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By Linda Hernandez and Dr. LaVonne Sheffield

All parties have role to play in making our schools better

School superintendents typically lead the organization for a few years, the best of them helping to bring real improvements to classrooms, and then they move on to another challenge. But the business of educating children continues. We're writing this guest column jointly to assure the community of a smooth transition when the superintendence of Rockford public schools passes Wednesday from one of us to the other.

In the swirl of activity that accompanies this change, let's look with pride at our accomplishments of recent years but also focus on the significant hurdles we still face. We share a vision that Rockford's public schools will once again become the schools of first choice for students and parents in this community.

To be sure, our schools are in better shape than they were a few short years ago. Mounting debt from years of overspending had placed us in a precarious financial position, and a state takeover loomed. Today, it's different; we carry Illinois' highest financial rating and one of the healthiest budgets among local governments.



Progress on the academic front has been slow and uneven. This year, more students than ever met or exceeded grade-level expectations on standardized tests, if you aggregate the data. If you disaggregate the data, however, a wide achievement gap between minority and white students still exists.

Haskell Elementary School improved enough to move off seven years on various state and federal academic watch and warning lists, an example of what can happen if we concentrate our efforts. Across the landscape, however, our schools are not where they ought to be.

Nearly a third of our schools are underperforming. Most of those have a high percentage of minority students. The primary challenge before the Rockford School District is to prepare all of our students to meet the challenges of the 21st century and beyond. A tangential challenge is to prepare teachers, administrators and support staff to educate students differently so they are prepared to compete and succeed in an international society.

Every child has the potential to accomplish extraordinary things. The primary goal of Rockford schools is to help children realize that amazing potential.

With that theme and direction, Rockford public schools will transform into a student-centered organization committed to ensuring that every child succeeds.

For such a transformation to occur, full participation of parents and guardians is required. Our schools will not get better without strong involvement from parents. It's that simple.

The best public schools in America are those in which parents are closely involved with their children's learning. So a major shift in Rockford will be an open-door policy that welcomes parents and makes an urgent effort to involve them.

What happens after school is important, too. Children need quiet time to complete homework assignments. Parents should set aside time for family reading and other learning activities, and we will work with parents to learn about those activities that help so much at home. We will reach out to the business community and other organizations to help children learn.



The classroom teacher is, of course, the most influential factor in whether children learn, so the professional growth of teachers will be a priority. We will establish a Teacher Development Institute that focuses on job-embedded coaching and mentoring, encourages national certification, and expands higher-education partnerships. As well, a new Leadership Institute will train up-and-coming teachers to become school principals. We will realign our curriculum and develop formative assessments.

Students have a job here, too. We will put our money and resources directly in the classrooms because that's where learning happens — not in the central office. We will help students plan leadership-building initiatives such as summits that invite peers from other area schools to address local, state, national and international issues and concerns.

In return, we will expect students to work hard in class and maintain the kind of character that makes not only their moms and dads, but the entire community, proud. Everyone must take responsibility for this transformation: the superintendent, Board of Education, teachers, students and parents alike.

Think of the change that can occur with everyone working together. We can deliver a world-class education that makes Rockford schools the schools of first choice for our families.

Linda Hernandez has served as superintendent of Rockford public schools since August 2007. LaVonne M. Sheffield assumes the position in three days.