

Now or never

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During a recent meeting between *Crain's* and officials from the Cleveland Foundation, the subject of the foundation's role in promoting education reform came up. Foundation CEO Ronn Richard was asked his opinion of the dramatic transformation plan for the Cleveland Metropolitan School District that has been put forth by district CEO Eugene Sanders.

"This is our last chance to resuscitate the district," Mr. Richard said succinctly.

The no-nonsense Mr. Richard isn't the kind of guy to make statements loosely. So it wasn't a surprise when he followed that comment by saying, "This school transformation is our No. 1 priority."

It should be the business community's No. 1 priority as well.

It's not that the business community hasn't been supportive in the past. But enthusiasm for rushing to the district's aid has waned over time as past reform efforts that companies have supported with money and personnel have failed to reverse the decline of Cleveland's schools.

No one can guarantee that Dr. Sanders' transformation plan will play out differently. However, we share Mr. Richard's belief that if the Cleveland schools are to be pulled out of their agonizing tailspin, a plan very close to the dramatic makeover Dr. Sanders is advocating must be enacted ASAP.

It's great that a handful of innovative schools are meeting with success, among them the Cleveland School of the Arts and John Hay High School, with its School of Science and Medicine and School of Architecture and Design. But students and families lack the luxury of time to wait for what amounts to incremental improvement to make its way through the Cleveland schools. As Mr. Richard correctly stated during our meeting, "It's not enough to save 1,000 kids in the district."

Joel Klein, chancellor of the New York public schools, likes to say the way to improve urban education isn't to create a great school system, but a system of great schools. That's where Dr. Sanders is going with his plan to close habitually underperforming schools and to focus the district's precious resources on those schools that are successful or stand a fighting chance to make the grade.

And for as much as it may pain the Cleveland Teachers Union, it's important that charter schools in the city with a track record of success be incorporated in any initiative for transforming the district. We especially like the idea of co-locating city and charter schools in buildings that otherwise might be underused, with no strings attached to whom the charter schools can hire for teaching positions. This nontraditional approach already is succeeding in New York with charter schools that are under the Uncommon Schools banner.

The cost of this transformation won't be cheap, which is why Mr. Richard says the business community "must come up with the dollars and provide moral support" to make it happen. Businesses have risen up en masse before in support of the city schools. We hope they marshal their forces one more time.

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