

Nevels optimistic on schools' future, Rendell relations

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

"We are not getting our fair share of talent," [James Nevels] said. "We're going to lure them with cooperation. That's how it was done in Chicago." Chicago is where CEO [Paul Vallas] implemented similar programs with much success.

"I know that it's not just about test scores," Nevels said. "But I'm bound by a statute."

"This will be one of the most exciting non-stadium projects that will hit this city," Nevels said about future plans. "Those principals have been the over-arching architecture of what we've been trying to do in the district."

FULL TEXT

This upcoming Wednesday marks the one-year anniversary of school reform in Philadelphia. Although the School District of Philadelphia has jumped some hurdles, School Reform Commission Chairman James Nevels says the district has a long way to go.

"We have a school system that was in cardiac arrest. We had to make a serious intervention," Nevels said. "We are now in a state of triage. We are in the process of stabilizing the patient."

In the long run, Nevels said, the SRC and schools CEO Paul Vallas plan to make schools in Philadelphia as safe as possible. Another problem they are going to tackle is having all of the more experienced teachers working at the schools with the most need.

Moreover, Nevels said, they would like to establish a policy that forces school administrators and teachers to work a minimum of 40 hours a week.

"You can't have your least experienced teacher teaching in the worst schools," Nevels said.

Additionally, he said, they are interested in enhancing the physical plant instruction so local kids can go and learn in a respectable environment.

Next year, Nevels said, people can expect the district to break ground for the construction of their first high school.

Nevels also noted the district will implement a variety of other beneficial programs which will include "Cradle to the Classroom," a program that will mentor mothers to be and an academy structure that will provide a co-op type of opportunity for young men.

Meanwhile, the district will try to increase parental involvement and recruit new teachers to the district.

"We are not getting our fair share of talent," Nevels said. "We're going to lure them with cooperation. That's how it was done in Chicago." Chicago is where CEO Vallas implemented similar programs with much success.

When Nevels first started with the Philadelphia School District, he noticed they were using rudimentary business practices. Nevels said they weren't balancing their \$1.8 billion budget and the staff at 21st and Parkway were not getting evaluated.

"That was absolutely distressing," Nevels said.

With only four months of operating funds available, he added the district had plans to shut down the schools and just have seniors attending classes.

"We had the dooms day planned," Nevels said. "We were ready for that possibility."

Assisting Nevels in getting enough money for the schools to survive, State Secretary of Education Charles Zogby's stance on how the money should be spent created a lot of controversy.

"People feel strongly about certain positions. He feels very intently about kids," Nevels said about Zogby. "We just disagreed about the details."

While accountability plays a large role in accessing the schools, Nevels said he doesn't think the resolution being pushed by Senator Allyson Schwartz for an accountability review council is necessary. Meanwhile, the district currently has an office of accountability that is accessing the rate of improvement of local schools.

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Although Gov.-elect Ed Rendell will be sworn in soon, Nevels said he has only held informal conversations with him about education, yet he thinks the district's relationship with him will be excellent. Nevels said he's also anxious to see who will be named the next state Secretary of Education.

Since Nevels has been the chairman of the SRC, his original principles have remained the same.

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DETAILS

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