

Jeffco Recall Election Raises Timeless Issues

I have spent my career working on organizational performance improvement challenges, which have consistently centered on the same three questions that are at the heart of the election to recall members of the Jeffco Board of Education.

First, do we have a performance problem?

Many organizations will deny this until the truth becomes too painful to ignore. Some candidates in this election apparently believe there is no student achievement problem in Jeffco. Ron Mitchell claims “Jeffco was on the brink of greatness” when the new board majority was elected, while Amanda Stevens cites “the district’s track record of excellence.” The evidence tells a different story.

Every student in Colorado takes the ACT in eleventh grade. It is the last comprehensive measure we have of the cumulative result of the taxpayers’ investment in twelve years (k-11) of their education.

In 2015, only 44% of Jeffco students met the ACT’s “college and career ready” (C&C) standard in reading, only 44% in math, and only 40% in science. Between 2008 and 2015, over 27,000 Jeffco 11th graders have failed to meet the C&C standard in reading, over 28,000 have failed to meet the math standard, and over 34,000 have failed to meet the science standard.

Among Jeffco students eligible for free and reduced lunch (FRL), just 24% met the C&C reading standard, 20% met the math standard, and 18% met the science standard. However, only 50% of non-FRL eligible students met the C&C reading standard, 54% met the math standard, and 47% met the science standard. That’s right – if you are the parents of a non-FRL Jeffco student, his or her chance of meeting the college and career ready standard in reading, math, or science is essentially a coin-flip.

That doesn’t look like a track record of excellence, or a district on the brink of greatness. In fact, [Jeffco’s student achievement problem has been clear for at least the past decade.](#)

And please don’t reply, “but Jeffco outperforms (fill in the blank).” In the real world, that doesn’t matter. If my children can’t do algebra, they aren’t getting the job or into the college they want. In our intensely competitive

global economy, if Jeffco's children aren't graduating college and career ready, they're going to struggle for years.

The second question is, if we admit we have a problem, what will we do? Substantial performance improvement always requires substantial change. There are no magic bullets.

The board members that are the target of the recall – Ken Witt, John Newkirk, and Julie Williams (“WNW”) – have supported significant changes to improve student achievement in Jeffco. These include establishing measurable achievement improvement goals, approving a new math curriculum, making free full day kindergarten available to every student who is eligible for free and reduced lunch, increasing additional school funding per FRL student from \$150 to \$850, strengthening local control and accountability by giving principals more authority over their budgets, increasing the rigor of program evaluations to ensure taxpayers are getting value for money, raising pay for starting teachers to attract more talent, basing teacher pay raises on performance rather than seniority, switching to new assessments that provide much faster feedback, and revitalizing School Accountability Committees, which give parents and business leaders a strong voice on achievement improvement issues. Moreover, [the most recent student achievement data](#) (from the 2014-2015 ACUITY tests) show a significant improvement in results for both FRL and non-FRL students.

In contrast, the candidates backed by the recall campaign propose a strategy whose key elements (based on their websites) include “keeping great teachers in every classroom”, “[full day kindergarten for all students](#)”, and “strong neighborhood schools”.

The third question is, how will we implement our performance improvement strategy?

Substantial change inevitably generates conflict. Yet too many struggling organizations place conflict avoidance (typically described as a “collaborative approach”) above the urgent need to take action to improve their performance. The result is a poorly implemented strategy that fails to achieve its goals. The election in Jeffco highlights this classic tradeoff. WNW believe that “change is hard”, and a temporarily higher level of conflict is a price worth paying for faster improvement in student achievement results. In contrast, the candidates backed by the recall campaign have placed less conflict and more collaboration at the top of their agenda, regardless of the likely negative impact on student achievement improvement.

This isn't the first time that Jeffco has confronted these three critical questions. In 1997, faced with rising public frustration over poor student achievement results, Jeffco hired outsider Jane Hammond as superintendent. She made many significant changes, and won passage of an award winning mill levy that tied increased taxpayer funding to improved student achievement. In just one year, Jeffco was halfway to its three-year achievement goal and Hammond was named Colorado's 2001 superintendent of the year. In 2002 she was suddenly replaced by Cindy Stevenson, a career Jeffco employee.

Over the next decade, collaboration was high in Jeffco, but student achievement stagnated despite billions in spending. Time will tell if history repeats in 2015.

Tom Coyne is a political Independent. He chairs the Wheat Ridge High School Accountability Committee, is a member of Jeffco's District Accountability Committee, founded www.k12accountability.org, and has worked on corporate performance improvement issues for more than 30 years.