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Another Blow To D.C. Schools [FINAL Edition]

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This Sunday D.C. School Superintendent Arlene Ackerman is to receive an honorary degree and address the graduates at Trinity College's commencement ceremony. Our original intention was to honor this fine school leader for her achievements on behalf of children in the District--and that's still our intention. But, sadly, the occasion is now a farewell, a too-familiar denouement for yet another bright star dimmed by the toxic smog of D.C. politics.

Ackerman's departure leaves a gaping hole in Washington's tortured strategy for an educational renaissance. Early in her tenure as superintendent, Ackerman told a Post reporter, "In this city, if you could walk on water, you wouldn't get credit for it. They would say, 'Arlene Ackerman can't swim.'" But Arlene Ackerman knew how to swim quite well, plunging directly into the troubled whirlpool of teaching and learning in the District.

I had many occasions to see her in action in meetings in which she laid out her educational philosophy and action plan; she knew exactly what needed to be done to improve student learning and teacher performance, and she did not flinch from the hard and unpopular actions necessary to get there.

She did all of this against the backdrop of a city whose daily horrors among children are unspeakable: Nearly a score of schoolchildren were killed this year, victims of the violence and despair that course through the streets where most of the District's public school students live.

Her critics quibbled about bus schedules while she wrestled with the herculean challenge of devising successful learning programs for schools in the midst of some of the most appalling social and political dysfunction anywhere in the nation.

The number of people who claim to have solutions to the problems of the D.C. schools seems to rise inversely to the real talent available to fix the deep and chronic ills. Ackerman actually held out the hope of such real talent, a genuine educator whose slogan, "Children First," has been the motivating value in all of her actions and decisions.

But the chronic political interference masquerading as legitimate oversight reached its nadir during Ackerman's tenure, as scores of politicians--elected, appointed and self-appointed--laid claim to governance roles whose inherent conflicts and confusions bound the superintendent in a Lilliputian web. Few, if any, of those responsible have real expertise in what it takes to educate children and their teachers, but ignorance rarely stops the political process in the District of Columbia.

As one of the area universities with large teacher education and school leadership programs, Trinity College welcomed Arlene Ackerman's appointment as superintendent, because we were also searching for ways to help forge solutions to the educational problems in the District. We

saw in her the large educational talent necessary to implement massive reform in all parts of the system.

We have worked closely with Ackerman and her staff, consistently finding her open, collegial, smart and passionate about the children for whom we all share responsibility. One night, over dinner with me and some of our deans and faculty, Ackerman warmed to the subject and spoke eloquently of her vision and plans for improved teacher training, particularly through the use of lab schools in many different settings throughout the city. Later, one of her colleagues told me that the evening was meaningful "because you really wanted to listen to what she had to say; most people simply want to tell her what to do."

The eagerness to dictate actions in complete disregard of the expertise of the person responsible for results is the main reason why the District is now, once again, searching for a school superintendent. The search will be hugely difficult, because the risks are appalling; imposing responsibility without granting authority and freedom to do the job is a proven formula for failure.

John Gardner once wrote: "The first and last task of a leader is to keep hope alive." Superintendent Ackerman came to bring hope to the children. She leaves betrayed by the grown-ups. The tragedy remains in the lives of the young people who are left, once again, with too many lessons about cynical and dysfunctional D.C. politics and not enough learning about excellence in education.

The writer is president of Trinity College.