

Barbara Byrd-Bennett

Work History Background and Press Clips

ACADEMIC GROWTH

Article: New York Daily News, Sept. 11 1996, Laura Williams. "[School Dist. Chief Gets a New Post.](#)"

Excerpt: Schools Chancellor Rudy Crew has chosen Barbara Byrd-Bennett, the superintendent of Community School District 17, to head his 'Chancellor's District' of 10 of the most troubled schools throughout the city. Byrd-Bennett, whose contract at District 17 is not officially up until next year, is accustomed to the task of turning around troubled districts.

"I hate to lose her, but [Crew] needs a top person," said Frances Hagler, president of the District 17 parents council. "She brought stability to this district, she brought togetherness and she weeded out a lot of undesirables."

Byrd-Bennett served as superintendent of third-largest school district in New York (Crown Heights in Brooklyn) for two years in the mid-1990s. Under her leadership, scores in the district jumped from 36.3 percent of students performing at or above grade level in 1994 to 41 percent at or above grade level in 1995. Reading scores jumped from 38.5 percent to 40.2 percent during that same time.

Article: New York Post, June, 3, 1998, Adam Miller and Susan Edelman. "'Worst' Schools Show Big Gains."

Excerpt: Officials at a Bronx school branded as "the worst" in the city were jumping for joy yesterday when word came that it was among the dozen in the "chancellor's district" that improved dramatically in reading. The 12 flunking schools taken under the wing of Schools Chancellor Rudy Crew two years ago, third-grade reading scores show the highest one-year gain in the city, at 15.9 percent.

"We're so damn proud," said Barbara Byrd-Bennett, the superintendent of the chancellor's district. "God, it's such a relief to know that the hard work is paying off."

Scores improved dramatically in the Chancellor's District during Byrd-Bennett's tenure as superintendent. In 1997 only 30.9 percent of third-graders read at or above grade level. By 1998, 46.2 percent did. For students in third to eighth grades, 22 percent were reading at grade level in 1997. By 1998, 27.9 were. Class sizes were reduced, children received more one-on-one tutoring, teachers were specially trained, weekend and after-school programs were implemented and special reading curricula was followed. This "high priority" method would become the foundation for Byrd-Bennett's reform methods in Detroit.

Article: Cleveland Plain Dealer, July, 17, 2005, Sandra Livingston, Janet Okoben and Scott Stephens. "Progress in peril; Cleveland budget crisis threatens to reverse hard-won academic gains."

Excerpt: A...measure of progress has been movement on the state proficiency tests.

In the critical subjects of math and reading, scores among Cleveland's fourth- and sixth-graders have improved more than twice as fast as statewide averages since 1998.

In fact, among 60 urban school districts recently examined nationwide by the Council of the Great City Schools, Cleveland was one of only seven in which math and reading scores improved faster than their respective state averages in all grades tested.

Although still below state averages, the passage rate on fourth- and sixth-grade math and reading tests increased by an average of more than 160 percent from 1998 to 2003.

ACADEMIC REFORM

Article: The Detroit News, Nov. 19, 2009, Amber Arellano. “[Tough job for Detroit’s academic czar](#)”

Excerpt: Despite her influence, Byrd-Bennett is relatively unknown in Detroit. Outside the city, she is considered a superstar. Hundreds of wanna-be reformers have tried to boost poor urban student achievement levels. Byrd-Bennett is one of the rare leaders who has done it.

"Barbara laid the foundation for everything we're doing with District 79 (New York City's alternative schools and programs)," says Giulia Cox, executive director of student support services for the New York City Department of Education.

The city has revamped its General Educational Development (GED) degree and other programs for teenagers and young adults who weren't succeeding in traditional high schools. The result: The GED passage rate doubled in the first year, and the city's graduation rate is rising, Cox says.

Article: Cleveland Plain Dealer, July, 17, 2005, Sandra Livingston, Janet Okoben and Scott Stephens. “Progress in peril; Cleveland budget crisis threatens to reverse hard-won academic gains.”

Excerpt: Cleveland schools are way ahead of where they were in 1998, when the debt-riddled, deeply troubled operation was given over to mayoral control and Byrd-Bennett was recruited from New York City to run it. She turned her attention, and the district’s pocketbook, toward aggressive academic reforms. Most focused on getting kids to read. And she started hiring and training educators, with an emphasis on finding smart, thick-skinned young teachers who could bounce back from the rigors of inner-city teaching without succumbing to burn-out or cynicism.

During Barbara Byrd-Bennett’s tenure, the district’s graduation rates climbed from 28 percent to 50.2 percent (in part due to better record-keeping). She lengthened the elementary school day by 30 minutes and set aside 80 minutes to focus on literacy in the morning. She increased spending for teacher training and support services by 94 percent (including computer programs and instruction in math, English and technology), though statewide, spending only increased by 49 percent. She also focused on hiring quality principals in the district and laying off underperforming principals.

FINANCIAL REFORM

Article: Cleveland Plain Dealer, Nov. 16, 2003, Janet Okoben and Ebony Reed. “Byrd-Bennett making her mark; Cleveland schools CEO has gained power, respect in five years on job”

Excerpt: As CEO, Byrd-Bennett is credited with getting voters to agree to pay \$380 million in taxes toward a \$1.5 billion program that will rebuild and replace the district's crumbling school buildings. Last year, then-state Auditor Jim Petro declared the district's books were "clean as a whistle," a vivid

contrast with years when the records were in such shambles that it was difficult to determine how much money the district had.

And this year, the district rose out of the state's category of academic emergency for the first time since the state began issuing report cards.

"She is clearly one of the most respected education CEOs in big-city school districts in the country," said Michael Casserly, executive director of the Council of Great City Schools.

"What I like is that she's incredibly strategic and focused," said Susan Tave Zelman, who heads Ohio public schools. "She's blunt and she's honest, and I like to think of myself as having the same qualities."

