

Champaign Hearing Public Comment

To: Chambers of Judge Joe Billy McDade
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From: Arthur Culver, Superintendent
Champaign Community Unit School District #4

1. Nature of My Interest in this Litigation

As the Superintendent of Schools for Unit #4, I am the primary administrator responsible for the success of the Consent Decree.

2. Summary of My Proposed Commentary

To embody the many goals of our District, for the last three years I have been using the theme of “the three R’s” – Rigor, Relevance and Relationships. I emphasize this theme repeatedly in meetings and written communications with Board members, teachers, and all staff. Rigor relates to the rigor of the curriculum and the rigor of high expectations to improve the students’ success. Relevance is for us to do a better job of helping students truly understand the relevance of what we are teaching, to their current daily lives and the future. Third, and perhaps most important, is Relationships. We must focus on developing and maintaining positive relationships with African American students in order to enhance academic improvement, improve school climate, reduce disciplinary incidents and improve attendance. Building successful relationships between teachers and students will effect a positive culture change in our schools.

Using these criteria as a guide, we cannot fail. As I have told my staff, when it appeared that the astronauts on Apollo 13 would not return to earth alive, NASA Flight Director Gene Kranz said, “*Failure is not an option.*” We are taking this same determination into the new school year. These children depend on us, and failure is not an option.

As I told your Honor at the hearing in December 2002, I have never failed anywhere in terms of improving student success, and I certainly am not going to start now. I am committed to the Consent Decree and to doing everything we can for our African American students, and I have been driving that message home every single day since I arrived.

In fact, one of the reasons the Board of Education hired me was my demonstrated track record in closing the achievement gap and achieving academic success for low-income and minority students. I was hired to implement successfully the Consent Decree and to raise achievement for all students. The Consent Decree goals are incorporated into every aspect of our educational process.

I also remember Your Honor expressing concern at the 2002 hearing that the District could not rely just on me as the lone person to work on the Consent Decree, and I assure you that has not been the case. Every single Board member, administrator, teacher and staff person lives and breathes the Consent Decree. Its goals have been incorporated into the fabric of our system and are being institutionalized for the future.

I wish to publicly thank – and I will encourage the public to thank them – the teachers, support staff and administrators who have been working extremely hard. It has not been easy. We made a lot of changes with the curriculum including the complete restructuring of the curriculum department to ensure tight alignment between the written, taught and tested curricula. The new structure created district level content coordinators for the core subject areas, 2 for reading, 2 for math, 1 science/health and 1 social science, as well as an assessment coordinator. This alignment continued at the building level where there are designated ELA, math, science and social science leaders at the elementary and middle school levels and content area chairs at the high school level. This delineation of responsibilities and increased accountability has led to improved student achievement for all students but with a special focus on improving the educational outcomes for African American students, as evidenced by preliminary 2006 ISAT scores and trend data.

In 2003-2004, the District created and implemented curriculum maps (instructional timelines), quarterly assessments and benchmark assessments to evaluate the effectiveness of the District's curriculum and student mastery of the grade level and course standards. Strong curriculum and effective teaching are essential to accelerating the progress of African American students. Low income students rely heavily on the curriculum to provide content knowledge, and we have made sure that our curriculum is aligned, enriched and delivered in a high-quality way. District-wide staff development aligned with district initiatives provides the training needed to ensure quality implementation of the curriculum.

In 2004, the District implemented Mastery Manager, a Web-based assessment tool designed to give teachers and principals immediate feedback on how well students are mastering the curriculum. Mastery Manager provides immediate, actionable achievement information that teachers and administrators use to adjust instruction and provide targeted interventions to improve student outcomes. Mastery Manager provides teachers and principals with data disaggregated by student, teacher, course, section, and grade.

At times, people did not quite understand these changes, but they did it and the hard work has paid off. As we have seen positive results, the belief systems have changed and the goals of the Consent Decree are being internalized in the people, as well as institutionalized in the policies and procedures.

The dramatic improvements in test scores validate my working theory that student achievement will improve once the foundational pieces are laid. That has been done, and I anticipate that we will see rapid progress in student outcomes. It will be faster because the hard work is done – the systems, programs, people, practices, policies – those things are in place now. Now, we must make modifications as necessary, continue to work hard, look at ways to enhance and accelerate improvement in areas where progress is slower, and monitor our efforts and outcomes closely.

I am so proud of our many achievements and believe we will use that momentum to carry us forward in all areas under the Consent Decree. For example, every single one of our elementary and middle schools made AYP this year, every one.

When we began the Consent Decree process, Stratton Elementary School was such a sore spot because of its performance issues that it was designated as a special desegregation school under the Consent Decree. Now, just a few years later, Stratton is a shining academic success. Along with Carrie Busey and Kenwood Elementary Schools, Stratton was named a *Spotlight School* by ISBE and Northern Illinois University, and Unit 4 is one of only 26 districts in the State to have three or more *Spotlight Schools*. In order to be a *Spotlight School*, Stratton had to meet AYP, have at least 50% of students receiving free or reduced meals, and at least 60% of students meeting or exceeding ISAT standards. Stratton also earned an Academic Improvement Award for three consecutive years, and is one of only four schools in the entire State to do so. Stratton is one of only thirty-eight schools in the State to be a double-award winner for both of those awards.

We have started feeling the effects of improvements in academic outcomes for African American students, and expect that trend to continue and accelerate. For example, the number of Level III courses taken by African American students has more than doubled, increasing from 354 to 723. Also, the number of African American students in Advanced Placement (AP) courses has increased from 5 in SY2003 to 36 at the midpoint of SY2006.

