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## Omaha Public Schools: Action is the Next Step

Last week, the Omaha Public Schools (OPS) released a 119-page needs analysis conducted by an independent consulting firm. This is one step in a longer strategic planning process that the district, with support from partners like the Omaha Chamber of Commerce, is undergoing. The new OPS School Board and the new Superintendent deserve credit for their courage to ask what is, and is not working within OPS and what must be done to better benefit students. Now, they must take bold action to address many of the inequities highlighted by the needs analysis.

Low expectations have a devastating effect on student achievement. Alarming, the OPS needs analysis highlights that low expectations are pervasive throughout OPS; teachers and staff do not believe all kids can succeed and are particularly pessimistic about the ability of children in poverty and/or children from non-English speaking homes to succeed. Such beliefs impair a student from developing a sense of self as a learner. Further, the analysis found “a lack of effective instructional pedagogy, particularly for students who may traditionally be viewed as at-risk for school failure.”

We know from the experiences of exemplary schools throughout this country, as well as some unique schools within OPS, that students attending high poverty schools are fully capable of achieving academic success. While teachers are essential to such success, they should not bear all of the blame for the low expectation crisis within OPS. Politicians, policy makers, and community members who constantly cite poverty as an excuse for failures in the classroom are responsible for setting the same low expectations on our school leaders and teachers as are being forced upon our students.

We can, and should, empathize with students who come from tough personal and family situations, including those living in poverty. Of course poverty impacts students in a myriad of ways, including in the classroom. But we can no longer tolerate a school system or a society that further penalizes students by layering on low expectations and excuses for failure, things which sabotage children's potential for education achievement. OPS has taken a crucial, positive step by undertaking this strategic planning process. But the magnitude of needed changes, made clear by the needs analysis, means that these changes will take time. Meanwhile, students and families deserve more high-quality options right now.

Throughout this country, high-performing, high-poverty schools are becoming less and less rare. More students are being offered the promise of a high-quality education through effective efforts to promote policies that prioritize students. Prime examples include: Capital Preparatory Magnet School in Hartford, a traditional public school; Charles R. Drew Charter School in Atlanta, a public charter school; and Sacred Heart School in Omaha, a private school. All of these schools have student populations that are high poverty, high minority, and, most importantly, highly effective at educating all kids.

No child should have to wait for an equitable, high-quality education when such education is readily available through simple, no-cost or low-cost policy changes. For this reason, Nebraska should embrace alternative options, such as highly effective, public charter schools and private tuition tax credits, both of which allow more students to attend quality schools with a culture of high expectations for their entire body of students. This is particularly crucial for those students currently trapped in failing schools. These policy shifts, if executed with students as the top priority, would not delay the implementation of much-needed improvements in Omaha Public Schools.



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