STREMBITSKY'S PAST FUELS A PASSION FOR CLARK COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT'S FUTURE

By NEAL MORTON
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Michael Strembitsky doesn't talk openly about the time he applied to be superintendent of the Clark County School District.

It was 2005, when dozens of applicants from across the U.S. clamored for control of what was then the nation's sixth-largest school system.

Strembitsky, a retired Canadian educator and sole foreigner in the running, didn't even make it to the finalist round.

"I don't know that that's public," Strembitsky, 81, said of his application.

Regardless, more than a decade after losing his bid for the job, Strembitsky now claims the public spotlight as he wields control over the future of the district.

In April, state lawmakers awarded Strembitsky a $150,000 contract to craft a plan to turn the district's 357 schools into individual precincts. His 10-page proposal aims to strip power from central administration and grant principals more autonomy to make academic, budget and staffing decisions.

It's a very preliminary plan, Strembitsky admitted last week. However, it's a plan that he passionately defends — even to the point of tears — as a true opportunity to reinvent education in Southern Nevada.

"I started as a teacher," Strembitsky said, his voice cracking.

He paused, blinking rapidly, before continuing.

"If you believe in the kids, if you believe in the people on the front line," he said of teachers and principals, "and then you see bureaucracies that stand in the way — well, this is a defining moment, a significant step in possibly making real change."

'No future'

Strembitsky shared parts of his background last week during separate interviews at lunch and in his office, offering a glimpse of the man behind an idea that has sparked interest from struggling school leaders throughout the nation.

He prefers to focus on the work, but acknowledged his experience in education inspired the development of a new school model.

“You can’t divorce the person from the idea,” Strembitsky said Tuesday.

Strembitsky, who spent 38 years in Edmonton Public Schools in Alberta, Canada, typically answers questions with a long and meandering anecdote. But he grows much more animated, speaking rapidly and gesturing with his hands, whenever he talks about teachers.

“I’ve worked with just about every major school district (in the U.S.) and the issue’s basically the same: The people on the ground are all frustrated,” Strembitsky said.

In the late 1950s, he learned that lesson first-hand as a beginning teacher in Edmonton. He quickly nurtured a passion for teaching, while at the same time growing exhausted with the overarching structure of the district.

A dizzying chain of approvals and a backlog of work orders required Strembitsky to wait months before a maintenance worker could mount a map on his classroom wall. So he did it himself, only to encounter additional complications as a reward.

“I loved teaching, but there was no future there,” said Strembitsky, who next week celebrates his 62nd wedding anniversary. The couple, who split their time between homes in Alberta and Hawaii, has two children, four grandchildren and one great-grandchild.

After five years, Strembitsky left to pursue a higher degree in order to learn how to fix the system. But the descendent of Ukrainian immigrants was told a person of his background could never change education — a sting of rejection that fueled a career passion for redesigning how schools operate.

“Twelve years later, I was superintendent,” he said, fighting back tears.

‘Necessary but insufficient’

Strembitsky remained in that position for 22 years and slowly, facing great opposition along the way, dismantled central administration.

First, the district offered open enrollment at all Edmonton schools. The policy allowed parents to “vote with their feet” by transferring their children to schools with higher student achievement. Several schools also offered alternative programs, such as language immersion, to increase the competitiveness and diversity of inner-city campuses.

Finally, Strembitsky allowed principals to control more than 90 percent of their budget, with a menu of services offered at a cost through the central office. Principals, he said, responded hesitantly, wondering about the limits placed on their spending decisions.

“I said, ‘If it’s not illegal, immoral or insane and it’s for the kids, then propose it,’” Strembitsky recalled.

School systems in California, Hawaii, New York and elsewhere in the U.S. have adopted varying degrees of Strembitsky’s approach.

In Clark County, the degree to which the “Edmonton model” can be replicated here depends heavily on existing state and federal law and the district’s collective bargaining agreement with teachers. Strembitsky will sort through specific restrictions included in those documents before lawmakers face a Jan. 1 deadline to approve a final plan.

Implementation would happen no later than August 2017, a full year earlier than originally outlined in legislation requiring the plan. Strembitsky has argued the accelerated timeline is necessary to prevent opposition from railroading the effort, which he admitted isn’t perfect.

“It’s what I call a necessary but insufficient condition, because organization structures in and of themselves don’t achieve,” Strembitsky said. “It’s people who achieve, but organization structures either facilitate that achievement — or they thwart it.”

He soon will discover whether the community as a whole wants to support, or thwart, his lofty agenda to remake the future of a Clark County School District he had once hoped to lead.

Contact Neal Morton at nmorton@reviewjournal.com or 702-383-0279. Find him on Twitter: @nealtmorton.

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