

Kansas City Star

KC public schools superintendent, longest serving in 5 decades, has a promise to keep

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When Mark Bedell was looking for a job, he stood behind a podium in the auditorium at Kansas City's Paseo Academy of Fine and Performing Arts and made a promise to the packed house that January evening and to the city: If he were hired to serve as the Kansas City Public Schools superintendent, he would stay until the job is done. "If we are constantly changing superintendents every three years, how do we make progress?" Bedell asked five years ago. He's still here, and the district has come a long way since Bedell was handed the reins in 2016.

But the job is a long way from done. And Bedell said Friday he has no plans to leave Kansas City any time soon. That's good news because the district, which has shown improvement, needs someone staying the course even while a pandemic and politics hamper progress. The job has been a heap greater than what Bedell thought it would be when he signed that first three-year, \$225,000-a-year contract.

Bedell, who had never led a district before arriving in Kansas City, is about to start a sixth year, which would make him the district's longest-serving superintendent in more than 50 years. In the preceding time, KCPS had seen 28 interim or permanent superintendents come with fanfare, start some half-baked initiative, then exit after two or three years.

Remember the middle school plans? In the two years that Anthony Amato led the district, he closed middle schools and created K-8 elementary schools. John Covington came in and moved middle schoolers into high schools. Two years later, Steven Green reopened middle schools. Instability in leadership was one of the reasons the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education cited for stripping the district of its accreditation in 2011.

KCPS has yet to get it back. The district needed someone to reverse enrollment decline, improve academic performance and graduation rates, hire the best teachers and get them in the right classrooms, raise the course rigor, provide more early childhood opportunities, assure equity in education and in extra curricular offerings and more. In short, change the narrative and reality of KCPS to one of a system that is thriving.

Bedell took the job. For now, enrollment looks stable at around 14,000 students. He's also addressing equity, closing some schools because there are too many facilities, not enough kids and some high schools don't have enough students to support athletics, debate and music programs while others do. Graduation rates jumped double digits over his five years from 68% to 78%. Schools have more advanced placement course offerings than ever, and international baccalaureate scores are up too.

“My goal has always been to try and be the superintendent that gave hope when there was no hope,” Bedell said. Hope was sorely needed when 2020 came with COVID-19 in tow. KCPS, like districts across the country, struggled to educate students during a global health emergency that exacerbated inequities in technology, food and housing. School shutdowns left many students behind. Bedell, who has had the support of a stable school board during his tenure, put health and safety ahead of political pressures and refused to reopen schools or drop mask mandates too soon.

Bedell wasn’t prepared to see political decisions such as state bills supporting school choice, City Council-approved tax incentives, and the impact of eviction rates on schools. But he’s learned countermoves.

In 2019, the district won national recognition for providing legal aid to families facing eviction and other problems that affect student attendance. Students are showing up, learning and graduating. According to a recent report from St. Louis University, KCPS is quantifiably moving the needle forward. And Bedell is pushing the state for more credit on how far students climb from the academic depths — holes dug by poverty and social disenfranchisement — where many start out. The report shows 11 Kansas City elementary schools, among 28, noted as “beating the odds,” in rapidly advancing learning in English language arts for a high concentration of students from low-income households. Another 11 district schools are advancing similarly in math. That kind of momentum also shows up in the 2019 state annual progress report. We applaud that. But it must be maintained.

The Council of the Great City Schools has said that under Bedell, “KCPS has made substantial progress,” and is “worthy of a fully accredited district.” Bedell is checking gains off the to-do list he promised to clear when he took the job. He wants to leave a legacy behind. More than ever, he needs strong support from city leaders, local businesses and the community. And of course, that’s what we should do. Every success for the district is a victory for Kansas City.