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POTY / Kriner Cash

A learning experience

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PHOTO BY KC KRATT

In August, 2015, the Buffalo Board of Education unanimously appointed Dr. Kriner Cash as its new superintendent. Even given the district's twenty-five schools in receivership and public confidence at a new low, Cash, sixty-one, says that he didn't hesitate when New York State's Department of Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia asked him to take on the job.

Cash's previous posts include education superintendentships in Memphis and in Martha's Vineyard. He was also chief of accountability and system-wide performance for Miami-Dade County, the country's fourth largest school district. The administrator was raised with an emphasis on education and self-sufficiency (his father held a PhD and a postdoctoral degree). Cash holds degrees from University of Massachusetts (EdD), Stanford (MA), and Princeton (BA). In order to create a highly functioning educational environment in Buffalo, Cash said he's committed to completing "ten years' work in four."

You're well into your second school year here—what are some highlights?

Along with Buffalo's rise, my mantra is the school system is also "under construction." We needed to accelerate on an aggressive, accurate, and reformed track. We started late for the 2015–16 school year, and we wanted to get plans and leadership in place. I analyzed data, met with parents, community members and groups, and put together a diverse leadership cabinet. By the end of my first school year, our receivership schools were on track to meet their performance indicators. And the school board voted to support my plan, the "New Education Bargain."

What is the New Education Bargain?

It's a pivotal blueprint for needed change: a three-way deal with parents, students and the district to transform the Buffalo Public Schools. Its six main elements are rigorous early elementary education, strong community schools, new innovative high schools, extended learning excellence, services for our neediest children and families, and a new relationship with teachers.

"Community" (vs. "neighborhood") schools strengthen and give ownership to communities. These enriched schools—seeded throughout the city—will be open longer hours and on Saturdays. They'll offer an integrated focus on health and wellness, social and emotional behavioral support, plus afterschool, adult, family, and community programming. It will be the village raising the children.

New, innovative high schools will help our children become more competitive, raise graduation rates, and strengthen post-secondary readiness. We're partnering with universities and colleges like UB, Buff State, Trocaire, and Canisius, as well as with businesses like Delaware North.

It seems the "new relationship with teachers" is happening. A few months ago, the twelve-year-long stalemate was broken, and a new teachers contract was signed. What made this possible?

I went into the negotiations knowing that each side has to give something up and determined that our children come out as winners. The new agreement is an essential investment in our teachers, who have the greatest impact on our students every day—and it provides increased educational opportunity and learning time for our students.

Buffalo's school system must be characterized by a teaching force that is both highly professional and valued. The breakthrough came, I believe, when [Buffalo Teachers Federation President Phil] Rumore and I realized that we share the goal of making Buffalo's schools the premier urban education system in the nation. Going forward, we will work together to make this goal a reality.

What are other goals?

Options for students and families. We're honoring our part of the bargain, with greater accessibility, opportunity, and quality. We need to continue to break down segregation and socioeconomic inequality.

What makes you happy/hopeful?

My three sons and my grandbabies. You see yourself in them, and you see them in yourself. That's the most gratifying feeling, if you've done it right. Just like the song says about freedom, we have to continue to fight for education—it's not guaranteed. We must be relentless—sleep in shifts to get it done. I hope that my legacy for the city of Buffalo will be to leave it with a high quality education system so that all of its children will be competitive in our world.

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Jana Eisenberg is a freelance writer/editor and longtime contributor to Spree.