T. Williams, Education and Community Development Consultant

Bureaucracies not always open to outside ideas

A Civic Caucus Review of Minnesota's Public Policy Process Interview

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Present

John Adams, Steve Anderson, Dave Broden (vice chair), Paul Gilje (executive director), Lars Johnson, Randy Johnson, Sallie Kemper (associate director), Dan Loritz (chair), Steve Mayer, Dana Schroeder (associate director), Clarence Shallbetter, T. Williams. By phone: Paul Ostrow.

Summary

Both schools and their communities should be held accountable for their children's education, says Minneapolis-based independent consultant Theartrice (T.) Williams. According to a proposal he developed in 1997, a school needs to have some knowledge of the assets of its community and the community needs to learn about the capacity of the school. The school and the community could then partner to identify some goals and a willingness to hold one another accountable.

Assets to take care of many student needs, such as health problems and homelessness, are in the community, not the schools, Williams says. Only when the community can organize itself so that kids are ready to be taught can we hold schools accountable for outcomes. He stresses the importance of evaluation and of reporting out the progress being made over time by all partners: the community, the school, the teachers and the parents. He asserts that community leadership is more challenging when kids in a community attend schools scattered across the city.

Williams's proposal, although it attracted early interest from the Minneapolis Public Schools, has never been implemented. That's the case, even though he served on the Minneapolis School Board for four years and every superintendent who's been in the district since 1997 has seen the proposal. He discusses the barriers of getting school district bureaucracies to take ownership and move forward with ideas developed by people from the outside.

Biography

Theartrice (T.) Williams is a Minneapolis-based independent consultant specializing in questions of social and distributive justice, with particular emphasis on community economic development and education issues affecting minority populations. Appointed by Gov. Wendell Anderson, Williams served as Minnesota's first Ombudsman for Corrections from 1972 to 1983. He was executive director of Phyllis Wheatley Community Center in North Minneapolis for seven years. He served on the Minneapolis School Board from 2007 to 2011 and is a former senior research associate at Rainbow Research, Inc. He has been the principal investigator on Rainbow Research evaluations of several local community-based organizations and has conducted program and organizational assessments at the national level.

His past work includes an assessment of The City Inc., a nonprofit organization that served inner-city Minneapolis neighborhoods; work with the Minnesota Department of Corrections on its community-based restorative justice programs; a diversity study of the American Cancer Society's Eastern Division; assessing three educational project initiatives; developing an inclusiveness self-assessment tool for the United Way and its member agencies; assessing the Saint Paul Foundation's Anti-Racism Funding Initiative; and assisting in strategic planning for a local community radio station.

For six years, Williams was evaluation consultant and technical assistance provider to 10 local community-based organizations funded by the Minnesota Health Department's Eliminating Health Disparities Initiative. He has been a senior fellow at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey School, teaching courses there. He has also taught courses at Augsburg College in Minneapolis. He is a recipient of The Bush Foundation Leadership Fellows award and numerous other awards and recognitions.

Williams holds a B.A. degree from the University of Illinois and a master's degree in social work from the University of Pennsylvania. He has also done graduate work at the University of Illinois, the University of Chicago, DePaul University Law School and Northwestern University.

Background

The Civic Caucus is undertaking a review of the quality of Minnesota's past, present and future public-policy process for anticipating, defining and resolving major public problems and issues. In the mid to late 1990s, while working as senior research associate for Rainbow Research, T. Williams developed a proposal for holding both schools and the community accountable for the education of their children. He presented the proposal to the Minneapolis School District in 1997. The proposal was never implemented. The Caucus interviewed Williams to learn about the process he used to develop his proposal and why some good public-policy proposals never get implemented.

Discussion

In 1996, the St. Paul Public Schools asked Rainbow Research to help the district develop evaluation plans for 25 of their failing schools. According to consultant T. Williams, former senior research associate at Rainbow Research, he and his colleague, Vanessa McKendall Stephens, spent a year working with St. Paul and completed a report that made solid recommendations to the district.

"No one likes to do work with solid recommendations and not see it go anywhere," Williams said. "But we learned that working with schools and with the school bureaucracy, that sometimes happens."

