

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

A hyper-local approach may be most practical route to lasting school reform

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Forget about urban school reform on a grand scale. A modest, hyper-local approach may be the surest way to turn around a failed district—one that starts by asking, “Can’t we get one well-performing school to serve children in this neighborhood?”

Those are the implications of a study published earlier this month about the performance of St. Louis Public Schools—neighborhood, magnet and charter—by the Illinois Facilities Fund. And they may represent St. Louis Public Schools’ best chance to achieve lasting stability.

U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan, during a visit to St. Louis last month, extolled the work of the fund—a private, non-profit community development firm that helps non-profit organizations examine a wide range of problems relating to planning, finance and facilities development.

In Mr. Duncan’s seven-year tenure as CEO of Chicago Public Schools, the firm sliced, diced, ranked and mapped data on school capacity and student population and achievement, school by school, neighborhood by neighborhood.

The results—in an easily digestible form—helped school managers and education policymakers to see at a glance how children are being served by public schools across the city.

Now St. Louis Public Schools—including neighborhood, magnet, specialty and charter schools—have received the IFF treatment. The National Association of Charter School Authorizers brought the firm in to crunch the data and make recommendations.

The results are a compelling array of neighborhood maps organized by ZIP code. They chart a distinctively local route to school reform. The recommendations

call for focusing first on six areas of the city with the greatest concentration of school-aged children and the fewest number of decent schools.

The approach is sound, but not because of precise calculations of scientifically collected data. To the contrary, you could throw a dart at a map of St. Louis and, virtually anyplace it lands, marshal a long list of good reasons for putting a good-performing school there.

The depressing reality is that data from the 2007-2008 school year reveal just four schools citywide that met Missouri’s annual proficiency target. The IFF had to invent its own measure for top schools; the IFF’s “Tier 1” schools perform at just half the level demanded by state standards.

It gets worse. Few St. Louis schools met even that dismal standard. Huge swaths of St. Louis lack even a Tier 1 school.

Those swaths are the geographic areas that the IFF recommends as staging grounds for the most vigorous school reform. The task is monumental, but there are hopeful signs of progress. It’s not at all obvious from the IFF study that new charter schools provide easy answers. The data, if anything, show charters to be part of the problem.

Not one charter school satisfied the state achievement standards. Only one even reached the diluted Tier 1 standard. Many were among the poorest-performing schools in the city.

The maps make a compelling case that you must start somewhere. They argue that school reform begins at home—that school reform, at its core, means ensuring every city neighborhood is served by at least one respectable school, and you build from there. The journeys of thousands of children can begin with a single decent school.