

Random Notes

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Our Christmas Wish List

As the gift-giving season approaches, we've put together our own little list of wishes for things we'd like to see happen in APS that we'll be sending North any day now:

Create Real Alternative Schools for Middle and High School Students

The frequency and severity of serious misconduct in our high and middle schools is on the rise. At the same time, Pupil Services seems to be adopting a more offender-friendly approach to addressing these problems. The unprecedented amount of grousing we hear among building principals about serious offenders being returned to their buildings underscores the gravity of the situation.

The following is excerpted from the Board Policy manual under "Student Conduct.:"

The Board has zero tolerance of violent, disruptive or other behavior, by its students, that violates the Student Code of Conduct.

The gap between policy and practice is widening to the greater detriment of students who are in school to learn and staff who are finding it ever more difficult to produce results. Crosby is a proven alternative delivery system. We need to draw upon their expertise and success to accommodate the needs of the unruly and protect the rights of the cooperative. Doing so will entail some additional cost, but failing to act will cost far more as safety-conscious parents complain in greater numbers with their feet.

Do Something About Special Education

Far be it from us to know all the answers on the effective delivery of instruction to disabled students, a subject that for many is a very touchy one. What we do know is that since the district got serious about inclusion several years ago, the litany of complaints from classroom teachers has been incessant and increasing annually. That's not to say that all complaints are valid, nor does it mean that inclusion can't work, because in several buildings delivery plans are working smoothly.

But we probably fall far short of the number of personnel needed to make inclusion work efficiently. As a result, we hear complaints from teachers about not knowing what to do with included kids in their classrooms, many of whom are nonreaders, and of not having enough in-class support from intervention specialists (who often can only get planning time when their kids are in included classes). Schedules are so tight and personnel so short that sometimes the number of included kids in a class approaches or exceeds the number of regular ed kids in the class! The situation is improving, but it remains a serious concern.

Intervention specialists have legitimate complaints, too. Inclusion has shifted the specialist's role from one of managing a self-contained classroom to supporting sped students and regular ed teachers in the regular ed classroom. Again, because of scheduling, a specialist may be responsible for a number of kids in an instructional period who are spread among two or three classrooms. Until someone figures out how to be in more than one place at the same time, problems will persist.

Then there's the problem with discipline. Short of assaulting a teacher, carrying a weapon or possessing drugs, sped kids have virtually no consequences for misconduct. The district has been hesitant to aggressively pursue action against sped kids for two reasons. The first is fear of a protracted legal battle in which the district would end up paying for its own legal counsel as well as its adversary's. One could pen a trilogy rivaling J.R.R. Tolkien's in volume of misdeeds by sped kids that would earn others out of school suspensions or expulsions. The problem is so widespread and severe that Pupil Services recently emailed principals asking them not to refer sped kids because their capacity to hold hearings is exhausted.

The bottom line is that we need a temporary placement facility that would enable the removal of such offenders without convening the United Nations. The lobby for kids with disabilities is extremely powerful as evidenced by the nearly impossible to navigate procedures for disciplining serious offenders. Ironically, the chronic cases are sophisticated enough to know exactly how much protection they have.

Close the Digital Academy and Open Our Own Distance Learning School

Enrollment in the Akron Digital Academy, according to the latest figures available, is nearly 600 students, and state funding for the school approaches \$4 million. The original idea behind the Academy was to attract kids from area charter schools, run a very lean operation and return unused funds to the district. A state rule, however, bars the wholesale return of funds to the district. The result is that only about 25% of the Academy's funding is returned to APS for what is termed "billable services."

The Academy is not an Akron school; it is a charter school sponsored by the Akron Board of Education. That fact may be lost when visiting the APS website, where the school is mentioned just as prominently as Akron schools. It has certainly been lost on a number of principals who steered kids to the school and subsequently admitted they were not aware the Academy was not an Akron school, nor did they realize how dearly the practice cost the district in terms of funding. The confusion raises questions about where the Academy's students would be if the school closed. Proponents say they would be in other charter schools; we'd like to believe that the district could retrieve kids (and the funding for them) in numbers great enough to surpass the annual payments to the district from the Academy. The question would be-

Santa A Big Hit With Members' Kids

Santa made his annual stop at North High School December 9th much to the delight of 250 Akron teachers and their kids/grandkids. The jolly old elf (retired teacher Irv Korman) was photographed with each child and passed out bags filled with goodies. Thanks to a tireless corps of elves (see photo below), the morning's activities, including face painting, music, arts and crafts, a magic show and refreshments, ran smoothly.



Santa's Elves: Front row: Jean Crofford, Anne Griffith; Middle row: Mike Rusnak, Nina Robishaw, Santa, Janis Sarver; Back row: Jeff Moats, Nora Jones, Barb Baltrinic, Patty Arthurs, Mikelann Adams, Bill Siegfert, Jessica Crofford. Not pictured: photographer Anthony Kidd.

come moot if Akron opened an Academy-like school of its own instead of sponsoring one as a charter.

Sell, Sell, Sell APS

Saturday we attended the ribbon cutting ceremony and open house at the Resnick Community Learning Center. This new facility was spacious, bright and comfortable—it was just terrific. New schools will be opening annually for the next several years. Let's make them the center piece in a campaign to bring kids back to APS.

Obviously, charter schools and open enrollment are the primary reasons for the serious enrollment losses we've experienced in recent years. An effective strategy must include an understanding of why parents have opted to withdraw from Akron for alternatives that are clearly academically inferior, and a willingness to address the reasons where practical.

Many urban districts have opened schools with specific themes, or targeted at certain populations. We have enough creative thinkers in this district to do likewise, and combined with the fact that there's no shortage of good things going on in classrooms across the district, we ought to be able to make an effective case that our schools are the place to be. So let's promote our district around these new buildings at every opportunity. Who wouldn't want to send their kids to these new, bright, spacious buildings with our world class teachers?

Health Care Board Decision Due in January

The State Health Care Board is due to report its findings regarding mandatory statewide health care coverage for Ohio school employees at the end of January. That is unless the lame duck legislature pulls a fast one and enacts legislation before the end of this month when the current General Assembly (thankfully) expires. We are monitoring the situation closely through our membership in the Hands Off Our Health Care Coalition and will keep you advised of developments as they occur.

Need A Masters? Check Out AU Cohort Program

Akron University's College of Education, in cooperation with AEA will offer a new Masters cohort program for Akron school teachers. Past cohort groups have had the convenience of meeting at an APS location, and taking classes as a group with other APS teachers. **Now, the U is also offering scholarships that will cover part of the tuition cost for all participants** in this upcoming program. The scholarships would pay for every third hour of tuition costs. The U is looking at Masters programs in 5 possible areas. If interested, please complete the program survey (you can print it off our website) and send it to us at AEA.

Tom Mooney

Public school teachers and students lost one of their staunchest advocates with the passing of OFT President Tom Mooney. Among other initiatives, Mooney led the coalition that sued Ohio over the constitutionality of charter schools. He also headed the Hands Off Our Health Care Coalition. He was a leader in school reform and teacher accountability. His vision will be sorely missed not just in Ohio, but across the nation.