voucher schools would be unnecessary.

Furthermore, I believe the concept of Innovation Zones is worth examining. Innovation Zones are a district, school or a group of schools in a local or state public education system that are afforded the independence, authority and incentive to pursue innovation free from unnecessary interference. All schools within Innovation Zones are more likely to be transformed by implementing rich learning environments and not by creating additional governance structures.

By collaborating with the Nebraska Department of Education and removing regulatory obstacles for all schools — and not just charter or voucher schools — all schools are encouraged to innovate and achieve excellence.

Technology is becoming an influence in the transformation of learning. It helps personalize education by encouraging academic engagement, promoting deep learning and allowing students to learn at their own pace. This kind of learning helps every student but is especially galvanizing for students living in poverty.

Creating settings that encourage all students to follow their interests and passions in a flexible environment is the type of choice that will lead to improved results. Rich learning environments in all schools, not just selected ones, will nurture our next generation of leaders.

Rich, customized learning approaches provide the ultimate educational choice.