

Ballard: tutoring needed Mayor proposes city office to track progress of students

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Mayor Greg Ballard says the status quo isn't good enough anymore when it comes to educating Indianapolis children.

Many aren't successful in high school because they're not prepared when they start, said Ballard, who tutors children at the Boys and Girls Clubs of Indianapolis.

"No one understands the true magnitude of the situation," Ballard said.

So Ballard is proposing what he's calling a big, bold idea in education: Provide help to every student who needs it, not just the ones who ask for it.

To do that, the mayor plans to open an office that will track all Indianapolis students through eighth grade. The office will evaluate what help they need, based on standardized tests and perhaps other measures. Then, working with the United Way of Central Indiana, the city will help parents find local not-for-profits that will help students with reading, math or other areas where they're struggling.

"Sometimes, parents just need help knowing how to help their kids," Ballard said.

The new mayor said that as he tutored the past couple of years, he saw firsthand the kind of help children and schools need. Responsible adults need to take an active role in educating the young people, said Ballard, who credits his parents, teachers and other adults for giving him the support and help he needed to succeed in school.

"The community needs to expect more from students," said Ballard, 52, a retired lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Marine Corps and a former instructor at Indiana Business College.

While the initiative's first planning meeting is a couple of weeks away, Ballard already has pitched his idea to the local business community, school superintendents and the United Way of Central Indiana.

"It's a terrific idea," said Roland Dorson, president of the Greater Indianapolis Chamber of Commerce. He praised Ballard for relying on the expertise of existing not-for-profits while using his influence as mayor to bring the parties together.

Focusing on younger children makes sense, said United Way CEO Ellen Annala, because once they've fallen far behind, the likelihood they'll ever catch up diminishes.

The United Way already tracks children within existing programs, such as the Ready to Learn, Ready to Earn initiative. Fifteen elementary schools in two neighborhoods participate in the program, which focuses on tutoring fourth-grade students.

"If we can get kids performing and succeeding by the sixth grade, then we can expect that they'll be staying in school longer and graduating," Annala said. "The mayor's idea would let us expand this to other areas."

Extracurricular assistance

Mayor Ballard is joining the effort to improve Marion County high school graduation rates. His plan would:

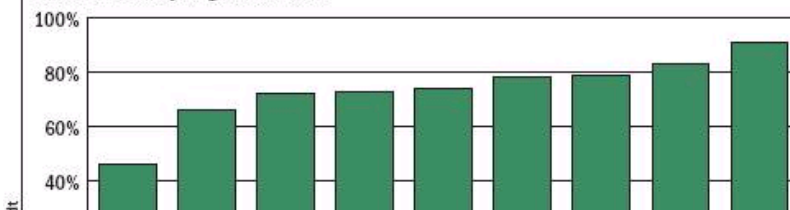
- track needs of students in grades K-8, then direct them to a not-for-profit that provides applicable services.
- use United Way of Central Indiana to act as a liaison between not-for-profits and parents.
- launch a pilot program in the fall at three or four Indianapolis Public Schools elementary schools.

Source: Mayor Greg Ballard

Lacking pomp and circumstance

IPS graduation rates trail others in the county significantly. Only Speedway schools hit the mayor's target of 90 percent.

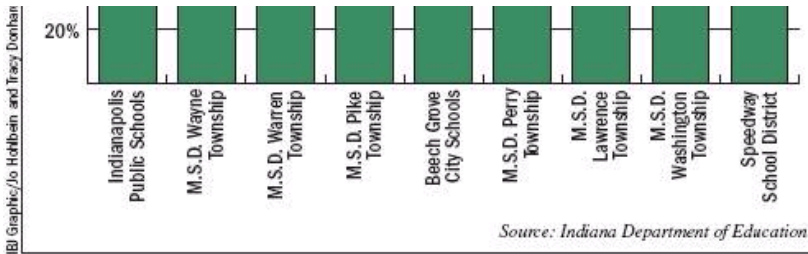
2006-2007 Four-year graduation rate



Ballard said the local school superintendents are on board with his idea, though he did meet with some resistance over what he referred to as "turf" issues.

Indianapolis Public Schools Superintendent Eugene White said that while Ballard did mention the program "there were no real details. I'm open to any ideas that the mayor has in terms of bringing services to children in need."

Many school districts, including IPS, already are making a big push to attempt to improve high school graduation rates, though data



released by the Indiana Department of Education this month show many have a long way to go.

Last year's high school graduation rate for the state as a whole was 76.5 percent, up nearly half a percentage point from a year earlier. However, the performance of IPS worsened, falling 4.7 percentage points. Only 46.1 percent of IPS students completed high school in four years. Marion

County township districts fared better, graduating an average of 76.7 percent of students in four years.

Ballard wants 90 percent of all students to graduate. Only the Speedway School District, at 90.6 percent, hit the mayor's target.

"If we don't provide an educated work force, companies aren't going to come to Indianapolis," Ballard said.

He hopes to launch a pilot program with three or four elementary schools this fall. The mayor said he hopes to build a coalition of businesses, the chamber, school districts and others so that funding the program would not require taxpayer support.

His plan would complement a recently launched initiative called Common Goal, a countywide plan spearheaded by superintendents of the 11 school districts and the Greater Indianapolis Chamber of Commerce. The plan will bring together businesses, the school districts and not-for-profits, like the Center for Leadership Development, The Mind Trust and the Indianapolis Urban League.

Common Goal's target is an 80-percent graduation rate in four years. It differs from the mayor's plan in that Common Goal targets at-risk high school students; the mayor's would address needs of students before they enter high school.

In both initiatives, business involvement is key, the mayor and Dorson say. Businesses will provide mentors to the not-for-profits or donations of cash or materials, among other help.

"We can shine as a community in terms of finding a solution that can actually work," Dorson said. "It's not just the responsibility of the person in the classroom or the superintendents. It's everyone's responsibility. If any of us are going to succeed, we depend on our kids succeeding."

Ballard also is trying to find a way to help kids before they even start school, but said he realizes that may not be feasible.