Columbia Missourian

Ty-Ron M. O. Douglas, Ph.D.
COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN

Columbia schools superintendent trying to build ‘cradle to career’ coalition

By Elizabeth Scheltens

September 26, 2012 | 6:00 a.m. CDT

COLUMBIA — Since he became superintendent of Columbia Public Schools in 2009, Chris

Erica Mendez Babcock
Belcher has been asking himself what he and his colleagues can do to close gaps in academic performance among students.

Now, he's looking for allies in a new coordinated effort to address the achievement gap between students from low-income homes and those from families of greater means. He is bringing together Columbia's social service organizations, health care providers, nonprofits, higher education institutions and philanthropies around a set of common goals:

- Making sure all students are ready for kindergarten.
- Making sure all students read at or above grade level by the end of third grade.
- Making sure all students successfully make the transition into and out of middle school, which, starting next fall, will be grades six through eight.

These goals, Belcher said, grew out of conversations among teachers, administrators, community leaders and Columbia residents at a series of "World Cafe" meetings, public forums at which participants discuss school-related issues.

The first World Cafe, in December 2009, led to the district's adoption of a Comprehensive School Improvement Plan that called for "the elimination of achievement disparities."

The World Cafe in November 2010 focused on the achievement gap. By the meeting's end, the 300 attendees had formed seven working groups, headed by community leaders, to study specific elements of the achievement gap, such as before- and after-school support and health care and nutrition.

Belcher said the themes that the working groups discussed led directly to the district’s decision to join with businesses, nonprofits and social service providers to take on the goals above.

Sally Beth Lyon, the district's chief academic officer, cited "the ideas, suggestions and shared conviction about solving the achievement gap" as critical for pushing the the partnership between the district and other community organizations forward.

The goals reflect what district spokeswoman Michelle Baumstark calls "a mindset shift" about dealing with the achievement gap.

"You can't expect one agency to fix the ills of society," Belcher said. "We have to work together."

Belcher said he wants to work hand in hand with organizations already serving low-income children to tackle health problems and other challenges that prevent many of them from coming to school ready to learn.
He has potential board members lined up from the Boys and Girls Club of Columbia, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Central Missouri, the Columbia Housing Authority's Youth Community Coalition, Heart of Missouri United Way, Stephens College and Columbia College. That board would share goals and data around serving Columbia's low-income children as well as oversee two new employees.

The district and the United Way would split the cost of hiring a data analyst, Belcher said, and the United Way would pay to hire an executive director to oversee the partnership.

Long term, such a partnership could lead to different organizations sharing data about the low-income children they're all trying to serve, said Greg Landsman, who five years ago helped form a partnership called Strive in Cincinnati that Belcher hopes to imitate in Columbia.

Landsman put it this way:

"A teacher might say, 'This student has been late, attendance has fallen off, he has a poor math score.' You have in the same data set whether that student is receiving support services elsewhere. Clearly this student needs a math tutor, so his teacher can send in a 'work order' that instantaneously gets him the support he needs."

**Poverty and performance**

The number of Columbia public school children living in poverty has risen 10 percent since 2003; the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education calculates that figure using the number of children whose families qualify for free or reduced-price lunches.

According to the most recent data available from the state, 40 percent of Columbia's public school students qualified for free or reduced-price lunches last spring.

Data from the 2012 Missouri Assessment Program show the district's low-income students are not performing as well as their peers.

- In grades three through eight, fewer than 34 percent of students who qualified for free or reduced-price lunch were proficient or advanced in the Communication Arts MAP assessment, meaning they passed. At least 63 percent of students who didn't qualify for free or reduced-price lunch passed.
- In grades three through eight, fewer than 33 percent of students who qualified for free or reduced-price lunch passed the Mathematics MAP assessment, with one exception: 41 percent of seventh-graders who qualified for free or reduced-price lunch passed. At least 63
percent of students who didn't qualify for free or reduced-price lunch passed.

- Fewer than 30 percent of students who qualified for free or reduced-price lunch passed the science MAP assessment, which is taken at grades five and eight. Almost 70 percent of students who did not qualify for free or reduced-price lunch passed.

**Columbia’s concern**

Meeting all of the needs of low-income children is a community issue, Belcher said.

"We're a progressive, intellectual community, and yet almost half the kids in our district live in poverty," he said.

This increases the burden on schools to provide meals, affordable day care for students not yet in kindergarten and after-school care for students with working parents, Belcher said.

Then there are the services that the schools don't provide, the absence of which can cause problems for low-income students: adequate medical and dental care and social-emotional problems that aren't being treated.

