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REFORMERS' ROUNDTABLE METRO COLUMN

This week, the Reformers' Roundtable column looks at the Mayor and his ambitious effort to improve city schools. Three Philadelphia reformers comment on what the Mayor can do to make the grade.

The school year began for nearly 170,000 city students last week. The start of classes comes with a new superintendent in charge and a new mayor pushing for Philadelphia to do more for its kids.

According to reformers, Mayor Michael Nutter has a lot to do if he's going to meet his goal of cutting the city's skyrocketing dropout rate in half.

This week's Reformers' Roundtable - Elliot Weinbaum, Senior Researcher, Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE); Helen Cunningham, Executive director, Samuel S. Fels Fund; Gerald Wright, Fathers Day Rally Committee; and Derek Green, special counsel to Council Majority Leader Marian Tasco - address the issue.

What concrete steps can the city take to fulfill Mayor Nutter's inauguration goal of halving the city's dropout rate and doubling educational attainment?

EW: Existing research gives good predictors of which students are likely to dropout before graduation. Resources for intervention and assistance should be targeted to students based on these data.

DG: Mayor Nutter can transform the summer job program into a citywide internship program during the school year. By combining the opportunity to earn money with educational requirements, students will be motivated to graduate and will have an opportunity to develop a future career through their work experiences.

GW: Short term: Focus on students entering eighth, ninth, and 10th grades by providing academic supports like tutors and reduced class size. Long term: Boost local revenue for schools to expand literacy initiatives and reduced class size in elementary grades.

HC: The city should give vigorous financial support to the Philadelphia Education Fund's College Access Centers which guide public high school students into college; to the Re-engagement Centers which support high school dropouts to get diplomas; and Graduate! Philadelphia which helps adults in search of degree completion information. A major media push supported by the City should underpin these efforts.

What sort of help - both fiscal and non-fiscal - should the city, under a new administration, be providing to the district, under new leadership of its own?

EW: The city could assume certain administrative functions that are peripherally related to instruction in order to allow district leadership maximum time to focus on instructional improvement.

DG: The City should leverage its relationships in the business community to develop public/private partnerships for the School District so that additional financial and other resources can be used to help educate our children.

GW: Local funding and operational efficiency must be a top priority. The city should support the call for transparency and public engagement in decision making, particularly regarding school budgets and contracting. Finally, reduce barriers by providing affordable transportation for public school students.

HC: The city, through the Offices of Supportive Housing and Community Behavioral Health should forge tighter partnerships with the School District to support the 5,000 or so homeless kids in the system. Without extra help these kids have frightening potential to drop out.

What's the first thing you would do if given control of the city school district?

EW: Make performance expectations and timelines clear to each principal; provide resources, support, flexibility and incentives; and demand accountability for results.

DG: I would create a one year financial oversight task force that would review all School District expenses as well as develop strategies for obtaining more revenue. This task force would include teachers, internal and external financial advisers, parents, labor representatives, administrators, and business leaders.

GW: I would require all School District staff to speak motivationally about the ability of our children to achieve and to foster a climate of accountability for District staff, just as we expect students to be accountable.

HC: First, I'd accept my yearly responsibility as a City to increase our financial contribution to the School District . Next, I'd raise teachers' pay substantially; provide the highest quality teacher training (like that available right here from the Children's Literacy Initiative);and establish individual teacher accountability . No learning , no job.