



Kriner Cash, a candidate for superintendent of Buffalo Public Schools, comes with recommendations and a few caveats. John Hickey/Buffalo News

As head of Memphis schools, Kriner Cash was a man of change He had big, bold ideas but uneven results

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Published: August 12, 2015, 08:30 PM

Updated: August 12, 2015, 08:32 PM

When the Memphis School Board went superintendent-hunting seven years ago, it was leading a 107,000-student district that wrestled with many of the same problems Buffalo faces today – urban poverty, lagging academic achievement, student violence, weak graduation rates and poor finances.

The board members took a chance on an outsider, a reform candidate from Miami. He swept in with a detailed action plan and early buy-in from stakeholders on all sides.

For 4½ years, Kriner Cash stamped Memphis City Schools with his agenda. He hired a big-thinking top deputy and enjoyed the benefits of cooperative, reform-minded school board members. With their help, Cash focused on early-childhood education, targeted support for students at risk of failure, and worked to improve student health, nutrition and safety.

But his leadership wasn't without critics, who believed he could have done more to build relationships, communicate his message and improve student achievement. His tenure in Memphis yielded inconsistent academic results on state tests and a graduation rate that both climbed and faltered under his watch.

The Memphis City Schools dissolved into a countywide school system two years ago, leaving Cash hunting for a new role.

Now Buffalo appears ready to take a chance on him. As Cash receives his first local introduction at a public forum Thursday night, The Buffalo News reviewed his leadership in the Southern city that cemented his reputation as a man of change.

Memphis education leaders, advocates and union representatives say Cash might be a good fit for Buffalo, despite some shortcomings. Whatever challenges Buffalo presents, they said, Cash has likely seen them

before and would be a quick study here.

“I know Buffalo is in New York, but Memphis is the real Broadway,” said former Memphis School Board member Martavius Jones. “If he can make it here, he can make it any place.”

Cash said he sees similarities between the two cities.

“Both districts are replete with extraordinary challenges, but also with tremendous promise and opportunity,” he told The News via email after returning to Buffalo on Wednesday afternoon. “The work is extremely demanding and the evidence of success comes with time.”

He added, “After engaging with many Buffalonians during the past week, I am optimistic and encouraged about what we can achieve together here, immediately and going forward.”

The positives

If there's one thing Cash wasn't short on in Memphis, it was big ideas.

“He has a lot of vision and a lot of good strategies to raise academic achievement overall,” said Jones, who headed the superintendent search committee that selected Cash. “I would give Dr. Cash's tenure in Memphis a letter grade of a B, and I think it could have been even better if he'd been here a little longer.”

Cash was the Memphis board's unanimous choice, impressing every school and community group he met during the search process.

Under Cash and his deputy, the Memphis school district established school-based health clinics with free transportation, better student nutrition, and adopted a standardized curriculum.

The district grew prekindergarten classes and made more Advanced Placement classes available to students throughout the 200-school district, which served 107,000 students prior to its merger with the county.

Cash also formed specialized high school prep academies to specifically target the academic needs of overage students at greatest risk of failure.

Susanne Jackson, a teachers union organizer and onetime parent activist, praised Cash's ability to meet people, review data and make rapid, frank and accurate assessments of the political, economic and cultural landscape in Memphis. The city is a culturally deep and insular place, she said.

“He got that right away,” she said.

One thing Cash can't be accused of is being uninformed. Many praise his breadth of knowledge on major education issues, especially as they affect a poor, minority population.

He also has been lauded for his ability to raise new revenue during difficult financial times. He was a successful breadwinner for Memphis City Schools, attracting huge amounts in grants, including a \$92 million grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Many Memphis stakeholders give Cash credit for bringing together many diverse groups in the application process – including the board, administrators and the teachers union.

As a result, Memphis was awarded a seven-year, \$92 million grant to improve teacher effectiveness, one of the largest, school-based grants to be awarded nationally. Memphis subsequently became a model for Tennessee, one of the first two states to access millions of dollars in the federal Race to the Top grant money, said Kenya Bradshaw, the former Memphis and Tennessee director of Stand for Children, an education reform advocacy group.

“That can be directly attributed to Dr. Cash and his work gaining external support to the city,” she said.

Cash also started “ThinkShow,” an open house of all Memphis schools that showcased academic-based projects that students worked on throughout the year. Thousands of community members came into the schools to serve as judges of the students' work and offer individual feedback to children. It was Cash's way of fighting back against negative public perceptions by inviting community members to see for themselves what students were doing, even though it was often time-consuming and disruptive for teachers, said Jackson, the union organizer.

Work with the union

Despite complaints some Memphis teachers lodged against Cash, he got along surprisingly well with the teachers union. Former leaders of the Memphis Education Association who dealt extensively with Cash and negotiated contracts with him uniformly described him as a reasonable man.

“At times, it was challenging; most often, it was rewarding,” said Keith O. Williams, who served as union president during Cash’s tenure. “Kiner Cash was a man of strong opinion and conviction. And if you convinced him that you had a better position, then he would come across. He was a very fair and objective person. Sometimes, he convinced us. So it worked both ways.”

The application for the Gates Foundation grant was an excellent example, he said. Cash convinced the union that a grant to improve teacher effectiveness wouldn’t hurt teachers. He even named teachers to head the committees, which made recommendations for the grant application.

“He really thought the opinion of teachers mattered,” Williams said.