As Cleveland Municipal School District's CEO, Byrd-Bennett successfully balanced the budget each year, including her first year on the job when she inherited a more than \$150 million deficit. Barbara Byrd-Bennett and her financial advisors paid down district's debt, secured the district's finances and received clean audits from 2001 to 2005. She took on a \$1.5 billion construction program, including 15 new schools. She eliminated middle schools and created a K-8 structure to save money and boost student achievement. She spent \$11 million over five years to extend the school day for proficiency test help. From 1998 to 2003, per-student expenditures increased by more than 53 percent (compared to 30 percent for the rest of the county.)ⁱ

Barbara Byrd-Bennett served as the chief academic and accountability auditor for Detroit Public Schools from May 2009 to June 2011. She worked under Robert Bobb, the district's emergency financial manager, who was appointed by the State of Michigan in 2009 to get the district back on sound fiscal footing. The state took away control from the Board of Education to manage the \$1.1 billion budget and gave that to Bobb and his turnaround team. Barbara Byrd-Bennett worked mostly on long-range planning.ⁱⁱ She helped develop a district five-year academic reform plan aligned with available and projected finances. The plan was aimed at bringing district on par with national averages on ACT, graduation and dropout rates by 2015.ⁱⁱⁱ The plan also outlines measures to increase dropout rate from 58 percent to 98 percent and offers college-level courses at all high schools.^{iv}

UNION RELATIONS

Article: Catalyst, April 30, 2012, Sarah Karp. ["Former Cleveland schools leader named interim chief ed officer."](#)

As the first mayoral appointed chief education officer in Cleveland, Bennett focused on teacher quality, says Charlise L. Lyles, co-founder and former editor of Catalyst Cleveland, the now-defunct sister publication of Catalyst Chicago. Her passion for quality professional development and training for teachers earned her a good relationship with the teachers union.

"She improved the teacher union's relationship with the district so that there was respect and considerable trust," Lyles said.

Article: Cleveland Plain Dealer, Dec. 2, 2008, Scott Stephens. "National teachers organization chooses Byrd-Bennett for fund."

Excerpt: Former Cleveland schools CEO Barbara Byrd-Bennett has been named co-chair of the American Federation of Teachers' new national "innovation fund," which is designed to help spark union-led efforts to improve public schools. Byrd-Bennett will share the chair duties with former Iowa Gov. Tom Vilsack.

"At the AFT, we aren't just asking our nation's leaders to invest in innovations," said President Randi Weingarten. "We're putting our money where our mouth is."

Byrd-Bennett was also a lead negotiator in talks with Detroit Federation of Teachers union in 2009 that successfully resulted in new three-year contract.^v

ARTICLES IN FULL:

Daily News (New York)

September 11, 1996, Wednesday

SCHOOL DIST. CHIEF GETS A NEW POST

BYLINE: By LAURA WILLIAMS

Schools Chancellor Rudy Crew has chosen Barbara Byrd-Bennett, the superintendent of Community School District 17, to head his "chancellor's district" of 10 of the most troubled schools throughout the city.

Byrd-Bennett will continue to run District 17 made up of 27 elementary and intermediate schools in Crown Heights and Flatbush until the local school board chooses an interim superintendent, say board officials.

The interim leader will serve during the process that district parents, the local board and the central Board of Education must go through to choose a permanent superintendent.

The top job in the chancellor's district opened up last month after Crew appointed its previous superintendent, Maria Guasp, to the helm of the scandal-scarred District 9 in the Bronx.

Byrd-Bennett, whose contract at District 17 is not officially up until next year, is accustomed to the task of turning around troubled districts. The former principal was appointed to head District 17 in December 1994 by then-Chancellor Ramon Cortines. Cortines ousted the previous superintendent and board because infighting killed their ability to make decisions.

One of Byrd-Bennett's first acts as superintendent of District 17 was to fill several principal vacancies, a task the previous regime could not do.

Math scores in the district jumped from 36.3% of the students performing at or above grade level in 1994, to 41% at or above grade level in 1995. Comparable statistics for reading went from 38.5% in 1994 to 40.2% in 1995.

"I hate to lose her, but [Crew] needs a top person," said Frances Hagler, president of the District 17 parents council. "She brought stability to this district, she brought togetherness and she weeded out a lot of undesirables.

"I'd hate to hold her back. This opportunity may not come around [again]."

Byrd-Bennett did not return phone calls.

Some are wondering why Crew would choose to take her out of the district at the beginning of the new school year.

"[Crew] is not giving us a chance to succeed," said Agnes Green, a member of the ousted school board of District 17, who was reelected last May.

Green is not serving on the school board pending a court battle between Crew and the ousted board members who were reelected, but she still attends board meetings and is active in the district.

"If he [Crew] had made his decision in June [this year], we would have had two months, time for a selection process that would not be pushed by expediency," she said.

Crew formed the special district last spring in order to whip low-performing schools into shape and avoid having the state take them over.

The schools are on the state's SURR or Schools Under Registration Review list.

The New York Post

June 3, 1998, Wednesday

'WORST' SCHOOLS SHOW BIG GAINS

BYLINE: ADAM MILLER and SUSAN EDELMAN

Officials at a Bronx school branded as "the worst" in the city were jumping for joy yesterday when word came that it was among the dozen in the "chancellor's district" that improved dramatically in reading.

At 12 flunking schools taken under the wing of Schools Chancellor Rudy Crew two years ago, third-grade reading scores show the highest one-year gain in the city, at 15.9 percent.

"We've really been under fire," said an elated Gillian Williams, principal of PS 63 in The Bronx. "But this shows that these kids can perform at very high standards."

The 12 schools were doing so poorly that the state Education Department threatened to shut them down.

Since Crew took them over, the schools have been lavished with attention - special reading curricula, teacher training, and after-school and weekend programs.

Class sizes have been reduced to 25, students are evaluated every eight weeks, and kids who do poorly get one-on-one tutoring.

"We're so damn proud," said Barbara Byrd-Bennett, the superintendent of the chancellor's district. "God, it's such a relief to know that the hard work is paying off."

A report released by the Board of Education showed that 46.2 percent of third-graders in the chancellor's district read at or above grade level. Last year, the figure was 30.9 percent.

