

Editorial: Collier County public schools

Let's study the problems, then hire superintendent

By Daily News staff

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Fresh from the sacking of Superintendent Ray Baker, a three-member majority of the Collier County School Board is poised to hire Dennis Thompson from Rockford, Ill., as his replacement.

Thompson's scheduled whirlwind tour of Collier early next week seems more of a courtesy gesture to the community by board members Richard Calabrese, Linda Abbott and Steve Donovan than a real interview/audition.

Yet, even the three board members surely realize the down side: Their push risks sowing ill will between Thompson and the community regardless of how well he may click. Plus, there is an election next year — and alliances could change, again, in a hurry.

Thus, the editorial board of this newspaper has come to the crossroads of whether to go along with the lone candidacy of Thompson. We cannot bring ourselves to do that any more than we can go along with the manner in which the board majority dismissed Baker.

We cannot go along with it merely because the board majority has the power to do so and probably will.

We haven't heard anyone else on the civic scene offer a comment beyond "ain't it awful" what Calabrese, Abbott and Donovan have done. So we propose a compromise — one that ought to satisfy advocates of change as well as those who recoil at the debacle of July 31, which cannot be undone.

We call on the board to authorize more audits by the same aggressive company, Hinshaw & Culbertson, that did the digging on curriculum. Let's see an audit on finances. And another on building design and construction. And another on academic performance, i.e., what outcomes ought to be expected given our area's demographics and resources.

Then, let's analyze the results, in the sunshine, letting the chips fall where they may.

Then, let's see the board decide what it wants to do about it.

Then, open the superintendency field to all comers. Let them declare and be grilled in public on precisely what they plan to do — and how — about these priority challenges.

And let us hear their deadlines for getting those jobs done.

The value of this would be to give the passage from one administration to the other some substance as well as style. And what we've seen of the style so far is not good.

Waiting to do the audits until a new superintendent is seated predisposes an incumbent to defensiveness about critical findings. There would be less of a sense of ownership. Our proposal puts everything on the table, in advance. Candidates would buy in or not apply.

Are Linda Abbott, Richard Calabrese and Steve Donovan serious about doing what is best for education? Are they sure that the direction they have chosen, so far, will achieve that?

This much is certain: Collier County Public Schools is going to have a change of superintendents. The situation is what it is. Our proposal, we believe, raises the chances of salvaging something worthwhile and lasting. Something positive.

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