



Bipartisan school reform

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Two Democrats and a Republican walk into a room and . . .

Agree on something!

It's no joke. State Rep. Eugene DePasquale, D-York, state Sen. Jeff Piccola, R-parts of northern York County, and York Mayor Kim Bracey stopped by for a visit with our editors last week.

Together.

It was their idea.

They wanted to talk about fixing our failing schools, particularly the city schools of York and Harrisburg.

It was a remarkable show of bipartisan agreement. They all said we need to make changes. We cannot sit by watching class after class post standardized test scores that show they are not learning enough to succeed in this competitive, high-tech world.

Rep. DePasquale candidly acknowledged he moved from the city to the West York Area School District because he and his wife were concerned about their children attending the city schools.

Mayor Bracey said it pained her to hear during

her campaign that many residents say the schools, which she attended, are not adequately serving today's students - and she said the current situation in the district is not acceptable.

Sen. Piccola said that while he's a suburban Republican, fixing the Harrisburg city schools are *his* problem because healthy urban centers are vital to healthy regional communities. (Hmm, sounds like that whole Metro York concept.)

This is exactly the sort of no-nonsense, bipartisan cooperation we will need to solve the problem of failing schools - and a host of other supposedly intractable problems in our society.

But it's one thing for two lawmakers and a mayor sit at a conference table and advocate school reforms.

It's another thing to push specific reforms through a politicized General Assembly without them becoming hopelessly watered down. That's the hard work facing Sen. Piccola and Rep. DePasquale as they move toward reauthorization of the state's Education Empowerment Law by June. The federal No Child Left Behind law requires the state to have such a statute, which among other things spells out the consequences for failing to make "adequate yearly progress" required by NCLB.

The current empowerment law just doesn't have enough teeth.

The York City School District has failed to meet

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federal test score goals for six years, so obviously not enough is being done to remedy the situation.

Rep. DePasquale and Sen. Piccola are proposing changes that would require more intervention in schools that persistently fail to improve.

That intervention could include closing schools or converting them to charter schools, dismissing or reassigning teachers, renegotiating union contracts, longer school days or years, merit pay for successful teachers or administrators, outlawing teacher strikes, state takeover of schools or even dissolution of entire districts.

All of those actions should be on the table when discussing the future of the York school district, which has a school board that's been dysfunctional and averse to reforms - for instance, blindly opposing charter schools that might offer students better opportunities.

Yes, these are some dramatic actions that are sure to be controversial - particularly among educators and their unions - but we must move in this direction if we're to have any hope of slowing and reversing the cycle of failure.

It's not a partisan issue. It's a survival issue - for our children and for our community.

Mayor Bracey, Rep. DePasquale and Sen. Piccola deserve applause for working together on this important issue. The entire York County legislative delegation must get on board to pass

an empowerment law that has enough octane to truly empower school reform.

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