For students in third to eighth grades, 27.9 percent were reading at grade level, compared to 22 percent last year.

Byrd-Bennett cited a litany of reasons for the success: Students spend 2 hours a day on reading. Kids stay after school three or four days a week, and some attend weekend classes.

Teachers drill kids on how to take tests, mentoring programs abound and parents are constantly updated on what their kids are learning.

Students, parents and teachers gave the efforts an "A."

Fifth-grader Eric Briggs, 11, said he was reading below grade level until recently. "I'm really reading better. It's made a big difference. I'm so happy."

His grateful mother, Iris Luckey, president of the parents association, said she's seen a dramatic change.

"Now, when he comes home from school, he picks up a book or a comic book instead of playing Nintendo."

Plain Dealer (Cleveland)
July 17, 2005 Sunday

Progress in peril;
Cleveland budget crisis threatens to reverse hard-won academic gains

BYLINE: Story by Sandra Livingston, Janet Okoben and Scott Stephens, Plain Dealer Reporters

SCHOOLS AT THE BRINK

Before she started to run seriously short of cash in 2003, Cleveland schools CEO Barbara Byrd-Bennett went a long way toward proving two momentous propositions for the poorest big city in America.

One: that even in a public school system as hopeless as Cleveland's seemed to be just a decade ago, poor urban kids can be taught.

And two: that – especially in such a system – it takes lots of money to do it.

Practically from the outset, Byrd-Bennett spent money like it grew in Cleveland's abandoned factories, while producing some of the city's first academic progress in memory.

Now, with a critical tax request on a special ballot Aug. 2 – a measure that would raise \$22.8 million for next school year and \$45.6 million a year after that – the Cleveland Municipal School District is at a crossroads.

Clearly, it remains well short of where it ought to be: Its students trail state averages on practically every key academic indicator and by wide margins.

But it's equally clear that Cleveland schools are way ahead of where they were in 1998, when the debt-riddled, deeply troubled operation was given over to mayoral control and Byrd-Bennett was recruited from New York City to run it.

Since then, the district reports its graduation rate has climbed from 28 percent to 50.2 percent, a statistic fueled as much by better record keeping as by academic improvement.

A better measure of progress has been movement on the state proficiency tests.

In the critical subjects of math and reading, scores among Cleveland's fourth- and sixth-graders have improved more than twice as fast as statewide averages since 1998.

In fact, among 60 urban school districts recently examined nationwide by the Council of the Great City Schools, Cleveland was one of only seven in which math and reading scores improved faster than their respective state averages in all grades tested.

But that kind of progress hasn't come cheap. Simply maintaining it — not to mention coaxing it to greater heights — will likely take more money, not less. And therein lies the peril of Cleveland schools as the Aug. 2 vote approaches.

Even as employee health-care costs and other expenses rise at or beyond the inflation rate, the district's spending options are held hostage by:

A school funding system that has been declared unconstitutional but remains largely unchanged;

Declining support from already struggling Cleveland taxpayers; and

Privately run but tax-funded charter schools that have sucked \$150 million from the school district's operating funds in the last seven years — and are expected to draw off another \$324 million over the next four.

And because of some combination of timidity, conflicting priorities or ballot-weariness, Cleveland officials waited at least four years too long — based on their own financial forecasts from the late 1990s — before seeking a long overdue tax increase last November.

By then, deficits had long since taken hold, painful teacher layoffs and school closings had filled the headlines, and academic progress had slowed. And voters resoundingly rejected the plea for another \$68 million a year.

That makes the stakes higher for the more modest tax request next month.

Passage would restore some — but far from all — of the cutbacks of the past two years.

Rejection would likely mean the wholesale dismantling of the ambitious reforms introduced since 1998 — and quite possibly, of the academic progress they fostered.

Schools chief spends big, gets results in class

Byrd-Bennett was never shy about spending money, as long as it was targeted to make a difference.

And she says it has been more than justified by results.

“This district at one point had huge sums of money and no student progress,” Byrd-Bennett said in a recent interview. “That’s directly attributed to a lack of focus and direction of those resources into what’s important. You’ve got to redirect those dollars on what’s needed.”

And that, she said, is exactly what she’s done.

When she arrived from New York in 1998 — after the beleaguered system had been handed over to then-Mayor Michael R. White and the elected school board disbanded — Byrd-Bennett inherited a school district more than \$150 million in the red and mired in chaos and despair.

With an infusion of new operating cash from a 1996 tax hike — the first such increase approved by Cleveland voters in more than a decade — Byrd-Bennett and her fiscal officers were able to steadily pay off debt and shore up the district's finances, earning clean audits from the state every year since 2001.

And she turned her attention, and the district's pocketbook, toward aggressive academic reforms. Most focused on getting kids to read.

Byrd-Bennett stretched the elementary school day by 30 minutes, for instance, and set aside 80 minutes each morning to focus on literacy.

And she started hiring and training educators, with an emphasis on finding smart, thick-skinned young teachers who could bounce back from the rigors of inner-city teaching without succumbing to burn-out or cynicism.

From 1998 to 2003, the district's annual payroll costs for educators — teachers and administrators with teaching certificates — soared by \$140 million, a growth rate of nearly 50 percent. That's faster than in nearly all of Ohio's school districts, and much faster, on average, than elsewhere in Cuyahoga County.

The ranks of Cleveland teachers grew faster than in all but seven of Ohio's wealthier, suburban districts.

By 2003, Cleveland reported one teacher on the payroll for every 10.8 students enrolled, the second lowest ratio in Ohio. Only Beachwood, at 10.1 students per teacher, had a lower one, according to state data.

Spending for teacher training and support services — including computer programs and “instructional specialists” in math, English and technology — increased by 94 percent, while rising 49 percent statewide.

The Cleveland district also poured nearly \$34 million over six years into a summer-school program; spent \$11 million over five years to extend the school day for proficiency-test help and committed at least \$17 million to eliminate middle schools by absorbing them into a kindergarten-through-grade-8 structure — a move officials said would boost student achievement by strengthening ties between families and schools.

