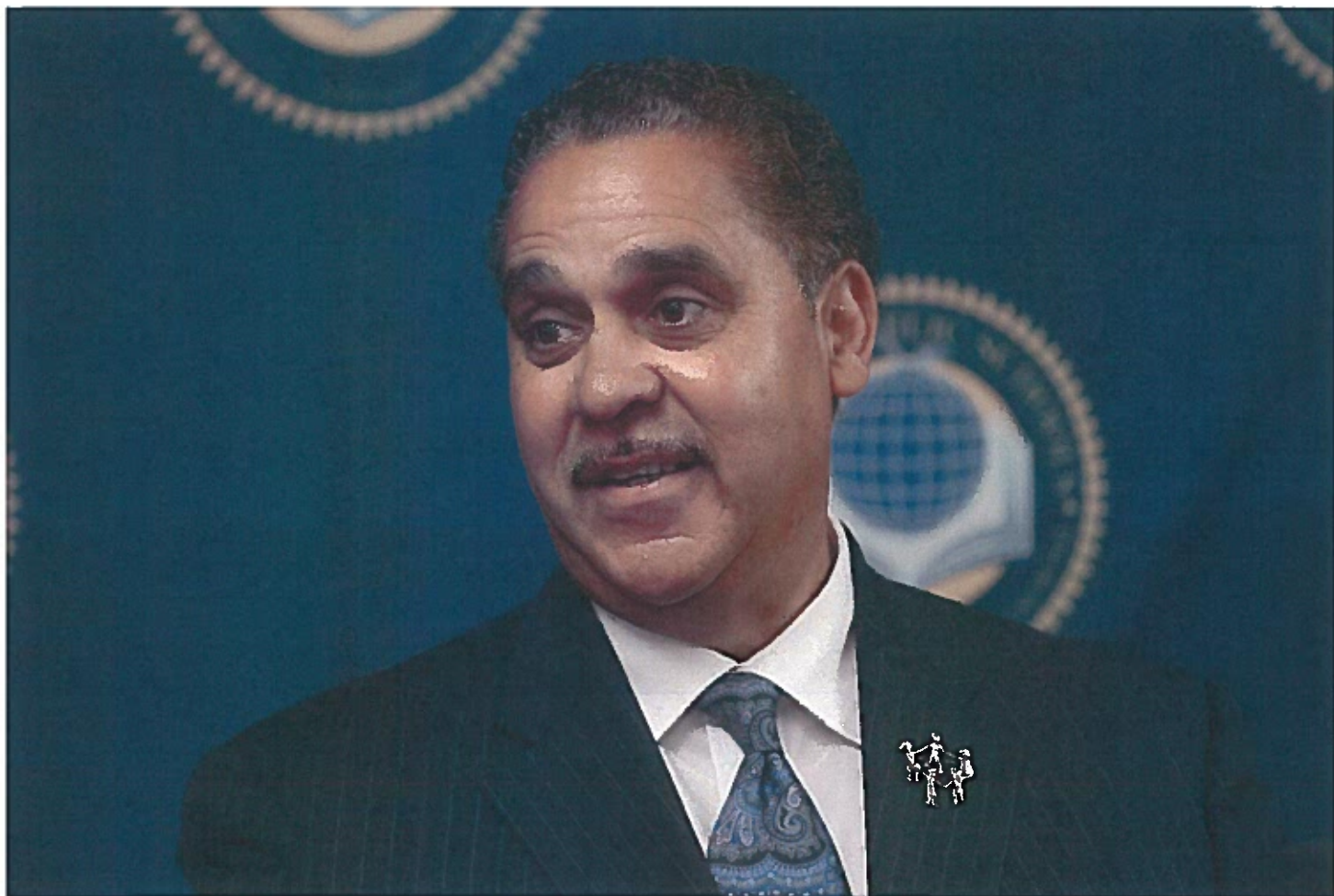


THE BUFFALO NEWS

Daunting obstacles face Buffalo's new school superintendent



Kriner Cash speaks, shortly after being voted in as new Buffalo Schools Superintendent in Buffalo City Hall on Tuesday, Aug. 18, 2015. (Robert Kirkham/Buffalo News)

