Assessing David Steiner’s Short Reign as New York State’s Education Commissioner

The state won the Race to the Top but his resignation leaves doubts that there will be any will to fulfill its promises

CAMBRIDGE, MA – David Steiner’s elevation to head the state’s education system in October 2009 “had been hailed as a providential pick,” writes Peter Meyer in an article assessing David Steiner’s short reign, to appear in the Summer 2011 issue of Education Next. Under Steiner’s leadership, the Empire State had come back from a 15th place finish in the first round of the Race to the Top (RttT) grant competition to win – just six months later -- a $700 million grant in round two. Steiner’s resignation announcement in April “rattled people” and raises questions about whether the will to implement the RttT-inspired reforms will be sustained.

Steiner – an academic with Oxford and Harvard degrees who also had pioneered new teacher training programs as head of Hunter College’s School of Education – had “charged out of the gate galloping,” observes Meyer, instituting greatly tougher benchmarks for the state’s 3-8 tests and initiating a major effort to write a statewide curriculum. His determined leadership was essential to the dramatic turnaround of New York’s bid for RttT funding. He and other key stakeholders – including union leaders, the Board of Regents chancellor, and state legislators -- came together to hammer out reform goals for the round-two grant submission. Among the reform milestones they achieved were a new requirement that 40 percent of a teacher’s evaluation be based on student achievement; raising the charter school cap from 200 to 420; and higher student achievement goals on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 4th grade and 8th grade reading tests and Regents exams.

Meyer observes that it is in this six-month story of education reform leading up to the successful RttT finish - the equivalent of turning a battleship on a dime -- that “we can see Steiner’s brilliance – and understand the bittersweet feeling of many New York educators who have lost their leader before they got to the Promised Land.”

In recalling an interview with Steiner four months before his resignation announcement, Meyer suggests that Steiner may have foreshadowed his departure. Reflecting on the RttT win, Steiner stated, “what we face now, to me, is much more difficult. Implementation.” In Meyer’s interview with him within days of his resignation announcement, Steiner stated that he had achieved what he’d been hired to do, which was to “plant a vision” and launch a radical reformation of the New York education system. With chapter one written, he felt ready to pass the baton to someone else. Meyer reports that some education reformers speculate that the endless political battles were the main reason for Steiner’s departure, but he notes that regardless of the reasons, “the race is not over: It has just begun.”

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