"The community has to provide the services that used to come from the nuclear family," Belcher said. "The community has to become that nuclear family."

To those who would argue against that responsibility, he said, "If we don't give kids the tools to graduate and be employable, they'll either take resources from you to survive, or they'll seek resources through unsafe means."

For a community like Columbia, Landsman said, the first option would have economic benefits.

"There are two ways to create economic growth in a community: you can attract it or you can grow it," Landsman said. "You could have all 17,709 of Columbia's public school students graduating college and career ready, ready to meet the existing career demand."

Belcher said it breaks down like this: "Half of the kids in our district live in poverty. Statistics show that half of them will find a way out of that situation, and half won't. For those who do make it out of poverty, the research shows that they had at least two adult mentors."

**Cincinnati's story**

In 2010, researchers Kelly Bathgate, Richard Lee Colvin and Elena Silva were asking many of the same questions as Belcher. At the time, they worked for Education Sector, a nonprofit,
nonpartisan think tank that focuses on education policy.

Bathgate said in an interview that she and her colleagues were asking themselves what communities were doing to successfully improve life outcomes for children from low-income homes. They looked all over the country and found an example in Cincinnati.

More than 70 percent of children in Cincinnati live in low-income households, according to Bathgate, Colvin and Silva's 2011 report "Striving for Student Success." Nonetheless, they wrote, Cincinnati made the greatest gains of any urban school district in Ohio and had greater success than any other Ohio district in reducing the percentage of students scoring in the bottom portion of achievement tests.

"Local leaders attribute much of this success to a unique partnership involving more than 300 civic groups, philanthropies, colleges, public agencies, nonprofits and businesses," the report said.

Bathgate, Colvin and Silva wrote that the partnership "attempts to coordinate every service and support that children and adolescents need, at every stage of their education and development."

Bathgate said that what makes efforts such as the Strive Partnership effective was the way it emphasized one overarching goal for the community, then broke that down into smaller goals for which each organization was responsible.

"They don't come together to sing 'Kumbaya.' They come together to move a specific, concrete and very public set of outcomes," said Jeff Edmondson, who helped start the Strive Partnership.

In an interview, Silva summed up the partnership this way: "Every organization that is focused on the well-being of children will have the same goals, and will be collecting and sharing data around those goals. They'll share the successes, struggles and challenges they have with groups of kids and with individuals."

**Potential challenges**

 Silva said her primary worry about partnerships like the one Belcher is trying to form is that when one single entity isn't responsible for a goal, somehow no single organization takes on the responsibility. If everyone is responsible, then no one is responsible, she said.

"That's a real risk, that's why shared efforts sometimes don't work and that's what makes people uncomfortable about them," said Silva, who is now a senior associate at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.
Noelle Witherspoon Arnold, assistant professor of educational leadership and policy analysis at MU, said partnerships between the public education and the private sector are nothing new. "These partnerships have been around, but we've been doing it poorly."

Her concern is that organizations focus on money instead of relationships.

"There are plenty of organizations that will throw money or ideology at a problem," Arnold said. "Bill Gates, for example, looks at a school and says, 'They don't have enough technology,' so he donates money. Some people would call that a partnership, but is it really?"

Strive's Edmondson said money alone can't close the achievement gap between low-income students and their peers. The difference with Strive, he said, is it collects data on all of the ways their member organizations are working with children, then only puts money and other resources into programs where the data show they make a difference.

"There are a lot of groups that 'spray and pray' — they spray resources at a problem and then pray that they will work," Edmondson said.

Truly effective partnerships go beyond giving money, said Ty-Ron Douglas, assistant professor of education at MU. They involve teachers and other stakeholders going into the communities where low-income children live and learning about their lives.

"There's a disconnect between who we are as teachers and who our students are," he said. "How much time do teachers really spend in those spaces where students spend their time outside school? Research shows that these spaces are more influential than the classroom. If we don't spend time in these spaces, how can we know our students?"

If Columbia's partnership is going to succeed, Kelly Bathgate said, parents have to have a say in the decision-making process.

"There's a lot of dialogue about 'how do we get parents to care?'" she said. "That can be short-sighted. Caring is not the problem."

Bathgate said the parents of low-income students often have had bad experiences at school themselves, which translates to a lack of trust.

"I couldn't find you a parent who deep down doesn't want what's best for their kid," Bathgate said. "It's a matter of building trust with them and giving them the tools to be an advocate for their child."
Supervising editor is Elizabeth Brixey.