Overall, per-pupil expenditures rose more than 53 percent in Cleveland from 1998 to 2003, compared to 30 percent in the rest of Cuyahoga County and slightly more than that statewide.

In part, Cleveland's costs are high because the district, like Ohio's other big urban districts, has so many special-needs students, Byrd-Bennett said, and several factors have driven up its payroll costs. Those include teacher raises to make up for lean contracts in earlier years; a drive — spurred in part by federal money — to shrink class sizes; and a commitment to recruit and hire the best-qualified teachers because research shows they fuel results.

Even, apparently, in Cleveland.

Proficiency-test scores improved dramatically.

Although still below state averages, the passage rate on fourth- and sixth-grade math and reading tests increased by an average of more than 160 percent from 1998 to 2003.

The improvements didn't bring Cleveland up to par, weren't always uniform and didn't necessarily correspond to variations in spending on teacher salaries from school to school.

Still, it would be hard to dispute that Cleveland's targeted spending increases from 1998 to 2003 played a substantial role in driving the academic improvements.

Spending drove progress, cutbacks threaten gains

In fact, the best defense of Byrd-Bennett's spending may well be what happened in 2003, when it stopped: The district's performance started to flatten out in some subjects and to ease downward in others when the district ran out of money, leading to fears that its hard-fought gains could evaporate as well.

“Losing the folks we lost has been incredibly, incredibly difficult and, at most schools, probably the most frequently cited reason for any kind of slippage,” said Lisa Marie Ruda, Byrd-Bennett's chief of staff.

The district reached a spending high-water mark of \$670 million in 2003 and has been slashing ever since — down to an expected \$558 million in spending for next year.

But Byrd-Bennett says her program has been cut to the core already. Class sizes have soared, especially in the higher grades, as about 1,200 teaching jobs were cut. Through layoffs and attrition, the district also lost another 800 employees, including scores of assistant principals, social workers and security officers, not to mention bus drivers and custodians. Many of the alternative programs for dealing with unruly students have also been eliminated.

The result, in addition to dirtier, more chaotic schools, has been predictable, Byrd-Bennett said: Discipline has become a major issue, especially in the high schools, a reality that's made its way into newspaper and television headlines.

Union rules can mean loss of quality teachers

Nearly all of the laid-off teachers had been hired since Byrd-Bennett arrived. Because of union contracts, the last hired are generally the first laid off, regardless of effectiveness.

And many classroom stars have been lost as a result, say current and former officials.

And because union rules also allow more senior teachers to pick their assignments, the losses have been most noticeable at historically struggling schools — typically spurned by the veterans — that had benefited the most from recent infusions of new teaching talent.

At Michael R. White Elementary, for example, where fourth-grade test scores blossomed in the Byrd-Bennett years under the tutelage of a generally younger, less experienced and less expensive staff, the teacher corps has been decimated by layoffs.

The school lost six teachers last year and seven for next year, combining for one of the highest layoff-to-enrollment ratios in the district.

In comparison, at Corlett, where fourth-grade test scores generally languished — despite teachers who typically boast 10 years more on the job and earn about \$11,000 more apiece each year than their counterparts at Michael R. White — no teachers had been laid off through the end of the last school year.

If the Aug. 2 tax issue passes, district officials say they'll be able to bring back as many as 100 teachers. But if it fails, they'll need to cut \$160 million more over the next three years to stay solvent. In that case, more drastic layoffs are certain.

"You'd be talking 3,000 people," said Ruda. "It would shut down the organization."

Meanwhile, the prospects on election day don't look particularly good for the schools, with tax supporters saying their polls indicate that more than half of Cleveland's regular voters would probably oppose it.

And no matter what happens Aug. 2, records show that Byrd-Bennett will have less money to spend in 2005-2006 than she had in her first full year on the job.

"It's a personal frustration," Byrd-Bennett said. People have forgotten how bad things used to be with the schools, she said.

"How do you get people in a community to understand there aren't any options? If there were, that we'd clearly use them; that we're at the bone?"

Events and indecision delay key tax votes

How did the district's prospects dim so dramatically? It's a complex story that appears to involve political timidity and indecision.

District officials knew since the late 1990s that a hefty tax increase would be needed to restore Cleveland's academic health.

And in hindsight, 2000 appears to have been a prime opportunity lost.

Ruda argues that 2000 was too early in Byrd-Bennett's tenure to demand a huge tax hike. Plus, she said, hopes were still high that the state legislature would try to deal with Ohio's unconstitutional school-funding system.

But that didn't happen. And unforeseeable events soon clouded the picture.

In October 2000, the gym roof at East High School collapsed, providing a dramatic reminder of the dilapidated conditions of many Cleveland schools. The result was an all-out campaign to pass a \$335 million school-repair and replacement bond issue the following May.

That essentially postponed a tax-hike request for operations until the following year. But a different schools campaign followed in 2002, with officials successfully seeking voter endorsement of continued mayoral control of the district, thought to be critical for school improvements.

That knocked the tax request off the ballot yet again.

In retrospect, Byrd-Bennett says she probably should have pushed harder for a tax hike then, even though pollsters emphatically opposed the idea. A tax issue on the same ballot could well have cost the district mayoral control, they argued, resulting in a return to an elected board of education, which they dreaded.

But with the bond issue and mayoral control safely behind them, Cleveland officials allowed 2003 to slip away as well without asking for more school taxes.

Byrd-Bennett said she argued "vehemently" for a ballot issue that year and won't say who decided against it. Her boss, Mayor Jane Campbell, said the business community was too preoccupied with a proposed convention-center bond issue to bankroll a school-tax campaign — even though the convention-center issue never went to a vote.

"They [business leaders] said, basically, they wouldn't fund it," Campbell said. "Well, what are you going to do? If you can't run a campaign, you can't take your message out."

The result was a gamble that backfired.

By putting off the inevitable year after year, officials made last fall's \$68-million-a-year tax increase proposal a must-win proposition for the schools. And when it went down, by a 55-to-45 percent margin, the stakes only got higher.

