

Retired Edmonton school superintendent bets he can overhaul massive Las Vegas school system

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A visionary teacher whose ideas transformed Edmonton Public Schools is gambling his internationally recognized methods will reverse the fortunes of Las Vegas schools.

In his 22 years as superintendent at Edmonton public, Michael Strembitsky unveiled many big ideas that still influence how and where 92,000 students learn. He punched holes in attendance boundaries, insisting schools develop programs that make themselves attractive — a movement he says prevented the demand for more private schools in the city. He introduced staff, student and parent surveys; began routine achievement testing; added the International Baccalaureate program in high school; and worked with the school board to bring police officers into schools.

However, Strembitsky is known by teachers globally for his insistence that schools, instead of kowtowing to decisions from a central office, know best how to spend their own money. He began introducing the idea of school-based budgeting to Edmonton public in 1976, and district retains that system of site-based decision making today.

Strembitsky's consulting work spreading that philosophy has taken him from California to Washington, D.C.; New Zealand; Australia and Hong Kong.

Not all jurisdictions that tried to adopt a version of his method stuck with it. An attempt in Hawaii flopped for political reasons, Strembitsky said, and school systems in Seattle and Cincinnati abandoned the approach.

Having twice failed at retiring, the 81-year-old Strembitsky is now the consultant guiding Nevada's massive 320,000-student Clark County School District through an overhaul that would see hundreds of school principals decide how to spend their allotted money and staff their schools. The district faces sluggish achievement results, growing ethnic diversity and an inequality of resources between schools, he said.

Strembitsky said his lasting marks on education in Alberta may be incomplete yet, pointing to school boards' lack of control to tap into their tax base, and the centralization of teacher bargaining and decisions over school construction. This interview has been edited for length.

Q: How did you get involved with this project in Nevada?

A: I had worked with an initiative that they had started in Nevada in the years 2005 to 2010 called Empowerment Schools. This was when schools were supposed to have a lot more say in how they were organized, how they were operated. As they researched ideas, my name kept cropping up. I worked with Clark County for five years. Then, we hit the point where either the system had to change or we come to a grinding halt. The thing stopped in its tracks in 2010. I made a decision at the time: I'm re-retiring.

This year, the State of Nevada has passed a bill to reorganize the Clark County Schools. They empowered a committee of nine legislators to carry this forward. They would like some people to testify as to ideas. I testified, and a week later, they approached me as a consultant.

Q: You helped Clark County School District plan to overhaul its system. What does the plan say?

A: It turns the existing district upside down, or what I call right side up. It makes the schools the focus of the district's operation. It also means that the superintendent and the senior staff focus their energies on what it takes to make schools work. Most places on the continent are organized so that when the board and the superintendents get the funds, they disburse those funds to various departments. The problem is, none of those people, not one of them, is responsible for the results of a school.

Q: How hard is it to convince people who have risen to that level in a huge organization to let go of control?

A: When you bring about change, a person like myself wants to convince them this is for the greater good. But the first thing people want to know is, what's in it for me? You can't fault them for that. It's not until you can convince them that if we have the greater good, you, too, can gain. As a result of all my work in the States, I marvel at what happened in Edmonton by the group that brought it about. It was just unbelievable how everything happened, fell into place. We didn't have any foundations funding us. We didn't have any seed money. We just up and did it.

Q: You said earlier you don't pay much attention to Alberta and Edmonton education issues now. You're not keeping up on it?

A: I thought I had a challenging job when I was superintendent. When I left the district (to work at a Washington, D.C., institute), it was even tougher. People find this difficult to believe: I

made the decision to leave, but my heart — (he pauses, and his eyes tear) — was in Edmonton. Is. It was tough to stay away, but it was the right thing to do for whoever succeeded me.

Q: But surely you must want to follow up with the school district to see how your experiment is working, 40 years later.

A: Well, the fact that 40 years later it's working is a testimony to the strength of it. I'm sure they have done things I wouldn't have thought of, and I'm sure, had I been here, I would have done things, too. But I deliberately have not followed up. That has become more difficult when they named the school for me. I did not realize the impact that it makes on the kids to see the name on the wall and then to identify that with a living person.

Q: You were the one who imparted this idea of open boundaries, and yet Michael Strembitsky School has become a prime example in Edmonton of the angry parent living across the street saying, 'What do you mean my child can't go to this school next year?' You've said it's more than ironic your name is attached to a school struggling with attendance boundary issues. How does that make you feel?

A: It is ironic. It would be good for a laugh if it was funny, but it isn't. I have a lot of sympathy for the parents. We've got to be able to assign responsibility so we know who is accountable for the results. The provincial capital budget is around 10 per cent of the operating budget, and yet, the 10 per cent (for building and maintaining schools) is so minutely controlled, so, what justification do we have for that?

Q: Do you have a third round of retirement planned?

A: Obviously, I've got things I want to do. When the province took away school boards' power of requisitioning taxes, the province solved one problem, but the perverse results of that are beginning to show. More and more things are going to the provincial level. It's small wonder today teacher negotiations are going to be made at the provincial level. I like decisions to be made closer to the people involved. I think the role of the boards has changed significantly. I long for the day when board members had more influential roles.