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Slow go for school change likely

Mayor Jackson's call for collaboration among districts draws welcome but muted response

By JAY MILLER

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For the second year in a row, Cleveland Mayor Frank Jackson closed his State of the City address expressing his desire that Cuyahoga County school districts work together more closely and efficiently.

It is a concept that isn't falling on deaf ears. But for as much as government consolidation and collaboration have become hot topics in the region, the comments of school leaders and elected officials indicate that any close alliances among school districts likely will be at the bottom of most to-do lists.

Mayor Jackson in his March 4 speech at the City Club of Cleveland advocated creating a countywide school authority that would look for a common solution to the financing woes of local school districts, would create countywide magnet schools and would find ways for school districts to better share resources and consolidate their purchasing power.

"If we are going to have educational excellence, and become globally competitive, then making systemic changes in education has to happen at the county level," he said.

"If we fail to act on creating educational excellence throughout the county," Mayor Jackson continued, "we will have squandered the greatest opportunity this community has seen in decades to reinvest in and reinvent itself as a thriving city and county for generations to come."

Mayor Jackson's message clearly was directed not only at members of school boards and school administrators with direct responsibility for school districts, but to suburban mayors, whose support of educational collaboration will be critical.

Beachwood Mayor Merle Gorden, who came downtown to hear Mayor Jackson's speech, is on the same page, though like Mayor Jackson, he doesn't yet know what a county education authority should look like.

"If we don't get together and talk about it and try to forecast where we want to go with this region as far as education, we are truly missing the boat," Mayor Gorden said in a telephone interview. "If we as community leaders don't focus on something and start some discussions, it's just not going to happen."

Pointedly missing from Mayor Jackson's call to action was any mention of school district consolidation, a

move that likely would be resisted by more affluent districts. Though some school officials believe some measure of consolidation must happen as education finances tighten, and the state of Ohio's budget crunch may force the issue on some districts, Mayor Jackson realizes that he, as head of the region's most troubled district, can't be the one to initiate the conversation.

Richard Markwardt, superintendent of Beachwood City Schools, said there is an aversion to consolidation, particularly among smaller districts, and that even larger districts have created small learning communities within large schools, suggesting that bigger isn't necessarily better. He conceded, however, that consolidation "might make sense from a bureaucratic perspective."

Added Mayor Gorden: "There are positive ways to approach all of (the subjects Mayor Jackson discussed) that are non-threatening to all communities."

Signs of progress

Ohio counties at one time did have county school districts that were supposed to monitor educational standards. Cuyahoga County's school district, though, has morphed into the Educational Services Center of Cuyahoga County, a 1,000-employee organization that provides specialized teachers and staff, such as occupational or speech therapists, for school districts that can't support full-time professionals.

Northern Ohio also has the Ohio Schools Council, a regional council of governments that serves 22 counties. It's where school districts now come together for such things as buying school buses and liability insurance. Districts also have joined ad hoc buying groups for health insurance, said Robert Mengerink, superintendent of the educational services center.

In addition, the 15 school districts that ring the city of Cleveland have joined together in the First Ring Superintendents Collaborative to focus on issues that affect older, more urban school districts, and on developing future school district leaders.

The South Euclid-Lyndhurst school district already is involved in a number of those efforts to pool resources. However, William Kent, president of the South-Euclid Lyndhurst Board of Education and president of Snow Bros. Appliance Co. in Lyndhurst, said he believes tight budgets will push the district to collaborate more.

"We're going to have to look at something," he said. "Tax dollars are too hard to come by."

Mr. Kent mentioned a so-far successful program by the Rittman and Orrville school districts in Wayne County. There, since 2007, the two districts have shared top administrators.

"It's something that's worth looking at," Mr. Kent said. "Everyone has a superintendent and a treasurer; it seems to be a little redundant. But it would be a huge challenge."

James Connell, former superintendent of the Berea schools, currently is the facilitator of the First Ring superintendents group. He said district consolidation "is not something on our table yet," but he acknowledged that the subject comes up in conversation.

"Everything I hear about consolidation having to happen is that it has to happen for somebody else," he said.