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A Call to Action for Restoring Trust

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A Call to Action For Restoring Trust

By **JO LYNNE DeMARY**
and **THOMAS SHIELDS**

If you have been following the recent impasse between the Richmond School Board and school administration and Mayor Doug Wilder and his administration, you will notice that very different stories are being told — each side trying to find a receptive audience.

Mayor Wilder believes his story of flagrant runaway costs and the inability of the school system to close underutilized schools is the best narrative. Since Wilder controls the schools' purse strings, he is using his story to financially force the hand of the School Board and school system. On the other side, the Richmond School Board and school system are telling a story of continual improvement and progress. They argue that they are the policy-setting arm for the schools and should be allowed to decide the agendas and alternatives without interference from the executive branch of city government.

Unfortunately, these highly charged stories are being played out in revolving press conferences, nasty letters, inflamed speeches, threats of audits, and now even a lawsuit. The public wants to know where all of this is heading — Do we need another audit? Do we need to continue studying this issue?

Since 2003 there have been three audits of the city's schools — "A New Course for Richmond Public Schools" was conducted by the Council of Great City Schools; a "School Efficiency Study" was conducted by the Commonwealth of Virginia; and most recently one was completed by the city's auditor. On top of that are several reports from the mayor's office, including one by an outside consultant and the mayor's own education committee. The citizens have to ask if this is how we should be governing.

WE BELIEVE another audit or study is not necessary. How much documentation is enough? We also believe that setting policy and public dialogue through legal pleadings and pointed letters will not accomplish anything. We believe that what the public wants is quick action and a thoughtful response to the abundant recommendations. We believe that only through decisive and clear action will the impasse be broken and the restoration of the trust between the two sides take place.

To accomplish this, we recommend that a small working group be created to find a viable alternative in the mounds of data, analysis, and research that has already been conducted about Richmond's public school system. This work group would be composed of a handful of knowledgeable, objective individuals who are highly specialized in the areas of finance and education and who could tackle the documented issues head-on and provide operational results in a timely manner. The members of this group would be appointed by each branch of local government — the City Council, the mayor's office, and the School Board — that has a role in appropriating and approving school funds and setting school policy. The findings of the group would be carried out without any undue influence or challenges from any of the branches of local government, but would be subject to public input from the citizenry. Once the group completed its synthesis, all sides would need to consider the priorities and work as best to implement the solution.

WE BELIEVE that our two institutions of higher education have a role to play in helping to resolve this impasse. To show that we want a resolution, we are offering our respective centers to host this group and would be willing to do the initial and important work of pulling the individuals together. We are offering this as a first step in realizing that the situation requires action, not study. Both sides have told their stories in this battle; now it is time to be action-oriented and responsive.

There is no time to waste. Waiting will be destructive not only for our city's schools, but for the Greater Richmond area. Our vitality as a region depends on our school systems being strong, viable, and effective.

Leadership is not about self-interest, but the interests we hold as a community. Our children deserve nothing less.

■ *Jo Lynne DeMary, director of the Center for School Improvement at Virginia Commonwealth University, is a former state superintendent for public instruction. Thomas Shields, director of the Center for Leadership in Education at the University of Richmond, is on the faculty at the Jepson School of Leadership Studies.*

