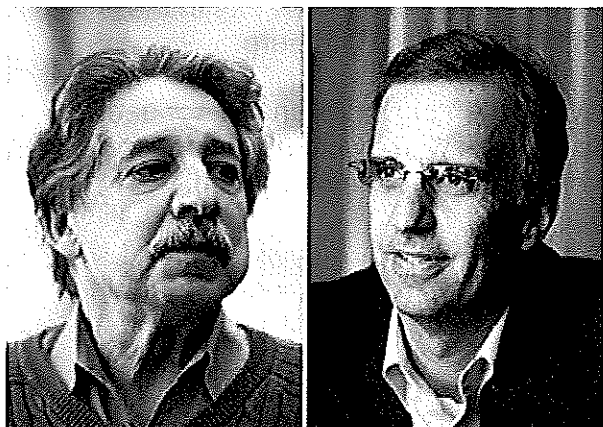




Madison and Dane County gearing up to help city's schools



20 HOURS AGO • PAT SCHNEIDER | THE CAPITAL TIMES | PSCHNEIDER@MADISON.COM

Madison Mayor Paul Soglin has some pretty strong ideas about how to improve academic achievement by Madison school children. Charter schools are not among them.

In fact, Madison's ongoing debate over whether a charter school is the key to boosting academic achievement among students of color in the Madison Metropolitan School District is distracting the

community from making progress, Soglin told me.

He attended part of a conference last week sponsored by the Urban League of Greater Madison that he says overstated the successes elsewhere of charter schools, like the Urban League's controversial proposed Madison Preparatory Academy that was rejected by the Madison School Board a year ago.

"A number of people I talked with about it over the weekend said the same thing: This debate over charter schools is taking us away from any real improvement," Soglin said.

Can a new committee that Soglin created — bringing together representatives from the school district, city and county — be one way to make real progress?

Soglin has been focused on finding a way for the city to play a bigger role in helping Madison kids succeed in school for quite a while, and last spring called for the revitalization of an existing city-school liaison panel to help get the job done.

He — along with Dane County Executive Joe Parisi and interim Superintendent Jane Belmore — are slated to address the resulting Education Committee at its meeting at 5:30 p.m. Wednesday in Room 300 of the Madison Municipal Building, 215 Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.

Asked to point to a couple of ways the city can do more to boost kids' academic achievement, Soglin said city resources and facilities can be part of offering kids more hours of learning each day and over the summer, and in giving their parents the opportunity to learn what they need to in order to help their kids do their best.

The city might grant funds, for example, to nonprofit agencies that offer academic after-school programs, and city-supported neighborhood centers could be where the programs are offered.

It's not that collaborations to support schoolchildren and their families are not already underway or on the drawing board.

For example, the "Early Childhood Zone," a joint program of Dane County, United Way of Dane County and the school district, is due to launch in the next few weeks in the Leopold Elementary School area on the border of Madison and Fitchburg.

The program uses home visits to assist families with parenting skills and to connect children to early education programs while linking families with eviction-prevention, job-skill and health care services. The program also emphasizes developing family expectations for consistent attendance in school.

It could be a model for other school communities, according to Parisi, who already has had some discussions with officials of the Sun Prairie School District.

"By all of us working together and joining forces — the public and private sectors, nonprofit groups and citizens — we can more effectively address our shared challenges," Parisi said in a statement.

Creating programs that would put school buildings to broader use and helping parents do the best they can by their children are also part of the school district's plan to close the achievement gap. Leopold Elementary, for example, is being widely used by community members for a variety of family-supporting programs.

"The schools need to focus on instruction and learning, but so much goes on with families that the schools can't get to — employment, housing, transportation for parents. If we look at each others' work to where there are gaps, and where we overlap, hopefully it will lift up the students," Belmore said.

West-side Ald. Matt Phair, chairman of the Education Committee, said that although it can be hard for such joint committees to move beyond efforts to facilitate communication, he hopes that the committee eventually will play a larger role than past city-school liaison groups and make specific program proposals.

The committee has focused in its first few months on researching the many existing programs that assist schoolchildren and their families, an endeavor Phair said highlights the need for staff time to support its work.

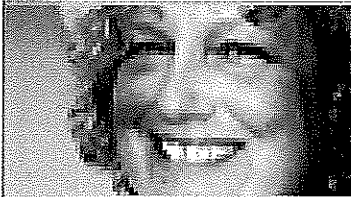
One function the committee can fulfill by its very existence is to make the statement that school achievement is everybody's business, Phair told me.

"We need to acknowledge that educating kids is not just the school district's responsibility. It's the city's responsibility and the county's responsibility, and all the (nonprofit) partners' too. This says we're getting serious about that," he said.

Phair, who is an eighth-grade teacher in the Mount Horeb Area School District, didn't want to get into the charter school debate when he and I talked. But he did agree that the controversy can get in the way of the larger issue of educating children.

"We've got to figure out a way to decide what we can all agree on, put our heads together and move forward to the make the school district better for all kids," he said.

Pat Schneider



Pat Schneider

For more than a decade, Pat has reported on the communities — neighborhood, ethnicity, lifestyle and avocation — that make Madison what it is.



