

Big hopes, but lost chances

Tom Griscom Publisher and Executive Editor
Chattanooga Times Free Press
Feb. 12, 2006

Some seven years into his term as school superintendent, Dr. Jesse Register wrestled with a host of issues.

While being able to attract thousands of dollars in grants from local and national foundations, he was unable to secure five votes on the County Commission in 2004 to approve additional tax dollars for public education.

County Mayor Claude Ramsey made schools a major initiative that year, and the usually behind-the-scenes politician went public with a personal appeal for public education reform.

Following months of reviews and a series of public meetings, the mayor unveiled his five-point plan for educational excellence. At the public announcement, the meeting room at the Convention Center was filled with educators, school board members and community supporters. Noticeably absent from the crowd were most of the politicians who would be faced with the decision to raise taxes to fund the education initiatives: the county commissioners.

Over the ensuing months, the tax debate became more divisive as Mr. Ramsey pressed ahead.

While the school board adopted the education summit goals, the commission — even to this day — failed to take a similar action.

And the education summit's finance committee never completed its work. Its failure to report summed up the differences among a majority of the county commissioners, the school system and those groups that were pro-tax.

The finance committee was unable to identify a common set of numbers to compare the Hamilton County system to other school districts in the state. Trying to determine whether to count an inclass instructor as a teacher or an administrator was but one of the inconsistencies that plagued the review process.

Finance members also wrestled with the school budget, trying to understand an entanglement of local, state and federal dollars.

This is not to imply there was any mismanagement of the funds; there was not. But some in the public and in elected office looked for ways to attach dollars to programs, particularly those in the classroom.

Differences of opinion existed as to funding priorities. Some of those differences stemmed from how business was done in the former city and county school systems.

Busing of children is one example. The city paid for the service while the county used contract bus drivers. In the post-merger era, both systems were retained for a period of time — an eventual mistake. The school system moved toward an in-house bus program, hired an outside management firm, and gave notice that the use of contract bus drivers was not in future plans.

The contract drivers had political connections with several commissioners who represented constituencies in the old county school system. This is not to say that these drivers are not dedicated workers; they are. But this issue became symbolic of the split among commissioners, the school board and Dr. Register.

The megaphone of the weekly County Commission meeting drowned out the school board, which meets once a month. The somewhat meager attempt by the school board to call for joint meetings with the commission merely amplified the public discord.

The crescendo came when the tax vote two years ago failed, causing a significant divide in the local community with fallout on all sides.

Personalities, framed around whether Dr. Register should remain as superintendent, became the rallying cry. The achievements from the Benwood and Carnegie Initiatives, magnet schools and reconstituted teaching teams were clouded by diversions about consulting teachers and central office personnel.

At the time, political speak beat educator speak. Politicians understand how to strike a responsive chord with average citizens while educators used terms that seemed as out of touch as former President Bush, who marveled at the scanner technology used at retail checkout counters.

For example, the school system was unable to state clearly whether consulting teachers count as central office or classroom personnel. Local school officials blamed the state Department of Education for the confusion.

Several commissioners got great mileage out of this lack of clarity, talking about excessive central office staff that detracted from the classroom. Would it have been better understood by saying that a consulting teacher was "an on-site expert consultant focused on assisting teachers in improving literacy skills?" This is the description offered by an outside reviewer. But they were not educators or in the middle of a political tug-of-war.

A year later and after more than a handful of heated political exchanges between the commission and school officials, one commissioner changed his previous vote and a tax increase was passed.

Starving the school system of funds was not the answer to resolving the bitterness between the County Commission and the school superintendent and board.

The link between high-quality education and economic growth is real, but those voices were hard to hear in the continued grudge match between dueling political bodies.

To reach Tom Griscom, call (423) 757-6472 or e-mail tgriscom@timesfreepress.com.