



YDR Opinion: School issues at YorkCounts summit

Updated: 04/20/2011 07:52:14 AM EDT

Assorted thoughts on YorkCounts' education summit last week - and other school-related subjects.

Closing the gap: First of all, cheers to YorkCounts for bringing people together to focus on this important subject.

Opening speaker Elaine Weiss, of the reform group Broader, Bolder Approach to Education, gave an interesting and insightful broad view of school reform issues.

She rightly warned against over-testing and overemphasis on those numbers - while noting that the situation isn't as bad as it's often painted. There have been significant overall improvements among elementary low-income minority students - particularly in math.

Still, there is an achievement gap between students in poor, city neighborhoods and suburban white students - and we must find ways to close that gap.

Ms. Weiss doubted the ability of charters and vouchers to improve that situation much and urged community and school leaders to focus on making sure minority students had enough to eat and had some home life stability.

Easy to say, hard to do.

YorkCounts Executive Director James DeBord followed Ms. Weiss' presentation with a story from his high school days that hit home.

He said we must find ways to close those achievement gaps, and he told a personal story about attending an urban high school and playing on the basketball team. Two friends on that team wound up in jail, he said, and two others worked in the criminal justice system. There must be other opportunities for poor minorities rather than inmate or prison guard.

Teacher training: Central York High School teacher Dayna Laur in her summit presentation focused on a more practical, nuts-and-bolts school issue:

collaboration.

She's involved in teacher training, and she rightly calls for more cooperation between school districts on that effort.

Why spend thousands training many teachers in a particular district when you could train a handful and have them pass the information along to fellow teachers? Why not have several school districts work together on such an effort?

Indeed - why not? We are talking about teachers, after all, who have the skill sets to teach others what they've learned.

Ms. Laur's suggestions made so much sense, it's surprising that what she advocates isn't happening already on a large scale.

Well, it should happen. It must happen. Ideally, we should combine and regionalize school districts to take advantages of administrative economies of scale. But this kind of collaboration among districts is a good alternate - or first - step.

Cyber charter: Cyber charter schools are definitely not for everyone. But they do fit the needs of some students and their families.

So if we're going to have them, it makes more sense for school districts to operate them than outside companies looking to profit from the ventures.

The Southern York School District recently adopted that idea - OKing a proposal to launch its own cyber

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school, the Southern York Digital Academy. The cyber charter will allow students to learn at home but still participate in some in-school classes, sports and other extracurricular activities.

Best of all, it's cheaper for taxpayers than other cyber schools - a savings of some \$5,500 per student.

Dodgeball: Finally, thumbs up to Giantonio DeFelice, a seventh-grader at Dallastown Area Middle School, for responding with maturity and civility to a decision by school officials to bar dodgeball in gym class.

He started a petition and wrote a letter to the editor - which resulted in a news story on Sunday (see the letter on this page).

School officials are probably right that dodgeball would be better as a club or an extracurricular than as a gym activity. Let's hope that happens so Giantonio can still experience the "weekly miracle" of dodgeball.

Thanks to Giantonio for his fun, well-written letter.

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