

Thursday, April 28th, 2005
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

IS MAJOR EDUCATIONAL CHANGE IN THE WIND?

It doesn't happen often. Only a handful of times during the thirty-one years I was in public life. But every now and then, a difficult, complex issue is presented to a public official that has consequences of major magnitude – consequences that can send a powerful message that a demarcation line has been drawn. Like a shot heard around the country, a message that says Louisiana is serious in making substantive, sweeping, far-reaching changes in its educational system. Radical changes. But it will take real courage. And it will be interesting to see which public officials step up to the plate.

If you haven't been following the latest crisis in New Orleans, the school system there has been a major failure. Observers from outside the state refer to the problem as “a national scandal,” and the legislative auditor has called the system's finances “a train wreck.” There is some \$80 million in federal money for low-income kids either misspent or not accounted for. And eight school superintendents in seven years have made the problem go from bad to worse.

The demographics don't bode well for those trying to bring about significant changes. Look at the numbers facing New Orleans:

- 1st in number of children living in poverty
- 1st in high school dropout rate
- 1st in rate of incarceration
- 1st in net population loss

With the legislature now in session, there are a number of proposed laws to allow for a state takeover of the school system. But there are already adequate laws in place to do just that. A school district, by definition, is “a political subdivision of the state.” And Louisiana law has a specific provision (La. R.S. 35:1351 et al), that allows the legislative auditor, the attorney general, and the state treasurer to go into state court and basically put the school system into bankruptcy. Don't expect these folks to act without a consensus from the governor and other members of the bond commission. But the system is in place.

Sure, there is going to be opposition. Any state takeover will be portrayed, unfortunately by some, as a black/white issue. That's why the present mayor, Ray Nagin, and other top New Orleans officials are a key to building any consensus. And apparently, the mayor is ready to go to bat.

So can a state takeover solve the problem? It would be an important beginning. There is much “behind the scenes” support from throughout the business community, including the New Orleans Business Council, Metrovision (a part of the Chamber of

Commerce), and a cross section of prominent New Orleans business men and women.

Said one backer of the program: “Look, from an education perspective, and from a wider perspective of any major effort to improve our quality of life, New Orleans right now is a major eye sore all over the country. A state takeover indicates a real effort to change. Right now, our efforts are being observed all over the country. How we handle the situation is going to say a heck of a lot about the future of New Orleans.”

The key to any takeover is to get the mayor of New Orleans aggressively involved in the process. The Illinois legislature gave such authority to present Mayor Richard Daley, who has brought about major change in Chicago. The school board there was dissolved, and the mayor appointed a CEO to run the school system like a business. The results have been quick and astounding. (You can read Mayor Daley’s remarks from a 2002 speech to a group of New Orleans businessmen by going to Jim Brown’s Blog at <http://www.jimbrownla.com>.)

Many close observers feel the New Orleans school problem is going to be “bell weather” for the state. If public officials from the governor on down can reach a consensus, and give the mayor of New Orleans the tools he needs for major change and direction, it’s going to be an important sign read all over the country of a new maturity in meeting major problems head on.

In trying to fix a major problem, there is an opportunity. Hopefully, it will not be an opportunity missed.

EQUAL JUSTICE FOR ALL?

It was of little notice to the state and local press. The former National Security Advisor to President Clinton, Sandy Berger, pled guilty last week. Guilty to destroying secret documents with scissors and lying about it to the FBI. His penalty? A \$10,000 fine and the surrender of his security clearance for three years. Wow! What punishment! He steals and destroys public documents, lies about it, and pays a fine?

It sure is comforting to know that, when it comes to making false statements, our Justice Department metes out equal punishment and equal justice to all. Right? Bunk!

Now give me a little tolerance here. After all, I rarely rant about the injustice that often takes place in our federal judicial system anymore. But I’m entitled to an occasional moment.

And did you see “Nightline” last night? An in depth story of how a CIA agent was set up by the justice department and sent to prison. . Here is what a fair federal judge wrote in his ruling: “In the course of American justice, one would have to work hard to conceive of a more fundamentally unfair process...than the fabrication of false data by the government, under oath by a government official, presented knowingly by the prosecutor in the courtroom with the express approval of his superiors in Washington.”

Too bad for me I didn’t have you ruling in my case judge. You would have been right on the money.

And why is it that so many Louisiana public bodies spend so much money to lobby in Washington? Isn’t that why we elect our senators and congressmen to go to Washington and look out for these same public bodies?

The city of New Orleans spent \$1,332,500 lobbying in Washington last year. The University of New Orleans spent \$1,280,000. Jefferson Parish was a close third at \$1,060,000, with Louisiana State University coming in at \$940,000. Why does Lake Charles Memorial Hospital have to spend almost \$1 million lobbying in Washington? What do they get in return?

Do senators and congressmen pick their “favorites?” If you don’t put up \$1 million to lobby, does it mean you won’t get any federal grants? Louisiana is supposed to lose another congressman by the year 2020 because of shrinking population. The way things are going, instead of electing a congressional delegation, the state could just elect a lobbying firm or two every year to look out for all of our interests. After all, we’re spending millions in state tax dollars to do this anyway; so we might as well go ahead and give these people an official designation. Just think of all of the money we would save in the long run.

"You are never obsessively dedicated to something you have complete confidence in. No one is fanatically shouting that the sun is going to rise tomorrow. They know it is going to rise tomorrow. When people are fanatically dedicated to political or religious faiths or any other kinds of dogmas or goals, it's always because these dogmas or goals are in doubt."

- Robert M. Pirsig, Zen in the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance

"Mothers all want their sons to grow up to be president but they don't want them to become politicians in the process."

- John Fitzgerald Kennedy

Peace and Justice.

Jim Brown

Jim Brown's weekly column appears each Thursday here at Politicsla.com, and in a number of newspapers throughout the State of Louisiana. You can read Jim's Blog, and take his weekly poll, plus read his columns going back to the fall of 2002 by going to his own website at <http://www.jimbornla.com>.

P.S.: Visit Jim Brown's website at www.jimbrownla.com.