Meanwhile, the cutbacks continued to take their toll — both on the district's performance and on its financial and political prospects.

Layoffs, heightened discipline problems and school closings combined to stir up considerable hostility toward the schools, officials say. And given the unusual length of her tenure, and that she has been the public face behind much of the bad news, Byrd-Bennett acknowledges that negative feelings about her may be fueling the problems.

In part, those feelings trace back to the controversial, 36 percent raise that she received in 2003 — from \$198,000 to \$270,000 a year — for a job she says her critics would describe as little more than a glorified "school marm."

But Byrd-Bennett and her troops have received considerable bad press for various foul-ups and seeming miscues as well.

State auditors questioned her for flying first-class, for instance, though Byrd-Bennett insisted private foundations, not taxpayers, covered the extra cost. She also caught flack for hiring her future son-in-law to a \$73,000-a-year job in the district's athletics department and keeping him there after he married her daughter. He left the district last summer.

Earlier this year, Cleveland schools also had to repay the state more than \$700,000 for inflating the number of students getting bus transportation. And the district quickly reworked a contract extension for Byrd-Bennett after news reports that it provided for a generous sick-pay allowance when she leaves. News stories about car allowances of up to \$500 a month for her top staffers also generated outrage among some.

A Plain Dealer analysis also showed last week that the district by-passed as much as \$14 million in potential income since 2002, largely by allowing local banks to invest its money at less-than-competitive interest rates.

But as important as such matters may be, their overall price tag doesn't come close to addressing the systemic, structural financial problems driving the schools' crisis.

Problems that include the economic decline of the city of Cleveland, which last year was declared the poorest big city in the nation.

Even more basic than that, however, is Ohio's reliance on the property tax to finance public education, a reliance that's been declared unconstitutional four times in the last eight years by the Ohio Supreme Court.

Despite some modest, inflation-adjusted growth during the latter half of the "Comeback" 1990s, resident income inside the boundaries of the Cleveland school district was still among the lowest in the state — even at its high point in 2000, just before the recession.

By 2003, the last year data is available, it had actually fallen by more than 8 percent.

The city's property values have languished much longer, constricting local tax support for Cleveland schools for decades.

The last time Cleveland voters approved a tax increase for school operations was nine years ago. But because of a 30-year-old state law that prohibits property-tax revenue from increasing with inflation, revenue from that hike peaked almost immediately.

After adjustment for inflation, the local tax revenue for Cleveland schools has actually declined — by more than 17 percent — since Byrd-Bennett arrived.

State support for Cleveland schools has flagged as well. The state budget freezes the district's funding for the next two years.

Meanwhile, the charter school movement continues to suck students and money from the Cleveland schools at a rapidly increasing rate, according to state data, from \$2.9 million in Byrd-Bennett's first year on the job, to more than \$67 million last school year. That figure is projected to reach \$90 million a year by 2009.

"It's very, very, very difficult," Byrd-Bennett said. "The only upside for us is that our student population is declining, so that the number of people and the resources that you needed diminishes as well."

The district has seen a 10 percent drop in enrollment since 2000 — a trend attributable more to the draw of charter and other alternative schools than to Cleveland’s dwindling population.

But the resources are falling much faster than the need. And they are leaving behind more than 64,000 inner-city students, many of them poor, and many who made remarkable strides when the schools were on the rebound.

After two rounds of layoffs and the prospect of more to come, the potential impact on hard-won gains in the classroom has left some Cleveland educators with a stoic sense of determination.

“We can all sit back on the sidelines and cry about what’s going, but that’s not going to change anything,” said Almira Elementary School Principal Lori Crum-Glenn. “We just have to try to be more creative with what we have.”

November 19, 2009 at 8:27 am

Tough job for Detroit's academic czar

By Amber Arellano

The Detroit News

November 18, 2009

It's 1:30 a.m. Tuesday, and Barbara Byrd-Bennett is e-mailing Detroit Public Schools' Emergency Financial Manager Robert Bobb one more thing to add to their to-do list.

She e-mails him at 4 a.m., when she cannot sleep. She e-mails him at 11 p.m., before she goes to bed. She e-mails him at 8:30 a.m. on Sundays from Cleveland, where she lives some weekends with her husband, Bruce, before returning to Detroit to do one of America's toughest big city jobs.

Byrd-Bennett is Bobb's academic czar and more: She is his co-chief.

When Byrd-Bennett told Bobb he was proposing budget cuts that would hurt children's learning, he backed off. When she recommended they negotiate a dramatically different teachers' contract, he followed. When she said Detroit had to radically change to compete with charter schools, Bobb agreed.

While Bobb is the school district's showman who woos the public with his no-nonsense message and anti-corruption results, Byrd-Bennett is the behind-the-scenes policy strategist charged with the arguably tougher job: dramatically improving student achievement in the country's most troubled urban school district.

"What is important to her is not the glory; it's the students and what's best for them," says Sharif Shakrani, co-director of Michigan State University's Education Policy Center, who worked with Byrd-Bennett in Washington, D.C.

This week is one of Byrd-Bennett's most critical early tests. She is one of the lead negotiators in talks with the Detroit Federation of Teachers' union. Negotiations have been extended until Saturday.

The negotiations are considered by experts to be essential to the district's survival. Byrd-Bennett wants the teacher union to agree to a new special contract for the city's lowest-performing schools, modeled after a successful effort she headed in New York City.

"What Barbara is working on now, along with the current teacher contract negotiations, will dictate the future of the Detroit Public Schools," Bobb says.

Despite her influence, Byrd-Bennett is relatively unknown in Detroit. Outside the city, she is considered a superstar. Hundreds of wanna-be reformers have tried to boost poor urban student achievement levels. Byrd-Bennett is one of the rare leaders who has done it.

What reformers around the nation are watching now: Whether Byrd-Bennett -- who led the turn around of New York City's and Cleveland's failing schools -- will be given the opportunity to flourish in the Motor City.

Children drive her

Byrd-Bennett's passion for disadvantaged children drives her. Growing up in the "projects" in a black working-class family in New York City, she says, she always wanted to be part of a movement to empower disenfranchised people.

