

GUEST COMMENTARY

Community merits salute as it aims high for children

This is an excerpt from remarks delivered by John Mackiel, superintendent of the Omaha Public Schools, during an event last Wednesday saluting the efforts of the Building Bright Futures initiative and the Bright Futures Foundation.

What is truly compelling about today is the fact that we are gathered to celebrate community-generated initiatives — initiatives that wrap around and support the work of schools, the work of districts, the work of the learning community and our state.

It is with genuine pride that our community can declare, when confronted with the despair found in all too many major metropolitan areas — despair resulting from racial intolerance; socioeconomic isolation; and the negative impact on academic achievement that comes with huge opportunity gaps children in our community have suffered — that we didn't throw up our hands.

We didn't abandon our children. We didn't abandon our city or our ideals. We didn't believe that schools, by themselves, could reverse the crumbling effects of poverty on educational potential.

And we never held that poverty was an excuse — but understood that poverty is a condition which, like gravity, affects every aspect of childhood: Prenatal influences. Birth weight. Medical care. Food insecurity



Mackiel

and residential mobility. Pollutants. Family relations. Life experiences. And access to opportunities. The State of Nebraska, Douglas and Sarpy Counties and the Omaha community crafted a different course, a course that takes courage, seeks unity, commits emotional and financial capital. It is a course wherein it's understood that education is more than what happens during school hours. It is a course of passionate resolve.

Nebraska can beat the odds. Omaha and Nebraska *will* beat the odds if we continue with our truly unique approach.

What we have is a tremendous opportunity. Nebraska's legislative creation of a framework that permits inclusivity and equity throughout the learning community is a national first and an enlightened policy.

While the Douglas/Sarpy County learning community is in its infancy, and indeed there

may be bumps along the way, we're optimistic. The framework is in place for a national model, and of that, we must be proud.

Building Bright Futures and Bright Futures Foundation are the other sources of pride and key ingredients to success. Research and plain common sense show that the initiatives that are proposed and are under way will impact each child's success and quality of life.

Success does not come swiftly or easily. A child's formative years span more than a decade. The lack of easy answers can cause finger-pointing, compromise resolve and paralyze voices. But, please know, the results of your labor and commitment will be evident as we stay the course.

The learning community, Building Bright Futures and the Bright Futures Foundation are to be celebrated. They are making the most of early childhood, providing academic support and career awareness, after-school mentoring and recovering lost youth.

These are the touchstones of an involved, caring and resolute community.