By **Donn Esmonde** (http://buffalonews.com/author/donn_esmonde/)

Published Sat, Aug 22, 2015

There's a simple mandate for Kriner Cash, Buffalo's new school superintendent:

Crack open a teachers' contract that has calcified for 12 years. Bridge the racial and philosophical chasm between an all-minority School Board minority and an all-white, reform-driven board majority. Wave a healing wand over 25 "failing" schools. Breach the board minority/teacher union alliance with reforms, from teacher evaluations to charter school conversions. Flex the muscle of the state's new receivership law – at least until firing staff and massaging budget lines lands you in court.

If Cash succeeds, he then can get started on curing cancer and brokering peace in the Middle East.

The clock already is speed-ticking on his honeymoon. If nothing else, the Memphis import is realistic. Cash is leasing – not buying – a place here and has the financial means to walk when he wants. Ever-helpful, we provide some unsolicited advice:

Ignore Carl Paladino – Like a tantrum-prone child, Buffalo's mini-Trump isn't easily tuned out. Let the board majority's lightning rod kick, scream and rant. In Paladino's bully-world, there are angels and devils, no in-between. As everyone from departed Superintendent Don Ogilvie to board President Jim Sampson discovered, you are the second coming until the first time you stray from Paladino's extreme-reform party line. At which point the nitro-tempered developer launches an email assault and tries to get you voted off the island. Roll with it.

Neutralize Phil Rumore: The BTF president/dinosaur has for decades protected teachers' seniority power, work hours and health benefits against pressure from a half-dozen superintendents and countless board members. You don't keep such luxuries as a cosmetic rider in the teachers' contract unless you've perfected the art of delay, distract and litigate. Any push to tighten teacher evaluations, unsweetened medical benefits or extend the school day goes through Rumore. In a district of mountainous obstacles, he is the Everest.

Leverage the advantage – As a black male superintendent of a mostly minority district, Cash gets the initial benefit of the doubt from the board's all-black, all-women minority – even though his pro-charter, union-threatening reform agenda seems contrary to its largely status-quo stance. Take that ball and run with it.

Play the "receivership" card – A potential game-changer is the state's new "receivership" law. Carrying the flag is MaryEllen Elia, the State Ed commissioner who spoon-fed Cash to the board. The law potentially gives Cash – or some other "outside" receiver – the power to transform "failing" schools without an OK from the board or teachers' union.

RELATED TO THIS STORY**RELATED LINKS**

- *Cash must navigate troubled Buffalo district while under commissioner's watchful eye (/2015/08/23/cash-must-navigate-troubled-buffalo-district-while-under-commissioners-watchful-eye/)*
- *State lets Cash revamp five schools without union OK (/2015/11/09/state-lets-cash-revamp-five-schools-without-union-ok/)*

Naming a third-party "receiver" would be a bold move for State Ed, which notoriously is more bark than bite.

Beyond that, Cash – given the limited shelf life of most urban school superintendents – may not outlast the court challenge the power play would undoubtedly provoke. But it would put instant rubber to the reform road.

Bigger picture – For all of the reform drama, the sad reality is there's slight hope – to my mind – of significantly moving the needle. The main factors in school performance aren't class size or spending-per-pupil. It's the income and education of a kid's parents. Schools stuffed with poor kids of undereducated parents are a formula for failure, no matter who's teaching the class or sitting at the superintendent's desk.

In a real sense, Buffalo's "failing" schools are largely a symptom of the student population. Which doesn't mean

we should stop trying.

A closing sentiment for Cash, on behalf of some 33,000 Buffalo school kids: Good luck.

email: desmonde@buffnews.com