"After that I gave some thought to the challenge between the schools and the community," Williams said. "Schools say, 'Educating the children is not our task alone. We need help from the community.' But they're the ones specifying that help. And it might not be what's available out in the community."

Williams then put together his 📄 Schools/Community Accountability proposal looking at the issue. "We have ways already of holding portions of the school accountable," he said. "There are ways to hold teachers accountable and even greater capacity for holding students accountable. We say parents are an integral part of that, but we're less able to develop accountability for them. And when it comes to the community, we have no way of developing accountability models there."

Williams drafted the proposal for the consideration of the Kellogg Foundation 1997 and discussed the possibility of Minneapolis Public Schools becoming a partner in a demonstration project to implement the proposal. Carol Johnson was the incoming superintendent. Minneapolis liked the proposal, he said, and was willing to commit $10,000 toward the effort.

At first, Williams said, he was talking about the whole school district. "We then decided it was crazy to try to get the district as a whole to do this," he said. So, the decision was made to concentrate on one school.

"The idea was to identify what could count as the community related to that school," he said. "A school and its community needed to learn something about each other. The school needed to have some knowledge of the assets of the community and the community needed to learn about the capacity of the school. Then they would come together and identify some goals and a willingness to hold one another accountable."

Williams said what we see from schools annually is performance on standardized tests. "Then we get upset about the distance in achievement between students of color and white students and identify it as the achievement gap. We're organized around how we get all students to achieve at that level."

"My concern is that we're looking at this in the wrong way," he continued. "I'm not that concerned whether kids of color, especially African Americans, ever close that gap." He said what he's concerned about is seeing continuous progress every year, because students can be successful without ever closing the achievement gap.

Assets to take care of many student needs are in the community, not the schools. " What are other things besides academic performance that we need to be concerned about that help with the overall growth and development of students?" Williams asked. Students have to show up at class, they need to have eaten, and they need to have their health problems and their homelessness addressed. "Can we find a way to get the kids to school 90-plus percent of the time ready to learn?" he asked. "The schools can't do that. Those assets are in the community."

Only when the community can organize itself so that kids are ready to be taught can we hold schools accountable for outcomes, he said. The community can say it delivered the kids ready to learn and if they're not successful, maybe the school is doing things wrong. "Then we can define what kinds of changes need to take place, Williams said.

It's critical that there's a reporting out of progress being made by all partners. "The only reporting we see now is reporting on students' performance on standardized tests," he said. "There's no reporting on how well teachers, parents and the community have performed. We need to have some way of holding all these partners accountable." Williams stated that the only way that might have impact in the community is by publishing the outcomes: What did the community promise to deliver and to what extent did it deliver? "Then it's up to the rest of us to work on that and make sure there's progress in that arena," he said.

Williams took the proposal to the Minneapolis, St. Louis Park and St. Paul school districts. "Then I found myself on the Minneapolis School Board (2007 to 2011) and I thought I could make it happen," he said. "I never could have been more wrong."

He said every superintendent who's been in the Minneapolis School District since he presented the proposal, most of the assistant superintendents and several of the department heads have seen it. "Everybody thinks this stuff makes a lot of sense," he said. "Part of what is probably happening is that I get the courtesy of being heard by being on the school board. When I go away, then that's it."

The Northside Achievement Zone in North Minneapolis is a wrap-around program to meet all of the needs of children in the area. "They're having some successes," Williams said. "The challenge is being able to sustain that over time." The key part in that, he said, is the stability of the relationship between the parent or guardian and the child.

"What we have in our schools, particularly in North Minneapolis, is high mobility," he continued. Families move frequently across the metro area or out of state. He said they take their kids out of school when they leave and the kids may or may not be in school in their new location. If they come back, there's no record of what kind of schooling they've had. "The gap is not so much in education as in the overall socioeconomic conditions of the kids who come to school," he said. "If we could close those gaps, we could see improved performance."

The main thing to deal with is what's happening in the family. An interviewer asserted that learning is the product of five things: (1) what's going on in the family, (2) what's going on with the teachers; (3) what's going on in the community to support learning; (4) what's going on with the students themselves and (5) what's going on at the school: is it a bureaucracy or a teacher-run school? He said if any one of these things is zero, the learning outcome will be zero.