Our schools are also enrolling students within racial fairness guidelines, and Controlled Choice has been successful under the Consent Decree. The kindergarten lottery for this school year received the largest number of participants since the program started in 1998. In fact, more than 95% of the participating families received one of their top three choices for schools, with the vast majority receiving their first choice.

We have also made tremendous strides in hiring and retaining minority teachers. Last year alone, the District hired 20 African American teachers, a 25% increase over the prior year and the largest number of African American teachers ever hired in a single year. The number and percentage of African American teachers on staff have increased for three consecutive years.

Champaign community leaders have assisted us in improving student achievement for African American students and the climate in our schools. The University of Illinois through its Chancellor has funded the Chancellor's Academy for a five year cycle. The Academy began last year and is a concentrated professional development program resulting from a partnership between the Champaign and Urbana public schools and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The overall emphasis is on improving instruction in reading and writing, especially in elementary grades 3-5 and in middle school. Additions to the program this year include a focus on improving reading and writing in the teaching of science and math, hands-on teaching practice with students, and a separate program strand for K-12 principals, running during the first week of the two-week workshop. Additionally, the District's own staff development has a strong focus on curriculum and achievement.

In collaboration with the University of Illinois and Parkland College, the District was awarded the Illinois Mathematics & Science Partnership grant in the amount of \$250,000. This grant provides professional development for math and science teachers. Teachers will gain a deeper understanding of current math and science content, and increase their ability to impart that deep level of understanding to students.

Parkland College provided a full-day seminar on strategies for improving the education of African American students with the renowned consultant Dr. Jawanza Kunjufu. Many of our campus and central office administrators attended this session and will implement the strategies shared at the seminar. The strategies included revising and raising teacher expectations, increasing parental involvement, changing teaching styles from a left brain abstract approach to a right brain hands-on approach.

In collaboration with the Urban League, Dr. Donna Ford and Dr. Edna Olive were brought in to address strategies for accelerating African American achievement, recognizing giftedness in African American students, and improving discipline and school climate.

In collaboration with the Police Department and the community, the National School Resource Officer program has been implemented at the secondary level to ensure that the schools have a safe and orderly learning environment. The Plaintiffs were involved in the selection of the officers and the development of the SRO Operating Procedures.

We expect to see accelerated improvement in all Consent Decree areas. Improvements will be accomplished by focusing on the following:

- Monitoring the data related to Consent Decree areas at least three times per quarter.
- Meeting with principals to review data and revise intervention plans as needed.
- Increasing accountability for improvement at the campus level.
- Ensuring strong correlation between success in the areas related to the Consent Decree and the evaluation of administrators that impact the Consent Decree areas.

I am communicating to every administrator, teacher and staff member that we will be monitoring these efforts closely to achieve success. We are holding ourselves accountable for results through our aggressive monitoring of Consent Decree related data, our evaluation processes and our alignment of departmental, school and District improvement plans with Consent Decree goals.

In addition to the aforementioned efforts, the ongoing collaboration/communication mechanisms with Plaintiffs will help lead us to success. A list of the collaboration mechanisms was given to the Court with the report that we filed, and include regular phone calls every two weeks between the Superintendent, Deputy Superintendent and Plaintiffs' counsel to provide Plaintiffs direct access to District leadership and address any concerns of Plaintiffs; monthly PIC meetings; Task Forces and committees with Plaintiff representation; and public discussion of Consent Decree matters at regular and special Board of Education meetings.

I am personally committed to the goals of the Consent Decree. Commitment to these exact types of goals has been the hallmark of my 28-year educational career. The Consent Decree simply

gives me a stronger leverage point to push the equity agenda and implement systemic change. I came to Unit 4, and I recruited others to Unit 4, with the intent of making history by meeting the goals of the Consent Decree. This is still my intent and that of the Board and of my administrative team. While the entire Unit 4 staff may have previously embraced the goals of the Consent Decree, I do not believe that they were empowered to achieve the goals. They are now empowered and have been given the necessary tools for success. We are one in our resolve to see all children succeed at high levels. I am humbled by the efforts of teachers and administrators in Unit 4 schools.

My strong commitment to Unit 4 and the goals of the Consent Decree is the reason that I am on a mission and remain steadfast in my relentless pursuit of fulfilling the obligations of the Consent Decree. The Consent Decree represents every belief and principle that have guided my actions as an educator, and I am grateful for the opportunity to prove that a diverse group of students in a community in the heartland of this nation can and will receive a world-class education.

Please view our success in student achievement, in gifted and talented, in hiring and staffing, and in other areas as the products of systemic change implemented by a team of talented, nurturing educators supported by a committed Board of Education. In 2002, I could only tell the Court what we would do. Today, I am able to share what we have accomplished. By the expiration of the Consent Decree, I expect that Champaign Unit 4 Schools will have lessons learned that will serve as a model for the rest of the nation. Although we understand that there is no time to rest on our laurels, I cannot let this day pass without asking the Court to acknowledge the hard work and successful efforts of the Unit 4 staff, the commitment of the Board, and my unwavering resolve to meet the goals of the Consent Decree and to provide equity and excellence for all.

I respectfully request the opportunity to publicly present this information. I have many opportunities to speak publicly, at Board meetings and community events, but I believe it is important for the District and the community to see me represent to you our commitment to the success of the Consent Decree. I would also be happy to answer any questions you may have for me since we last met in 2002. Thank you.