How that would translate to Buffalo is an open question. Williams and other union leaders acknowledge that the strength of the union in Memphis and the benefits its employees receive are far less than what exists in Buffalo, even though the organization represented more than 8,000 teachers, assistants, principals and counselors during Cash’s time. Union members were already contributing 25 percent of their paychecks toward health care and had much weaker seniority rights.

But union leaders said they appreciated Cash’s communication style and the fact that either he or a top member of his leadership team met with teachers directly at union meetings every month – though teachers didn’t always give him a warm welcome.

“We appreciated that,” Williams said, “because that was effective.”

Finally, Cash laid preliminary groundwork for Innovation Zone schools, low-performing “priority” schools flagged by the state that were transformed similarly to how receivership schools in New York State are supposed to be transformed. Those schools generally have been seen as making great progress compared with other state and local school indicators.

The negatives

Cash had vision in Memphis, but he also had shortcomings.

Academic achievement in Memphis was inconsistent under his tenure. Board members acknowledged both academic gains and setbacks on standardized tests, which lagged behind the state average. Graduation rates rose considerably but then regressed.

In 2008, the year Cash started as superintendent, Memphis had a graduation rate of 66.9 percent. That grew to a historic high of 72.6 percent in 2011, but fell back to 67.6 percent by 2013, the year Cash left the district.

Some of Cash’s ideas were developed and executed poorly and ultimately rolled back, critics say, blaming his outreach to the broader public.

Some also said Cash’s deputy superintendent, Irving Hamer, deserved more credit for many public school reforms.

While friends and allies described Cash’s strong personality as “personable,” “charming” and even “courageous,” foes described him as “introverted,” “arrogant,” “stubborn” and “egotistical.”

Despite having the political skills to win friends, build relationships and bring people together, those who know Cash say it’s clearly not something he prefers to do.

“Dr. Cash is very headstrong,” said former Memphis School Board member Tomeka Hart, who chaired the board the year Cash was hired. “He knows what he wants. Having been that kind of person, I had to rehabilitate myself. Sometimes you just have to be willing to give, and it’s hard for him to do that.”

When the school district was working toward a merger with the county, a random survey of district staff showed Cash had lackluster support – 70 percent of respondents rated him “average” or worse. Union leaders said most teachers were so opposed to the merger process that they didn’t complete the survey. But other public polls showed eroding support for his leadership over time.

Outreach issues

Cash has been faulted for not always having the ability or the people in place to properly communicate and execute some of his major agenda items. When he tried to roll out a controversial, revised grading system for early elementary children and made a sweeping change toward block scheduling, he was met with fierce opposition and criticism of a decision-making process that some considered exclusionary.

“He’s a genius in some areas,” said Hart, the former board member. “But what you’ve got to have is people on his team who could take what was in his head and create a management plan that could be implemented. Bold visionaries like him need people who could actually make it work.”

Jackson, the union organizer and onetime parent advocate, said Cash also didn’t do enough to engage district parents or to help rebuild parent organizations that were decimated in the 1980s.

Jones, a supporter of Cash, said he was proud that the board developed a strong, results-based evaluation tool by which to annually judge Cash’s work and said it would be wise for Buffalo to adopt something similar if Cash is named superintendent. He also said that while Cash had many positive attributes, he needed to leverage his resources better when it came to communicating with staff and the broader public.

“He needed a top-notch communications team,” Jones said. “He had good people, but I wouldn’t say he had excellent people in that category.”

Cash also made news for some embarrassing personnel incidents. In 2012, he was forced to remove his handpicked deputy, Hamer, for making crude and offensive remarks about a secretary at a party hosted by Cash and attended by many district administrators.

The Florida Times-Union also reported that in 2008, while working in Miami-Dade schools, Cash was reprimanded and fined by Florida’s Education Practices Commission for telling a colleague he needed to shave his beard because he looked like a terrorist.

Bradshaw, who headed the Stand for Children reform group, said Cash might have fallen short on broad public outreach, but otherwise defended his efforts, saying that he regularly met with faith-based community leaders, the United Way and other nonprofit agencies, as well as the city. She also said he met with key business executives and told them that if his students graduate with the necessary skills, he hoped business leaders would make room for them in true leadership roles.

She said she recalled him asking, “Will you make sure they have seats in board rooms, and not just in warehouses?”

Fit for Buffalo?

All signs point toward Cash gaining steam as the next permanent superintendent of Buffalo Public Schools. All nine board members appear to like him, some more than others. The fact that he comes recommended by state Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia carries weight. Moreover, every community and stakeholder group that met with Cash last week and was reached by The Buffalo News said they came away impressed.

The Buffalo School Board has already named a committee to begin contract negotiations with Cash, who will take questions from the public in a moderated forum at 6:15 p.m. Thursday in Buffalo Academy of Visual and Performing Arts, 450 Masten Ave.

Barring a crash-and-burn performance at that public forum, the board could be convening a special meeting within days to vote on Cash as the next leader of the district.

If that happens, Memphis education leaders say they hope Cash will have strengthened his weak spots after two years of enforced retirement and that Buffalo will see an opportunity to finally come together behind a single road map that leads to student success. They also admonished the board to hold Cash accountable for his promises, have realistic expectations, and to not squander an opportunity to do things right.

“It could be magical,” Hart said, “or disastrous.”

The Buffalo News will cover Cash’s public forum live. To follow the live coverage and for more on this story, visit the School Zone blog at www.buffalonews.com/schoolzone

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