

Management Experience is Paramount

This month, the Colorado Association of School Executives bestowed the honor of “state superintendent of the year” to a man named John Barry. People may be interested to know that John Barry, who leads the Aurora, Colorado schools, does not have a background in education. Barry – General John Barry, that is, is a distinguished retired two-star major general from the U.S. Air Force.

After serving our nation for 30 years, managing large organizations at the state, national and global levels and even leading the Space Shuttle Columbia accident investigation, Gen. Barry decided to serve his country in an equally important way, as a school superintendent. Barry’s success today in leading his school district to accomplish its mission of raising student achievement, particularly for low-income students, has brought him his state’s top superintendent honor.

Like the military sector, the business sector has produced great management talent. For example, Paula Dawning, AT&T’s former vice president of sales, went on to lead one of the poorest and most chronically underperforming urban school systems in Michigan: Benton Harbor. Under her management, fourth grade reading test scores improved more than 100 percent in just two years, and the dropout rate decreased 20 percent. Like Barry, Dawning was also named state superintendent of the year.

As New Yorkers consider whether Cathie Black is qualified to run the New York City Department of Education, it is worth looking at why leaders without education backgrounds, like Barry and Dawning, have succeeded, and what leadership skills and experience are truly essential in order to see student gains.

At first glance, it seems strange to suggest that a leader outside of an industry is worthy of leading within that industry. However, many other nontraditional superintendents across the country have led their districts to raise student achievement – among them: former Chicago Superintendent Arne Duncan, former Denver Superintendent Michael Bennett, and former San Diego Superintendent Alan Bersin.

So how is it that leaders without backgrounds in education have been able to guide public school districts to raise student achievement?

The answer lies in the fact that one of the main reasons that teachers and students today do not have the support they need to succeed in the classroom is because too many superintendents with expertise in teaching and learning unfortunately do not have the knowledge and experience necessary to efficiently and effectively run multi-million or billion dollar enterprises and deliver results.

In other words, what we have on our hands is a management problem. Without an outstanding manager at the top, teachers and students don’t get the support they need. Managers are responsible for setting workplace policies under which teachers can succeed. Managers are responsible for negotiating contracts that create the conditions under which teachers can succeed. Managers are responsible for making sure that central office employees directly support what our military friends call the “front lines” in education – teachers in the classroom.

Managers are responsible for making sure that student interests, rather than vendor, contractor or political interests – remain front and center in central office decisions. And managers are responsible for budgeting, tracking and efficiently allocating resources – across transportation, facilities, human resources, and operations – so as to push all possible dollars down to the classroom, so teachers can earn more and students have the learning opportunities they deserve.

We don't have to look far to find dozens of large city school districts nationwide that have been close to – if not in – bankruptcy in recent years, even before the recession. Without the strongest manager on top, millions of precious taxpayer dollars dedicated to educating our children have too often gone missing, unaccounted for or have fallen into the pockets of contractors. And what's left may or may not be spent on efforts likely to raise student achievement and close chronic income and ethnic achievement gaps, although that is our national goal.

For example, it took the Governor of Michigan appointing a leader outside of education – Robert Bobb – to discover that Detroit Public Schools had been distributing paychecks to hundreds of “people” who were deceased. Those paychecks were being cashed.

Another large city school district central office recently “managed” thousands of school buses by moving around colored string on the wall, even though a multi-million dollar piece of software designed to efficiently manage transportation lay unopened in the closet. Students and teachers surely could have benefitted from having millions more in the classroom. And community members whose taxes funded that software surely would have preferred that it be efficiently applied toward efforts that directly served students.

This sad state of affairs is not the fault of teachers or parents – it is the fault of management. Because of a lack of strong management, students, teachers and taxpayers in cities nationwide have been shortchanged.

To be successful, chancellors or superintendents must quickly learn from the greatest minds and research available on how to improve their organization's ability to engage all students at high academic levels, which is fundamental to setting strategy and producing results. And, they must be surrounded by outstanding experts in teaching and learning. The New York City Department of Education is fortunate to have such experts at the cabinet level.

But our experience shows that it is not necessary that superintendents themselves have backgrounds in education. A great education leader can learn the operations side, and a great business leader can learn the education side. But the most important thing is to get the best manager possible – with a track record like Cathie Black – in place while the opportunity exists.

--Eli Broad, founder of The Eli and Edythe Broad Foundations, which funds The Broad Superintendents Academy