Byrd-Bennett was inspired by her dad, Wallace Lee, a postal worker who rose to become a leader in his union. Her mom, Helen, worked in retail.

She found her opportunity in a chance meeting in her early 20s with a renowned New York City educator called Mother Hale. The woman asked her, "Do you want to be a teacher?" Byrd-Bennett answered, "No, but I want to be part of a movement." Mother Hale said, "You're hired."

Struggling as a teacher early in her career, Byrd-Bennett eventually made a name for herself in her mid-30s when she began to unravel the mystery of how to boost student achievement in high-poverty schools.

She was charged with improving instruction and curriculum in dozens of schools. Her first year, test results flat-lined.

"I could almost cry, just thinking about it," she says. "We looked at why and made changes."

By years two and three, students' reading and math test scores improved, eventually reaching a jump of 30 percent. National experts paid attention. The model she developed is championed by Mass Insight Education & Research Institute and other school turnaround experts.

"Barbara laid the foundation for everything we're doing with District 79 (New York City's alternative schools and programs)," says Giulia Cox, executive director of student support services for the New York City Department of Education.

The city has revamped its General Educational Development (GED) degree and other programs for teenagers and young adults who weren't succeeding in traditional high schools. The result: The GED passage rate doubled in the first year, and the city's graduation rate is rising, Cox says.

Byrd-Bennett built that foundation as the superintendent of the Big Apple's special Chancellor's District in the 1990s.

Byrd-Bennett wants to apply that model to Detroit. She and Bobb are proposing to create a "high priority district" within the larger district for the city's chronically failing schools.

The high priority district's success largely rides on securing a special teachers' contract, as it did in New York. Byrd-Bennett wants failing schools' staffs to be hired based on performance, not just seniority; and ensure students have longer school days and smaller classrooms.

To encourage the Detroit teacher union to support such changes, Byrd-Bennett and Bobb are offering an unprecedented \$45 million in performance-based bonuses for school employees.

Such a carrot helped build buy-in from New York City teachers' union.

Detroit hasn't been that easy.

Detroit talks difficult

Byrd-Bennett had anticipated difficult contract negotiations; budget deficits; brutal public scrutiny and an intrusive school board in Detroit -- all are part of the typical urban district's terrain.

What she had not expected is Detroit's almost total lack of workable systems.

"This really isn't about reform," she says of Detroit. "In a reform district, you see some measurable results relatively quickly ... Children are not dying in a reform district."

"Detroit is very different, in my mind," she added candidly. "This is about turnaround. ... I failed to judge how deep and intense the work would be here. It's very heavy lifting."

On the other hand, Byrd-Bennett says Detroit is similar to New York City and Cleveland, the latter of which she served as superintendent for eight years until 2006.

"Every community thinks their circumstances are worse than any other city," she says. "They think nothing can be done."

Experts say the results of her work will not be seen until next fall, at the earliest, if she is given the chance to succeed.

"Barbara knows all of the challenges; she knows what the hiccups are," says Michelle Rhee, chancellor for Washington, D.C., public schools. "At the end of the day, she can be as great as anybody, but if there is not the political will and infrastructure in place to support reforms, it's not going to matter."

Like Bobb, Byrd-Bennett is ambitious and decisive -- and often works 14-hour days, her staff says. Her buoyant energy is contagious.

"I've done incremental school change and rapid change," she says, explaining her workaholic lifestyle. "Rapid change is what parents want."

Unlike Bobb, Byrd-Bennett is so warm and gracious, even her critics like her. Keith Johnson, the teachers' union president, says he has so much faith in her -- unlike Bobb -- he believes the district could be turned around in just three years under her.

For her, she says "Detroit is a high for me in my career." It's a chance to ensure some of the country's neediest children get the high-quality schools which they deserve, the civil rights movement of her era.

She says the biggest obstacle to school reform is faith.

"You have to suspend your disbelief," she says. "Change can happen, and it does happen. I've seen it."

**Plain Dealer (Cleveland, Ohio)
November 16, 2003**

**Byrd-Bennett making her mark;
Cleveland schools CEO has gained power, respect in five years on job**

BYLINE: Janet Okoben and Ebony Reed, Plain Dealer Reporters

Barbara Byrd-Bennett's first week as head of Cleveland public schools was nearly her last.

Hours after she started her job on Nov. 16, 1998, a board member suggested the district hadn't budgeted money for Byrd-Bennett's salary. As a result, he said, the woman lured from New York by then-Mayor Michael White could not legally be issued a contract.

Byrd-Bennett remembers thinking, "Well, then, I'm outta here."

"And in my head I was already thinking, 'I'm going to sue the pants off you people,' " she said, a broad smile spreading across a face that has graced countless magazine covers, political fliers and television broadcasts around town. Her contract ended up being approved later that week, and her first paycheck arrived - handwritten, because the payroll department couldn't generate one from a computer.

It was the first of several times in the early days of her job that Byrd-Bennett wondered what kind of "dysfunctional" school district she had just taken over.

Five years later, Byrd-Bennett is still on the job, the first Cleveland superintendent to last that long since Paul Briggs led the schools from 1964 to 1978.

In those five years, she has become one of the highest-paid and most powerful school leaders in the nation.

"She is clearly one of the most respected education CEOs in big-city school districts in the country," said Michael Casserly, executive director of the Council of Great City Schools.

The most recent evidence of that is her appointment last week to the National Assessment Governing Board, which sets policy for a test known as the nation's report card, Casserly said.

As CEO, Byrd-Bennett is credited with getting voters to agree to pay \$380 million in taxes toward a \$1.5 billion program that will rebuild and replace the district's crumbling school buildings. Last year, then-state Auditor Jim Petro declared the district's books were "clean as a whistle," a vivid contrast with years when the records were in such shambles that it was difficult to determine how much money the district had.

And this year, the district rose out of the state's category of academic emergency for the first time since the state began issuing report cards.

Some say improvements are coming too slowly for the district's 73,000 students, but Byrd-Bennett's supporters emphasize that she is making progress.