The interviewer stated that we must deal with what's happening in the family. Williams said the interviewer was on the right track. "The school can do its job if good things are happening in the family," he said.

There are four kinds of gaps affecting kids' learning. Williams was part of a group (African American Leadership Forum) that looked at this issue and identified four kinds of gaps:

1. A preparation gap

, which is the difference in how well prepared kids are when they enter school. He said their level of preparation goes back to how stable their family situation is. Kids spend most of their time outside of school and learning takes place everywhere. "We don't always like the type of learning that takes place in some of these places, but, nonetheless, it's happening," he said.

2. A belief gap.

"We have to believe these young people can learn," he said. Many times if kids are from a difficult environment, we think these poor kids can't learn. Teachers might take on the attitude that they have more sympathy than interest in helping these kids learn. "The child has to believe that he or she can learn, too."

3. A teaching gap.

That involves matching the teaching with the kids in the classroom.

4. A leadership gap. We need leadership that helps us pull together those community assets mentioned earlier, leadership in the schools that knows how to use those community assets and leadership within the school and the classrooms.

Evaluation is critical. Williams said he saw a lot of great ideas from Minneapolis teachers, who would find resources to implement them for a short time. "But it was not connected and not sustainable and it didn't go anywhere," he said. He said few proposals for new efforts had evaluation plans. "I learned during my years at Rainbow Research the value of an evaluation plan."

"One of the most frustrating things when I was on the school board," he continued, "was that on many proposals that had been funded, there was no evaluation. We seldom saw any reporting back on what difference a program made. No evaluation plan was identified and there was no good reporting back to the public. Are we any better off? We shouldn't wait till $2 million to $3 million has been spent before evaluating things."

Community leadership is more challenging when kids in a community attend schools scattered across the city. An interviewer commented that ever since the mid-1970s, "kids have been going to school all over town. Parents don't know other parents; kids don't even know the kid across the street who goes to another school."

"That makes it extremely challenging," Williams said. "It makes it difficult to identify what we mean by 'community.' When I'm talking about it, I'm looking at a number of identifiable community institutions: the family, faith-based organizations, community centers. A tremendous challenge is placed on the community leadership when kids are scattered across the whole city. The focus has to be more on working with families and helping them connect to the schools, especially if their kids are in three different schools."

Even for people serving on a school board, it's difficult to get things done. "I learned very quickly that my expectations of what I could do when I was on the Minneapolis School Board were unrealistic," Williams said. "I was only one out of seven members and now in Minneapolis, it's one of nine."

He said it depends more on the leadership of the district, the superintendent. "If the superintendent has no vision for the district, then the school board is not going to have one that can be implemented."

Student performance reports focus on how poorly many students did, rather than on the kids' assets. An interviewer brought up former Minneapolis Superintendent Carole Johnson's concept of asset-based education. Kids who have challenges also have assets, the interviewer said. "They know how to survive. We don't find out what these kids can do. What kind of progress have they made over the years? We don't measure their progress after they've come into school behind."

Williams responded that we focus on the kids who are not performing. He said there are lessons to be learned from kids who entered school behind, but have succeeded. "What are the lessons to be learned from them? There is a small group of kids at Bethune School who did as well as some of the kids at Kenwood School," he said. "Can't we learn more about this group? I didn't find any real interest in looking at how we can capture those assets and build on them."

We could measure community outcomes by looking at how things change over time for kids who come to school facing challenges like homelessness or health problems. Williams said we could identify those challenges affecting students that schools can't take care of. For example, he said, if 300 students starting school had significant health issues, we should look at how that's changed over time, say, over three to five years.

Steve Mayer, formerly with Rainbow Research, said the group proposed looking at the ways communities, community organizations and parents stepped up to fill their role as partners. "We wanted to flesh out what that partnership could look like," he said. "We weren't looking so much at quantitative measures, but at nominative ones. In what ways did community organizations step up and in what ways did parents step up? Those styles could get more light shone on them, so they could get emulated and strengthened."

"We don't always have a plan to deal with something like a high poverty rate in an area," Williams added. "The schools can't deal with it. They're getting kids at the end of the line with problems the schools can't deal with. We need a plan within the community. If there were a plan, some of the funds invested in schools could be better invested in other institutions or organizations in the community."

