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Monica Yant Kinney | Camden schools: No time to waste

By Monica Yant Kinney
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By the time you read this, Camden Schools Superintendent Annette D. Knox will be out of a job.

Board of Education members will congratulate one another on ridding the district of a divisive distraction. Community activists will cheer her ouster as a victory of good over evil.

Then what? I hate to be a nag, but summer break ain't what it used to be.

Students get sprung tomorrow and return Sept. 7. That leaves 75 days to begin bailing water from this sinking ship. Who'll grab a bucket?

Knox may have been weighing down the boat with her fat contract and questionable performance bonuses, but she's hardly the only thing dragging down the district.

There's the ongoing investigation into whether adults cheated on students' state standardized tests.

There are questions about whether a pair of principals tried to steal \$28,000 from the schools they led, and whether a third principal, Joe Carruth, was fired for the sole offense of airing the district's dirty laundry.

And there's the nagging reminder that 19 of Camden's 32 schools are officially "in need of improvement" under the federal No Child Left Behind law. A handful of them have fallen so far back in the pack that they face complete restructuring.

Unleash the power

So again, forgive the insistency, but how soon can we expect action from people who can stop the lagging and bring on the learning?

I'm thinking Gov. Corzine and acting Education Commissioner Lucille Davy, who have been shamefully quiet about the betrayal of some of the state's most vulnerable children.

I'm thinking South Jersey legislators like State Sen. Wayne Bryant and Assembly Speaker Joe Roberts - powerful people who know Camden and care about its future.

In a previous column, I threw up my hands and suggested that the best hope might be a total state takeover.

I said it completely forgetting that the state has run the schools in Newark, Paterson and Jersey City for years with minimal success. And that takeovers are the educational equivalent of Vietnam.

"It's like an occupation," David Sciarra reminds me. "How do you get out once you're in?"

The good news is that in New Jersey, takeovers are unnecessary. As Sciarra, executive director of the Education Law Center, explains, Corzine already has all the power he needs to clean house in Camden.

As part of the landmark *Abbott* decisions, the state's courts gave the education commissioner constitutional power to ensure troubled districts get both the funding and attention they deserve.

"The power is unlimited," says Sciarra, who argued the case on behalf of 360,000 needy children. "You don't need the Legislature. You just do it."

"You can hire people, fire people, change principals, rewrite the budget... whatever it takes to get the district moving in the right direction."

It's get-busy time

Getting rid of Knox was the first, delicate step, and one well-played. It could have dragged on for months.

Now, will the same people who rose to the occasion move as quickly to tackle the bigger problems that have plagued Camden for decades?

How soon will Corzine introduce a team of educational miracle workers with a license to ruffle even fellow Democrats' feathers?

When should we expect Commissioner Davy to drive south to announce the results of her months-long test-rigging investigation? Will schools change hands even if there's no way to prove people cheated?

While in town, Davy might want to stop and talk with parents about what they think is missing from their kids' educations. You'll never know if you don't ask, but in Camden residents are often ignored. It's easier to tune them out than in.

I've often feared that state leaders would rather Camden just disappear into the Delaware than wade in and get wet trying to rescue it.

But Corzine - with his liberal heart and business brain - may be the right man at the right time. Presuming *he's* tuning in.

We know from *Abbott* that he's got the way. But does he have the will?

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