

'Mayoral Academy' wins support of House leader Fox

By MARCIA GREEN, Valley Breeze Editor

CUMBERLAND - Mayor Daniel McKee's plan to reinvent public schools with his Cumberland Mayoral Academy won a hefty endorsement on Feb. 26 when House Majority Leader Gordon Fox of Providence signed onto the enabling legislation and called it "an exciting vision for our students."

The legislation was filed by Cumberland Rep. Kenneth Vaudreuil with co-sponsors Fox, Peter Kilmartin of Pawtucket who is the House majority whip, William McManus of Lincoln, and Agostinho Silva of Central Falls.

It was assigned to the House Finance Committee for hearings. A similar bill is expected in the Senate by Central Falls Sen. Daniel Issa, who heads the Senate Education Committee, McKee said.

The plan, nearly a year in the making, piggy-backs onto the existing charter school legislation to permit McKee and other mayors and town administrators to open public charter schools apart from the established school district.

[Click to view the plan.](#)

McKee has repeatedly pledged to demonstrate a way to achieve higher student achievement while spending less money.

McKee, along with a coalition of area mayors and administrators, is proposing a regional school open to students from Cumberland, Lincoln, Pawtucket, Central Falls and Woonsocket that's based in Valley Falls.

The school will be operated by a nonprofit organization with a track record for success, such as Achievement First, Uncommon School and Aspire Public Schools.

The governing board will be chaired by the mayor, involve representatives from all communities, and be accountable to the community.

He and Michael Magee, the Cumberland educator heading up the Office of Children Youth and Learning, point to a number of success stories in alternative schools including the MATCH School in Boston where an eight-hour school day has helped turn a population of disadvantaged youths into a student body achieving nearly 100 percent proficiency in math, for example.

Fox's endorsement may be telling, McKee said, because it suggests the powerful House leadership is behind the effort.

Fox said he signed on as a co-sponsor "after meeting on two or three occasions with Mayor McKee and discussing his exciting vision for our students. In tough budget times, it is critical for the state to seek efficiencies in all areas of government, including education. I support giving students every opportunity to maximize their learning potential.

"I have spoken with Commissioner (Peter) McWalters and we agree that the mayoral academy is a concept worthy of further exploration," said Fox.

Funding for the academy would come from the state according to a formula established for the state's other charter schools based on per-pupil spending by the local school district.

Buttressing McKee's call for a "start from scratch" school system, consultant Bryan Hassel prepared a 28-page report that will be distributed statewide, McKee said. For a copy, go to www.valleybreeze.com. Hassel calls mayoral academies "the first example of a mayor-led regional network of public schools running parallel to the existing system. If successful, it would serve as a model that could be adopted throughout Rhode Island, but also imitated nationally by the many mayors across the country eager to find ways to improve public education dramatically with the resources they have."

The consultant notes that while Rhode Island children come from homes with better educated and higher income levels than the national averages, the Ocean State is ranked 10th to last by Education Week in actual student success from kindergarten to grade 12.

Looking at standardized test scores, Hassel said, "the overall picture is one of Rhode Island lagging behind its neighbors and the nation as a whole."

Spending more isn't the answer, Hassel said. Rhode Island's per-pupil spending is 7th highest in the nation. Rhode Island is one of four states characterized as high spending, low performance.

Said Hassel, "What Rhode Island needs is not more spending but new ways of allocating educational resources that produce better results.

"By starting new schools, built from the beginning to perform well while containing costs, the mayoral academy approach can model a new strategy for delivering the public schools that Rhode Island's children deserve and that its taxpayers can afford.

"The mayoral academy idea combines two promising trends in public education: greater mayoral involvement in public education and the creation of new, break-the-mold public schools that are achieving extraordinary results for children," says Hassel's report.

McKee is suggesting using the charter school legislation already approved in Rhode Island but with a couple of changes.

Vaudreuil's bill would exempt teachers in mayoral academies from the guarantee of prevailing wages and benefits paid other teachers in the district. They could also be exempt from tenure and participation in the state retirement system.

Hassel's report says mayoral academies "need the flexibility to operate in ways that achieve the best results for students."

He suggests the kinds of teachers they attract - many already retired or people who aren't making education a career, for example - need a more flexible retirement plan than the state plan provides.

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