

Box sees city takeover of schools

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said Box seemed particularly intrigued by the possibility of achieving that in Rockford.

"He was very interested in what we were doing here," she said.

But a potential city takeover apparently is on the back burner for the time being, and Box has identified other ways to influence the school crisis, including recruiting candidates for the upcoming school board elections.

'Attitude change'

Box said he seeks candidates who would effect an "attitude change" about desegregation and who would push to implement court-ordered anti-discrimination measures and allow Rockford to extricate itself from court control.

The Rockford School District has been under federal court control since one of a series of court orders was issued in 1989.

Box said the community needs school board members who would bring a business-minded approach to the school system, rather than campaigning on populist issues that have little to do with ending the desegregation battle.

The mayor last week urged officials at the Rockford Area Chamber of Commerce to help identify candidates within the business community. The deadline to enter the November election is Aug. 25. Four of seven board seats will be up for grabs.

"I'm just trying to figure out some people whom I think would

Two school districts		
	Chicago	Rockford
Annual operating budget	\$2.8 billion	\$245 million
No. of students	412,921	27,977
No. of faculty	27,000	1,800
No. of schools	557	51
No. of board members*	5	7

* Chicago's school board members are appointed by the mayor; in Rockford, they are elected by the public.

be good, who are good thinkers, who would bring certain things to the board," he said.

He stopped short of saying he would make endorsements in the election.

Daley's five-member school board in Chicago, which consists of leaders from the business community, has been applauded for bringing business sense to public education.

Rockford Area Chamber of Commerce Vice President Joe Reagan said he couldn't predict whether local business leaders would heed Box's call to action.

Time commitment

Reagan said the business community wants an end to the school crisis as much as other segments of the city, but serving on the school board requires a substantial personal commitment.

"You have concerned business people who are listening to the mayor," he said. "People are really struggling for answers."

Box was widely criticized during his most recent re-election campaign for not being more active on the school crisis. The ongoing squabble is blamed for hurting property values and is believed to have caused families to leave Rockford for surrounding school districts.

After getting 52 percent of the vote to survive a challenge from Republican Tim Simms, Box pledged to assume a higher profile on school issues.

Since the election, he has met individually with most school board members.

Board President Judy Picus, who plans to step aside rather than seek re-election this fall, said board members would not support a city takeover of the school district.

"It would be a drastic step," she said.

More involvement

Picus, though, welcomed the mayor's increased involvement in

schools, including his effort to recruit board candidates.

"As long as he does not expect anything other than good government," she said. "I would hope the mayor would have a loftier goal."

Box voiced frustration at being criticized for his handling of a problem over which he has no formal authority. Under a Chicago-style arrangement, he said, he could appoint school board members who would be insulated from local politics.

He said it was disappointing to see the current school board last month disregard his input on the sale of Church School. The board unanimously approved the sale to a local development group Box felt could not handle the property and complained that Box tried to intervene.

"Am I frustrated? Yeah, I'm frustrated. Especially when the criticism comes that the mayor should do something," he said. "If you're going to hold the mayor responsible, give him the authority."

Lawmaker's doubts

State Sen. Dave Syverson, R-Rockford, said he has discussed the issue with Box and agrees that some aspects of Chicago's reform movement could be exported to Rockford — but not a city takeover.

Syverson said one complicating issue is the fact the school district extends outside Rockford's city limits, raising the question of whether Winnebago County Board Chairman Kris Cohn would share control.

Daley speaks

Excerpts from a June 5 speech by Mayor Richard Daley in Washington, D.C., urging other mayors to get more involved in public education:



Richard Daley

■ "We have a state of emergency in our nation's public schools, and chief executives have to take on that challenge."

■ "Mayors must accept that education is the key to the future — and that it is the only way to bring about long-term, meaningful change."

■ "I can picture a day when families choose to stay in cities because of the quality public school systems"

■ "Everything I do as mayor or would fail if we gave up on the schools."

More importantly, he said, voters probably would not want to give up the power to elect school board members.

"I'm not sure if the public is interested in making the change," he said.

Box agreed public support would be required but predicted it would develop once people see how Chicago has simplified school funding, eliminated waste and increased accountability.

He said Chicago might be developing a model for city-run school systems throughout the country. In Rockford, he said, a move to shift control of the schools to City Hall is possible once the federal court has relinquished control. No one knows when that is likely to happen.

"If it's so vital to the community, you're going to hold the mayor ultimately responsible anyway," he said. "And you elect him every four years. Why not give him the authority?"

"I think that's ultimately what will happen."

What do you think?

Would the Rockford School District be better managed under Mayor Charles Box?

Would you like to see school board members appointed rather than elected by the public? Or do you think Box should stick to City Hall and stay out of the school district?

To give us your opinion, call our comment line at 987-1388, send e-mail to regstar@sinnfree.org or send us a fax at 987-1365.

Please include your name, age, hometown and a phone number so we can verify your message.