"What I like is that she's incredibly strategic and focused," said Susan Tave Zelman, who heads Ohio public schools. "She's blunt and she's honest, and I like to think of myself as having the same qualities."

Byrd-Bennett's first boss, former Mayor White, said he is proud of her work.

"In my view, the most important thing she's done is put children where they ought to be in the system, and that's first," he said.

Her current boss, Mayor Jane Campbell, said Byrd-Bennett "deserves every penny" of her salary, which has grown from \$155,000 to \$278,000, plus bonuses.

"I think that nothing we do in this city matters more than the success of the school district," Campbell said.

Both White and Campbell agree that Byrd-Bennett benefits from being the first Cleveland school chief to work in a system controlled by the mayor's office and an appointed board. Byrd-Bennett calls mayoral control "an experiment which was extremely appetizing to me."

Her chief of staff, Lisa Ruda, said mayoral control has given Byrd-Bennett the freedom to build a staff and start programs that would have taken more time otherwise.

"Barbara, wherever she is, is going to be a successful superintendent." Ruda said. "But without the governance structure, there's no way she could have accomplished what she has."

In other cities with mayoral control, superintendents must go through a city council to get budgets approved or deal with input from advisers.

But both mayors for whom Byrd-Bennett has worked have vowed to stay out of day-to-day affairs.

School board members appointed to serve during Byrd-Bennett's reign have given her their support with a long string of unanimous votes in favor of her administration's proposals.

Byrd-Bennett also has managed to fashion a cozy working relationship with the powerful Cleveland Teachers Union, which had a history of butting heads with superintendents.

Last-minute negotiations in 2000 averted a teachers strike, but last year the union agreed to extend the contract through 2005. CTU President Richard DeColibus is an unabashed fan of Byrd-Bennett.

"The first year we danced around each other because we weren't sure of each other," he said. "The level of trust wasn't there. Once we realized trust was there, that opened the gate."

DeColibus said some of his members are uncomfortable with the rapport he has with Byrd-Bennett, given the adversarial relationship between the union and administration in the past. But he said they need to understand that cooperation is good for both.

"I haven't agreed with everything they've done," he said of Byrd-Bennett's administration. "I haven't made a big public dispute. Sometimes it was just a matter of sitting down with her to work it out."

Byrd-Bennett's ability to work with the unions was one attribute that impressed the Cleveland Foundation, one of many charitable foundations that have donated millions for research, training and other services over the past five years.

Since 1999, the Cleveland Foundation has donated \$4.8 million to the district and \$10 million more to organizations that support the school system.

"Does that mean you get all the results you want?" said William McKersie, former senior education program officer at the Cleveland Foundation. "No, but she does have a vision."

Even in rough times, Byrd-Bennett has defused criticism. In 1998, when an administrator sent a memo to principals asking them to identify their worst teachers - a move that infuriated an already sensitive teachers union - Byrd-Bennett took the heat and soothed the situation with a letter to employees.

At the start of this school year, parents of middle school students were enraged with the sudden news that their children would take RTA buses instead of yellow school buses to cut costs. Byrd-Bennett said it wasn't her idea, but she stuck up for her staff. Eventually she relented and returned the yellow-bus service.

"No matter what the issue is, I'm going to wear the jacket," she said. "I think you have to say . . . this was a bad decision. And so, let's just fix it and let's come back and say how do we handle that kind of decision in the future."

City Council members have been frustrated by the lack of communication from the Byrd-Bennett administration. Councilman Zack Reed said council was bombarded with questions from residents on the bus issue, but had no answers. Council members are put at a disadvantage when news about the schools comes from the media instead of the district, he said.

Reed and Councilman Joe Jones want council to create an education committee. The district's 39 percent graduation rate is of particular concern and Jones said he won't support any tax increase until he and constituents know more about plans for improving the district.

"From what I know about Barbara Byrd-Bennett, I hear that she's a great administrator and I don't want to take away from that, but there needs to be more communication," said Jones.

Councilman Michael Polensek is more suspect of the real progress made in the last five years.

"The city is desperate," he said. "They are looking for a savior. They are looking for a champion. The city, and to an extent The Plain Dealer, has made her the education messiah. We've got so far to go, you can't even see the light at the end of the tunnel."

Zeddie Coley, a former Cleveland teacher and a current member of a watchdog group overseeing the construction program, said the people who disparage Byrd-Bennett don't understand what it takes to run a school system.

"She's running a billion-dollar operation," he said. "That's no easy job."

Denyse Tilford, a parent of five children who attend Cleveland schools, supports Byrd-Bennett even though she was laid off last spring from her job as an aide at Clara E. Westropp Elementary. She was called back to work earlier this school year, but money woes have employees worried about who will be laid off next.

Even though she questions some decisions, Tilford wishes more people had patience with the system, especially when they complain about how long the construction program is taking.

"A lot of times people vote for things, stand there and wait for something to happen," Tilford said. "Meanwhile, there are crowded classes while you are waiting for new schools and parents are frustrated, waiting."

Ayana Aughburns, a freshman at Cleveland School of the Arts, is grateful for the new books and computers her middle school got last year.

"Cleveland schools aren't as bad as people say they are," she said. "They are getting better. From what teachers tell me, I believe it's because of the new CEO."

Byrd-Bennett's salary has drawn criticism, and that's likely to continue as she tries to sell voters on the need for a tax increase next year.

But ultimately, Byrd-Bennett said she thinks she will be remembered for the new and refurbished schools that will be gained through the construction program.

She said she wishes she also will be remembered for taking "this broken-up system that had forgotten what its purpose was . . . and getting the community refocused on the importance of its most valuable commodity -its kids."

Now that Byrd-Bennett has made the five-year mark, many wonder how much longer she'll stay. She has said she will fulfill her contract, which runs through 2004 with the option for a two-year extension. School board President Margaret Hopkins isn't worried.

"She's a passionate professional," Hopkins said. "We're looking forward to keeping her here for many years to come."