Sometimes it's difficult to get others to take an idea they didn't generate and become excited about it and move forward with it. An interviewer asked whether when a proposal hasn't been implemented, like the one developed by Williams, it's possible that the proposal might have been enacted if other organizations had taken some ownership and backed it. The interviewer then asked if other organizations took ownership of Williams's Schools/Community Accountability proposal.

Williams responded that no other groups took ownership of the proposal, because he didn't present it to them. He said potential partners would be critical to success, but he was focusing first on how to

get the Minneapolis district to take ownership. "I sensed that sometimes it's difficult to get others to take an idea they didn't generate and become excited about it and move forward with it."

He asserted that when working with bureaucracies, such as schools, the state and public housing agencies, it's extremely difficult to get people in the bureaucracy to accept an idea as theirs and "give it legs" from within.

The interviewer quoted another Civic Caucus member, who says there's no end to what you can accomplish if you don't care who gets the credit. "We should concentrate on helping others to accomplish their goals rather than *me* trying to get *my* idea adopted," the interviewer said.

There is a tremendous need for the public and private funding community to step up to the plate. In terms of getting an idea seriously considered, an interviewer asked Williams what he sees as the critical area for improving the institutions of public policy: the universities, the foundations, the think tanks. Where is the responsibility?

Williams responded that there is no one place. "Foundations need to be more aware of what conditions exist and sometimes divest themselves of their narrow visions. It's not necessary to have impact across the board or to change policy with foundations."

"Foundations do play an interesting, creative and not necessarily sustainable role," added Mayer. "People leave foundations, so there is discontinuity. Only with hindsight can we see the effects of the programs they fund. Not on this list is people energy. Foundations need to invest in taking the next step in support of people's assets."

The Greater Minneapolis Urban Coalition met for the first time in 1968. Behind the creation of the Urban Coalition was the impetus of the riots on Plymouth Avenue on the Near North Side of Minneapolis in 1966 and again in 1967. "Plymouth Avenue was exploding," Williams said. Forty to 60 corporate and civic leaders went to Washington and came back "scared to death." Williams and Larry Harris then did a three-month study about the formation of the Urban Coalition.

"We decided to bring all of our assets together around one table: the community, corporations, public and nonprofit organizations," Williams said. "To some, this was a nightmarish combination."

The Rev. Rolland Robinson, then president of the board of The Way, was a founding member of the Urban Coalition. He recalled later that the Coalition's first board chair, Honeywell President Stephen Keating, described the Coalition "as a means of providing a dialogue, of improving communication and increasing understanding among all elements of our city. We need a commitment from all segments of our community to develop a city where every citizen is treated as a total human being."

"Corporate executives were not used to being challenged," Williams said. "It was an almost impossible organization to run. A welfare mother was sitting next to Honeywell's president. But it provided learning to corporations and you could slowly see the difference in corporations in the community."

The Coalition, he said, helped put together partnerships that were collaborations of corporations and people in the community. That type of networking doesn't exist now. "We need to find ways to remake those connections."

Alternative schools are the stepchildren of the Minneapolis Public Schools. An interviewer asked Williams for his observations about alternative schools. Williams responded that alternative schools have been around for a long time, serving kids who were not making it in regular school by helping them make up credit deficiencies.

He named several schools as examples of successful alternative schools: Plymouth Youth Center, Loring-Nicollet, East Side Neighborhood, Connect, and the school that used to be run by the Urban League. He pointed out that alternative schools are public schools, because all their resources come from the Minneapolis Public Schools. "These kids need a lot more help, but the district is not allocating the same amount of funding to alternative schools as to regular schools," he said. It's challenging for alternative schools to get some services, like mental health services, that the district is supposed to provide. "These schools are the stepchildren of the Minneapolis Public Schools."

School districts should develop facility plans in cooperation with other school districts and educational institutions. Williams pointed out that now each school district develops its facility plan independently. "Minneapolis shouldn't move forward with a facility plan solely on its own," he said. "It should be in partnership with other districts and other institutions like the University of Minnesota (U of M) and the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MnSCU) system. No one is willing to push the buttons to say, 'Let's do these things together.'"

Williams had conversations on this issue with former U of M President Robert Bruininks and with the Metropolitan Council. "No one is willing to take that on," he said.