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DATA

Larson: School success requires more than good intentions

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Posted: Saturday, September 12, 2015 10:30 pm

By Craig Larson

Everyone wants the best for Richmond's kids. They should have great educations that lead to successful, productive and rewarding lives. And great schools will invigorate and improve Richmond in innumerable ways.

Nevertheless, if you read the paper and watch the news, it would seem that there is no meaningful discussion about *how* to improve our schools. Plans are certainly proposed. I am a scientist at VCU. We use data to build, test and improve our theories. Theories that aren't supported by data don't have any credence. Without data and analysis, no scientist can count these school plans as any more than good intentions, hope and wishful thinking.

In general, to improve at something, it is useful to look around, see who is good at that something, determine why they are doing better, what explains their success and what can be imitated. These are the ideas that we need to hear about. With respect to Richmond Public Schools (RPS), we need to know:

(1) What school districts are doing better than RPS? (Here it is probably most useful to look at districts with similar

socioeconomics, but that is beside the main point).

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We need to ask more questions - and expect better answers.

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Then *experiment* with what has worked elsewhere. We rarely get things right the first time. But that's OK — commitment to a process of constant analysis, reevaluation and experiment is the most likely way to achieve excellence — and removes the pressure of finding an educational magic bullet.

Everyone involved with RPS over the decades has had good intentions. No one wants the schools to fail or our kids to be short-changed. It must be clear now that good intentions are not enough. What is needed are good intentions based on *knowledge* — knowledge of what works (and what hasn't worked) — and this can't be accomplished without *research*.

Earlier in the year, I pointed out to a School Board member that Richmond Public Schools Superintendent Dana Bedden's Academic Improvement Plan (AIP) did not appear to be based on any research. The superintendent's office ultimately sent us both a list of bullet points and notes culled from various educational experts — but with no data or analysis.

With a \$271 million annual budget, RPS should be doing more substantial research. And this research should show up in Bedden's reports; it should be discussed by School Board members; and it should make it to the paper and the news, and be discussed by interested citizens.

All Richmonders should expect more. We must press the idea that the schools can't improve without doing the work to find out what works — and debating which ideas we should try first.

We need a *cultural* change — we need to expect our school leaders to have this knowledge. We need to ask them for data at every School Board meeting, and at every superintendent meet-and-greet. We should expect to read about ideas based on data every time we read the paper.

When we don't hear data, we should call out our leaders — remind them that good intentions are not enough. *We* must change, too. We need to expect more — and ask the right questions. And remind our school leaders about the big picture — long-term academic success.

It is easy to get caught up in the day-to-day: replacing band uniforms, choosing new school names, re-evaluating school zones. In the big picture these are minor — and will be forgotten.

The only thing that the public will remember is whether we have great schools or not.

The way things are now resembles a stranded boat, where everyone is arguing about whether the crew should get new uniforms, or whether the boat needs a paint job. Everyone wants to get back to land, but no one uses the radio to ask the

advice of the Coast Guard.

We should expect every relevant Richmond institution to be involved. VCU has a School of Education and a Center for Public Policy. Maybe they have the research our school leaders need. If not, we should expect more out of them, too. More than anyone, they should know the importance of having good research to inform the best decisions.

Our schools can be better. But it will require decisions based on data, and a change of culture for everyone involved. We need to ask more questions — and expect better answers. So here's the first question: What districts are doing better than RPS, what explains their success and what we can replicate? Expect answers.

Craig Larson is associate professor in the Department of Mathematics and Applied Mathematics at Virginia Commonwealth University. Contact him at clarson@vcu.edu.

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