

SCHOOLS

St. Louis schools plan includes nonprofit takeover of failing schools



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ST. LOUIS • City schools Superintendent Kelvin Adams proposed a move Thursday that could involve handing the reins of some of the city's most chronically troubled schools to outside groups — taking a lead from urban school systems in cities such as Chicago, Philadelphia and New York.

If any of the district's 18 lowest-performing schools fail to meet specified targets next school year, Adams wants to hire nonprofit entities to run them in 2015-16, he told the Special Administrative Board.

The schools would become contract schools — schools operated independently, but still belonging to the district. The operator could hire school staff and set curriculum. The district would remain accountable for test scores and enrollment.

The entity could be a charter school operator, or an educator, or a firm with a track record for doing school turnaround work. It's open-ended, Adams said after the meeting, as long as it's a nonprofit entity.

"It's not necessarily a charter. It could be a charter," he said. "We want to be careful in what we say about doing this. We don't want to leave the impression that we're giving away schools."

The district will be releasing a request for proposals in the next 10 days. But it could be weeks or months before the district begins signing contracts with school operators.

After several years of gains, scores on state standardized exams dropped in St. Louis Public Schools last year. The district's standing under Missouri's new performance measures put city schools in danger once again of losing accreditation in two years, adding an increased sense of urgency around improvement.

The plan was part of the 2014-15 budget and transformation plan that Adams and his staff laid out to the board.

It shifts staff and resources so that students in schools that are struggling the most get more intense tutoring and support.

It also involves classifying each of the district's 67 schools based on state performance measures. The system has four tiers. Schools with the best academic outcomes — such as Kennard Classical Junior Academy and Soldan International Studies High School — would be autonomous schools, and would receive the least amount of central office supervision.

Those that do the worst are part of the Superintendent's Zone. Since fall, Adams has been directly supervising these schools.

Adams is proposing to shift \$6.4 million to Superintendent's Zone schools next year to beef up in-school tutoring, provide teachers with additional training in reading instruction, hire more reading and math specialists, and add more social workers and counselors.

Nearly 6,300 children attend Superintendent's Zone schools — roughly a quarter of the children enrolled in city schools. Ninety-seven percent of them live in poverty, which means many come to school with health and social issues that can make learning difficult.

Rick Sullivan, president of the Special Administrative Board, asked Adams whether shifting more resources to those schools would eliminate excuses for their failure.

"The answer is yes," Adams said. "We want to take away the reasons why students are not successful."

And if those efforts don't yield better academic results, the district would look to outside operators to try.

"There are a number of outside groups that do this across the country," Adams said. As far as who would qualify? "A lot would be determined by the school's specific need."

Though unique in Missouri, handing over chronically low-performing schools to nonprofit agencies is increasingly common in large urban districts. It's becoming more unusual for an urban district to be operating its lowest-achieving schools than for an outside vendor, said Michael Casserly, executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools.

The council has a major study underway to analyze how well the strategy works.

"Preliminary evidence suggests sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't," Casserly said. "It's better than mixed. There is some evidence to show it does work, but there are a significant number of instances where it doesn't."

The proposal has the potential to stir controversy. In January, a consultant's proposal to the Missouri Board of Education became a lightning rod statewide for wanting to give nonprofit entities, such as charter school companies, control of school operations in unaccredited districts.

Among those who expressed opposition to the proposal were members of the disempowered elected St. Louis School Board. Katherine Wessling, board vice president, said Thursday that she needs to learn more about who the outside entities might be before deciding whether to support Adams' proposal.

"My initial response was, it sounds as if he's admitting he can't do the job with those schools," she said. "If they do that, they need to be prepared and have an option for kids who don't want to be in an experimental situation."

Adams said he isn't worried about defending the proposal to skeptics.

"I don't think anything we've ever done has not been controversial to somebody," he said.

Unlike previous years, Adams is not proposing to close any schools. He is proposing to reopen Carver Elementary School, 3325 Bell Avenue, in midtown. It will house some grades in the Academy of Environmental Science and Math building — once an Imagine charter school — on South Spring Street.

Collegiate School of Bioscience and Medicine will be adding 10th grade.

The proposed \$295.9 million budget is about \$1 million less than this year's. It assumes a slight dip in enrollment.

Public forums will be held from 6 to 8 p.m. March 27 at Vashon High School; and from 10 a.m. to noon March 29 at Central VPA High School. The Special Administrative Board could vote on the plan as early as April 10.