

Saving Roosevelt

Letters, editorials about the Roosevelt School District

Tom Horne: Roosevelt is failing the kids

For a number of years, the Arizona Department of Education has devoted more resources to helping the Roosevelt School District than any other district in the state. Still, the district continues to perform poorly in its academics. This year, there are seven underperforming schools and four failing schools in the district.

At its core, the problem at Roosevelt is leadership. Many Roosevelt administrative personnel are inexperienced in their positions and lack the knowledge or ability to describe an instructional strategy, resource or assessment and how they affect student achievement.

The overwhelming consensus from interviews and focus groups at the district and school levels is that the district RSD governing board's harmful interference in district operations is the number one No. 1 reason nothing gets done or done well in the district.

District staff, community members and parents state that the board's decisions are based on race, personal favors or personal vendettas and that many district staff are afraid of the board's retaliation. Political ties among board members and midlevel management, including principals, leave the superintendent unable to discipline or provide leadership.

The result is a pilotless airplane filled with children, flying in the dark and surrounded by mountains. All stakeholders shared that drastic action must be taken including removal of the board's authority, so the district would have a true opportunity to improve.

In the past three years, the district has received almost \$90 million dollars in state and federal assistance. This increases its per pupil funding from the statewide average of about \$6,000 to about \$8,000 for Roosevelt, yet parents, teachers and students report not enough books and classroom materials for students; consistent classroom management and student discipline issues; inferior and unhealthy school environments.

The state auditor general has informed the district of its financial non-compliance on many issues, including: no accountability over its capital [assets](#); poor cash controls leaving student monies susceptible to loss, theft or misuse and district bank accounts were opened by employees without approval of the governing board.

The state has an extremely successful program called Reading First to increase reading proficiency rates in Grades K-3. Eight of the nine Roosevelt schools had to be terminated for cause, and the district lost \$1 million in assistance.

Among the reasons was that "serious lack of leadership left reading intervention systems in disarray." The effect will be less fewer elementary school students reading proficiently, which will negatively impact the remainder of their academic careers.

Roosevelt had the ability to send more than 70 staff (for free) to state best practices programs, but sent only eight.

A fifth-grade teacher told me that her students came from a fourth-grade teacher who was barely literate, and who had the students coloring all day. In a properly run school district, leadership prevents this from happening. This is the kind of problem that produces seven schools that are underperforming and four schools that are failing.

All three representatives from the legislative district that covers Roosevelt have introduced a bill in the Legislature to authorize the state to intervene in academically dysfunctional districts for a limited time.

After many tries by other methods, I have concluded that this is the only way to turn Roosevelt around academically, so that students will learn what they need to be successful in the 21st-century economy. Letting your legislators know that you support their efforts is the best way to ensure that our children receive the education that they need. !

Tom Horne is the state superintendent of public instruction.