

Audit hits B'ham schools for poor PR, operations

By Helen Niemiec
staff writer

Both the board and administration reacted to a public relations and communication audit of the Birmingham Public Schools at Tuesday's meeting, with a commitment made by both sides to investigate the findings further.

Board member Bradley Host called the findings a "sledgehammer" to the board, pointing out shortcomings in credibility and planning abilities.

John Wherry, a school public relations consultant, talked with staff, board members, parents and community leaders before issuing a report last month.

A videotape of the October board meeting where Wherry presented his findings will be cablecast on channel 21 on Tuesday, Jan. 2, in lieu of the regular board meeting, which has been canceled.

"This audit reveals that significant concerns do exist in the Birmingham Public Schools and they must be vigorously addressed, but the apparent imbalance in weaknesses over strengths is created by staff and community impatience, even intolerance, for any problems at all in a school system they want so badly to be perfect," Wherry concluded in his report.

Birmingham schools

The Birmingham School District includes a portion of northern Southfield.

AREAS OF CONCERN listed in the audit were:

- The perception that the district either does not engage in planning or does not carry out plans well;
- School district communication is often sporadic, not timely and

lacks credibility.

- The bond election failure has been viewed as a referendum on the public's confidence in the board and administration, rather than a financial issue.
- The blurring of the board/administration roles and board decisions made in response to small segments of the community.
- Comments about district image, operations and racial issues.

The district's strongest point, according to Wherry, is community and staff pride in the school system. Board member Malcolm Hay called the audit a "good first step,"

though he added "the only way to rebuild trust is by action, not words."

Host said he was pleased with the thoroughness of the findings, though he admitted that he originally did not support the audit because he expected the report to echo only board and administration views.

"He's been a messenger of what the community has wanted to tell the administration and board — the community doesn't trust us," Host said. "The problem isn't the community — it's right here."

HE URGED THE BOARD to cablecast the Wherry videotape because "the written report isn't enough."

Hay said the audit was "money well spent" and that it should be cablecast several times so the community can see it.

Board member Judith Perryman preferred looking at the recommendations and "moving on" rather than dwelling on the videotape.

"The board pretty much agrees with Wherry," said Board president Patricia Godchaux. She recommended that the administration review the finding and that the board consider the issue at its retreat in February.

Superintendent Roger Garvelink told the board that he would not respond to every part of the report at that night's meeting. "No one should assume that we'll enthusiastically embrace all recommendations," he said.

On the charge of insufficient planning, Garvelink said the district should make a point of telling the community about its planning efforts, since planning is an ongoing part of the administrative tasks.

Garvelink told the board that he will be turning down more of its requests because Wherry recommends a clearer line be drawn between ad-

ministration and board activities and because of "burnout of the administration."

"The board tends to keep piling things on to our annual goals," he said.

ONE RECOMMENDATION that Garvelink will use is the formation of a key communicators forum, where he and other administrators will meet with community leaders on a regular basis to keep a pulse on the city.

"I have a need to get input from the community in a way I haven't gotten in the past," the superintendent said.

Another recommendation that will be used is targeted mailings to parents and community members about school issues. In the past, communications were broad and people often didn't read them because they felt they weren't pertinent, he said.

Schools postpone new budget talks

By Helen Niemiec
staff writer

Few comments were made on the controversial proposal to cut 49 staff positions so the Birmingham Public Schools can finance \$5.8 million in building repairs, with people either opting to wait for a public hearing or trying out before the budget came up on Tuesday's agenda near the midnight hour.

The board was to discuss the next meeting date to set the issue last Tuesday, but no firm date was established.

Board president Patricia Godchaux told audience members they were welcome to speak at Tuesday's meeting but that the board decided to let the administration have 30 days to refine its proposal, meaning the topic won't return to the agenda until late January.

"I apologize to the people who wanted to talk about the budget,"

Godchaux said at 11:30 p.m. A public hearing also will be scheduled to allow comment from staff, parents and the general community.

School assistant principal John Schuster spoke against the budget proposal, saying that the plan would finance renovations "at the expense of staff and programs."

THE BIRMINGHAM SCHOOLS proposed budget cutback of 49 staff positions included seven administrators, 3.2 operational assistants, 19.2 teachers, one media clerk, 11.5 paraprofessionals, four custodians and three maintenance employees.

An assistant for 11 years, Schuster said he had aspired to be a principal. "That goal may be gone and I may be losing my job as assistant principal," he said.

Eliminating assistant principals would change the program, he told

the board, because there would be less personal contact with the students.

James Haefner, a former board member, agreed that there has to be a better way to finance school building repairs than to take the money from the general fund budget.

"There is no question that the buildings need a lot of work," said

Haefner, who was defeated by Brad Host in last June's school board election. "Maybe a smaller bond issue in the \$20 to \$25 million range would reduce the massive cuts."

A person involved in the gifted and talented program had planned to speak that evening but said she would wait for the hearing in January.

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