



Cleveland schools' transformation part of national trend

By Thomas Ott, The Plain Dealer

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Dr. Eugene Sanders is introduced on the night he first laid out his plan to transform the Cleveland schools.

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- The Cleveland school district isn't alone in shutting down low-performing buildings, moving to cut employees and promising to blow up old ways of doing business. It seems to be happening everywhere.

Tight budgets, years of enrollment decline and public frustration with chronically poor test scores are compelling urban districts across the country to make drastic changes. The federal government and foundations, both national and local, are supplying an incentive with money that rewards radical restructuring.

Cleveland schools CEO Eugene Sanders has spent 30 years in education and can't recall ever seeing such a confluence of "game-changing forces." The currents share a common source: Desperation to increase the nation's supply of skilled and college-ready graduates.

"People are just demanding higher performance among public schools and particularly urban public schools," he said.

The influence of economic stress is what separates this wave of school reform from those that preceded it, said Scott Stephens of **Catalyst Ohio**, a magazine focused on urban education.

"What you're seeing is an emphasis more and more on market-based reform rather than traditional reform," said Stephens, a former Plain Dealer reporter. "I think part of it's philosophical, part of it's fiscal."

Mass school closings are grabbing most of the attention. Kansas City recently decided to shut nearly half of its schools, Detroit almost a fourth. Cleveland's school board voted early last month to close 16 of 100-plus buildings.

Cleveland also may join districts that are lopping off employees. The Cleveland Teachers Union has said that more than 650 of its members may lose their jobs. Sanders has declined to confirm the figure.

Surveys taken by the American Association of School Administrators found that 6 percent of its members closed schools this year and that nearly twice as many plan to do so next year. Casualties will probably continue to climb in 2012 as school districts face their worst financial problems in nearly a century, said Daniel Domenech, the group's executive director.

But consolidation is only part of the picture. Districts, including Cleveland, are reworking what remains after the dust settles. The combination -- the closing of failing or underused schools and then the concentration of scarce resources in what seems to be effective -- is fashionably called "transformation."

Leaders buzz about holding their schools more accountable, teaching 21st century skills, upgrading "human capital" -- the administrative and teaching staffs -- and giving poor families quality school options. Districts are moving to streamline bureaucracies, shift authority to principals, involve outside partners and use student-achievement data to shape instruction and evaluate employee performance.

"Some things got lost in the national press we received," said Eileen Houston-Stewart, spokeswoman for the Kansas City schools. "It's not just about closing buildings; it's about what's taking place in the buildings."

Detroit, which has been closing schools for years, is essentially bankrupt and under control of a financial manager appointed by Michigan's governor. Academic reform efforts have ended in one failure after another. Proficiency levels on national achievement tests are in single-digit percentages, causing community leaders to declare that enough is enough.

Marshaled by foundations, a community-district alliance called Excellent Schools Detroit has drawn a blueprint for reform. Most notable is a plan to set up an independent Standards and Accountability Commission that will train a spotlight on poor performing schools -- public and private -- and push for liquidating those that don't improve.

"We feel we are in full crisis," said Dan Varner, chief executive officer of ThinkDetroit PAL, an organization that promotes youth development through athletics. "We have a broad array of folks at the table; this wasn't just education experts."

Experts say the urban district is evolving from the industrial-era, mass-production model into a portfolio of schools -- some conventional, some theme, some run by charters or other outside managers -- that gives families choices and attempts to meet individual children on their widely varying skill levels.

Michael Casserly, executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools in Washington, D.C., predicts considerable gains in urban students' achievement but says the improvement won't result from options alone. Another key, he said, will be using student achievement data to plan instruction and providing schools with training to execute successful approaches.

Prodded by the Obama administration, districts are pressing for use of data to evaluate, assign, fire and pay teachers. And unions, with jobs in jeopardy because of the economy, are showing signs of acquiescing.

Policy groups, concerned about who goes when the budget ax does fall, have begun to take aim at seniority rights. Casserly said that will be a tougher fight.

Test scores are up in New Orleans, where the state took over more than 100 schools after Hurricane Katrina struck in 2005. While the extreme conditions in New Orleans prompted Louisiana officials to intervene, Casserly said takeovers are on the wane because states are in a financial stranglehold of their own and don't

have the money.

Superintendent Paul Vallas in part credits the improvements there to the use of test data to guide programs and get help for struggling students and teachers. But he also operates free of a teachers union that no longer has a contract.

The district has adopted an 11-month school year and eight-hour, 15-minute day, and principals have authority to appoint their teachers. Officials have converted a majority of the schools to charter or "charter-like" operations and aggressively get rid of principals and teachers who aren't performing.

Tulane University researcher Michael Schwam-Baird acknowledged the overall rise in test scores but said high schools have made only marginal gains. He said it was unclear whether the improvement resulted from district reforms or other factors, including a large influx of federal cash.

American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten has urged Cleveland and other affiliates to maintain an open mind and keep all issues on the table. She also has acknowledged the need for speedier removal of bad teachers.

But Weingarten said many in the debate are obsessed with punishing teachers and overlook other reasons why schools fail. The keys to teachers' success, she said, are a revamped curriculum, safe schools, smaller classes, collaboration among staff and partnerships between schools and social-service agencies.

"Because you're facing a lot of tough choices, you're hearing a lot of screaming and a lot of demonizing instead of people working together," she said.

The latest urban school reforms have not been tested enough to know whether districts have at long last hit on the right formula. The only certainty is that school leaders are willing, for the moment, to employ a variety of strategies at once.

What may seem like flailing is actually "applied common sense," said Paul Hill, director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington. After years of failure, urban schools recognize that different children respond to different approaches.

"Districts are saying, 'Instead of doing everything one way, we're going to look for opportunities to get effective schools any way we can,' " said Hill. "It's sort of going from one fairly restrictive mode to more 'Let's figure out what we can do that works.' "

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