

Published Tuesday
April 18, 2006

Midlands Voices: Chambers unfairly punished OPS

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An interesting aspect of Legislative Bill 1024 is that the onus of integration is now on the "learning community" rather than on Omaha Public Schools. Districts that opposed meaningful change designed to further integration now have ownership of that responsibility.

While it is a non sequitur to entrust that duty to those who have been resistant rather than to those who championed it initially, the important thing is that the OPS goal of further integration survives - all thanks to the enigma that is State Sen. Ernie Chambers.

A Sunday World-Herald editorial sorted out what went wrong in this exercise. But it failed to credit the Chambers contribution to this embarrassment.

Thriving on endless conflict, the senator elected to pummel and vilify an ally. OPS had come too close to rendering the senator ineffective by addressing integration issues in the "one city, one school district" effort. Chambers' solution was to "kill the messenger" and befriend the new "learning community."

Chambers now is allied with school districts that have demonstrated their reluctance to substantively remedy these inequities. And if the "learning community" fares no better than OPS has, Chambers once again will be able to focus on the problem rather than the solution. I believe that OPS came too dangerously close to the latter for Chambers' tastes and legacy-building.

And what tripe is the Chambers claim that he does not care about integration or segregation. Chambers betrays his protests with his criticism (misdirected though it is) that John Mackiel ended OPS busing in order to end integration.

Sen. Chambers unfairly punished OPS for not achieving sufficient levels of integration in the current paradigm. No wonder OPS struggled. It did not have the consensus needed to do better (support from other districts, legal mandate, etc.). That has just been achieved. Unlike OPS, the "learning community" will have the tools.

Sadly, the Legislature and Gov. Dave Heineman were unwitting participants in Chambers' adaptation of "The Pied Piper." It was a palatable and naive cast masterfully directed and choreographed as usual by the senator. They had not a clue. Bit players all, they were oblivious to the context of Chambers' script.

The ultimate irony and most important point is that what should now be done in the name of integration under LB 1024 may look something like what OPS would have done under "one city, one school district." That direction is now codified in state law (notwithstanding porous, wiggle-room language that may provide escapability).

So, it is no surprise that suburban district superintendents are less than enthusiastic. They are now required to take up the OPS mission. The chess master of the Legislature captured the queen (OPS) and checkmated the king ("learning community").

Chambers takes no prisoners. Never has, never will. OPS was demonized despite trying to right the wrongs of the past. OPS suffered the wrath of Chambers for no good reason.

For the new "learning community," this experience falls under the category of lessons learned: "Be careful what you wish for, you just may get it." Those opposed to what OPS wanted to accomplish relative to integration have just received a big mouthful of it - just in a different flavor.

Unfortunately, the appearance of it all does not look like an OPS victory, for the moment. Unlike Chambers, I believe that history will smile on the OPS vision: "One city, one school district. The right thing to do."

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