Barbara Byrd-Bennett will give an update on the state of Cleveland schools tomorrow at the City Club. The speech will be carried live on WCPN FM/90.3 from 12:30 to 2 p.m., with a question-and-answer session afterward for those who wish to call in. A television broadcast of the speech will air at 10 a.m. Sunday, Nov. 23, on WVIZ Channel 25.

Former Cleveland schools leader named interim chief ed officer

Catalyst Chicago

By: Sarah Karp

April 30, 2012

Less than one business day after revealing that Chief Education Officer Noemi Donoso is leaving, CPS officials announced that she will be succeeded by Barbara Byrd Bennett, a veteran educator who ran Cleveland schools for seven years.

Though Donoso's resignation is not effective until May 31, Bennett will be in town working in an advisory role for a month, spokeswoman Becky Carroll says. Bennett will then serve as interim chief education officer.

CPS officials also announced that CEO Jean-Claude Brizard was bringing Beth Mascitti-Miller, a former colleague from Rochester, NY, to fill the role of early childhood chief officer. Last week, legendary early childhood expert Barbara T. Bowman retired.

In many ways, Bennett seems the opposite of Donoso, who was relatively inexperienced when Mayor Rahm Emanuel and Brizard plucked her from Colorado.

"Bennett is a seasoned and respected leader with depth and expertise across a broad spectrum of education issues," Brizard said in a press release.

As the first mayoral appointed chief education officer in Cleveland, Bennett focused on teacher quality, says Charlise L. Lyles, co-founder and former editor of *Catalyst Cleveland*, the now-defunct sister publication of *Catalyst Chicago*. Her passion for quality professional development and training for teachers earned her a good relationship with the teachers union.

“She improved the teacher union’s relationship with the district so that there was respect and considerable trust,” Lyles said.

Lyles also said Bennett also concentrated on improving the principals in Cleveland. “She cleaned house and got rid of quite a few principals,” Lyles says.

After leaving Cleveland, Bennett worked as a consultant for a number of districts, most recently as Detroit schools chief academic and accountability auditor..

Bennett is also a trustee for an organization called Common Core, a non-profit research and advocacy organization that pushes for a broad liberal education as opposed to a narrow focus on tested subjects.

Carroll says that Bennett has also worked on teacher union contracts, implemented a longer school day and new teacher evaluations. “Given where we are as a district, she is a good fit,” Carroll says.

Brizard was able to tap Bennett quickly because he knew her professionally, Carroll says.

Brizard turned to Mascitti-Miller as someone he knew and trusted. Before leaving Rochester, he hired her as his deputy superintendent of teaching and learning. In that role, she helped write curriculum aligned to the Common Core State Standards.

Mascitti-Miller also led World of Inquiry School No. 58, Rochester’s first K-12 school.

A year ago, Mascitti-Miller had applied for – but did not become – interim superintendent of Rochester City School District. Some speculated that her closeness to Brizard, who had fallen out of favor with the Rochester school board, hurt her candidacy.

Plain Dealer (Cleveland)
December 2, 2008 Tuesday

National teachers organization chooses Byrd-Bennett for fund

BYLINE: Scott Stephens, Plain Dealer Reporter

Former Cleveland schools CEO Barbara Byrd-Bennett has been named co-chair of the American Federation of Teachers' new national "innovation fund," which is designed to help spark union-led efforts to improve public schools.

Byrd-Bennett will share the chair duties with former Iowa Gov. Tom Vilsack.

"At the AFT, we aren't just asking our nation's leaders to invest in innovations," said President Randi Weingarten. "We're putting our money where our mouth is."

Adam Urbanski, president of the organization's Rochester, N.Y., affiliate, will run the fund. Urbanski, widely regarded as one of the most progressive leaders in the teachers union movement, has helped push the organization to school reform and social justice issues.

Byrd-Bennett, who came to Cleveland in 1998 from the New York City schools, is an executive-in-residence at Cleveland State University.

Crew cuts: Rudy Crew, one of the education world's marquee names, is coming to town as the guest of Cleveland State University's Center for Educational Leadership.

Crew, superintendent of the Miami-Dade schools, also served as chancellor of the New York City schools. He is the author of "Only Connect: The Way to Save Our Schools."

Crew is the featured attraction of the center's executive session dinner and seminar Tuesday-Wednesday, Dec. 16-17. Deadline for registration and fees is Thursday, Dec. 11.

For details, visit csuohio.edu/cehs/edleadership.

Honor roll: Longtime teacher and Cleveland Teachers Union activist Meryl Johnson is being honored as teacher of the year by the Cleveland chapter of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

Former State Sen. C.J. Prentiss of Cleveland will receive the group's excellence in education award. Prentiss has coordinated a highly successful statewide program aimed at helping black male high school freshmen at risk of dropping out of school.

The group will present the honors at its annual gala Thursday, Jan. 15, at Executive Caterers at Landerhaven. Gov. Ted Strickland and civil rights activist the Rev. Al Sharpton are expected to speak.

For information or reservations, call Marcia McCoy, gala chairwoman, 216-283-2739.

School choice: The Ohio Coalition for Quality Education, a pro-charter school group, recently brought together legislative leaders from three states to talk about the impact of school choice.

Ohio Speaker Jon Husted, a Republican, was joined by Oklahoma Rep. Jabbar Shumate and Wisconsin Rep. Jason Fields, both Democrats, at a gathering in Columbus to answer questions from state officials, educators, charter school operations and the media.

The legislators addressed issues such as accountability, funding and how to get choice to urban parents.

ⁱ Cleveland Plain Dealer, July 17, 2005. "Progress in peril; Cleveland budget crisis threatens to reverse hard-won academic gains." (LexisNexis)

ⁱⁱ Detroit Free Press, May, 21, 2009. "DPS board, idle since takeover, works on academics without Bobb."

ⁱⁱⁱ The Detroit News, Jan. 21, 2010. "[Bobb unveils DPS academic overhaul plan.](#)"

^{iv} The Detroit News, March, 15, 2010. "[Bobb's new goal: 98% will graduate.](#)"

^v The Detroit News, Nov. 19, 2009. "[Tough job for Detroit's academic czar.](#)"