

*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

## Editorial: St. Louis district right to try a bold step to lift low-achieving schools

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**Opinions are mixed** on whether students would benefit if St. Louis' lowest-performing schools were run by nonprofit groups.

Even without conclusive evidence, Superintendent Kelvin Adams' proposal to seek outside help is a sign of the urgency he feels to improve education for students in the district and his willingness to try new methods.

He should be commended for looking for ways to help kids who are struggling and for acknowledging that the same old methods are not working.

Large urban school districts around the nation increasingly are handing over control of chronically low-performing schools to nonprofit agencies, says Michael Casserly, executive director of the **Council of the Great City Schools**.

Mr. Casserly said Friday that the turnaround strategy is still relatively new and there is not much data available to evaluate it. His organization has a study underway to analyze the practice. Mr. Casserly said it is becoming more unusual for an urban district to operate its own lowest-achieving schools than for an outside vendor to do so.

**"It doesn't** always work. There are prominent examples where it does not work," he noted, adding that it is being tried in such urban school districts as Boston, Washington, Philadelphia, Chicago, New York and Newark, N.J.

"It's better than mixed," Mr. Casserly said of reviews on the strategy. "There is some evidence to show it does work."

He said he would not characterize Mr. Adams' proposal as a desperate move, which is what some critics have suggested it looks like.

"I would characterize it as commitment to those children in those schools to make sure they get the highest quality education," Mr. Casserly said.

**One of the** more recent places where the strategy is going to be put to use is in Massachusetts. State education officials have selected three nonprofit agencies and a superintendent — all with good records for boosting student achievement — to take over control of four schools in Boston, Holyoke and New Bedford.

This marks the first time that the state will take control of individual schools within a district, a power granted under a 2010 law. The takeovers will begin in the summer.

As the Post-Dispatch's Elisa Crouch has reported, Mr. Adams has proposed hiring outside vendors to operate 18 schools if they fail to meet specified academic targets next year. The vendors would run them beginning in the 2015-16 school year.

Mr. Adams told the district's state-appointed Special Administrative Board that the operators could be charter schools, or an educator or a firm with a proven record of school turnaround work, as long as they were nonprofits.

He said the district is releasing a request for proposals but that it could be weeks or months before contracts are signed.

**The tactic is** being tried because of poor scores on state standardized exams last year. Those scores followed several years of improvements, but under the state's new performance measures, the latest scores were enough to put the city's schools in danger again of losing accreditation in two years.

Mr. Adams also plans to shift staff and resources so students in the struggling schools will get more intense tutoring and support. Those schools — and the 6,300 children in them — came under the direct supervision of Mr. Adams last fall.

The superintendent has proposed shifting \$6.4 million to them next year to provide more in-school tutoring, additional teacher training, to hire more reading and math specialists, and more social workers and counselors.

All of these are good steps by Mr. Adams, but the public shouldn't expect miracles. The reality is that 97 percent of the students in the district's lowest-performing schools live in poverty. They come to school with intractable health and social issues that can overwhelm their ability to learn.

A study released Friday by the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights found a pattern of unequal educational benefits split along racial lines. The study is the first analysis of data from all of the nation's 97,000 public schools in nearly 15 years.

It shows that minority students are more likely than their white peers to be suspended from school, and that the pattern starts in preschool. They also have access to fewer rigorous math and science classes and are taught by less experienced and lower-paid teachers than white students.

Sixty years after *Brown v. Board of Education* is too many decades gone since the country promised every student a right to equal education. Achieving that equality has been and will continue to be an uphill battle, but it must be continued, by any means necessary. Too many generations have been lost.