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Vision 2015 chairman issues challenge to candidates

Lee fully supports Vision's goals; Markell has problems with teacher compensation issues

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NEWARK -- With a stirring challenge to almost every sector of society, Marvin N. "Skip" Schoenhals on Thursday called all hands to the task of bringing world-class education to Delaware's schools.

Schoenhals, chairman of WSFS Bank, is chairman of the Vision 2015 coalition that has worked for several years to harness education research and craft a plan that would transform the state's struggling school system into an effective and efficient network focused on student achievement.

He challenged the state's next governor -- who was sitting in the front row of the Clayton Hall auditorium -- to support the coalition's plan fully, remove the archaic rules and regulations that hobble real progress, set higher targets for graduation rates, accept accountability and name a "change agent" as secretary of education. That secretary, Schoenhals said, should be committed to making Delaware's schools the best in the world by 2015, "no exceptions, no excuses."

And before he left the room, he had significant commitments from both men who hope to be the next governor -- Republican Bill Lee and Democrat Jack Markell.

Lee pledged full support for the plan -- "right down the line" -- calling it "the best chance we have to make this the best educational system in the world and close the achievement gap."

Markell said he supported most, but not all, of the plan, expressing concern over some proposals related to teacher compensation.

"When I disagree, I will say so," he said.

Aggressive education improvement is essential to finding a long-term fix for the state's financial problems, Schoenhals said.

"If we get education right -- before any other state -- we will have an insurmountable head start," he said.

Schoenhals called for "block grants" to schools, money that would not be tangled in legislative micromanagement, but would be invested according to the needs identified by school officials. He called on lawmakers to reallocate \$90 million of the \$156 million identified as "wasted money" by the Leadership for Education in Delaware Committee. He called for budgets that can be easily understood by parents and taxpayers.

He urged teachers, principals, superintendents and school boards to aggressively pursue the ideals of the plan -- pushing for the training and resources they need, while accepting greater accountability. He urged officials to develop a career ladder for teachers, based mostly on classroom effectiveness.

And he challenged parents and business leaders to demand the change needed in Delaware schools and not lose focus as they did during significant reform efforts of the 1990s.

Lee and Markell responded to Schoenhals' challenges, then took questions from John Sweeney, editorial page editor for The News Journal, and John Taylor, executive director of the Delaware Public Policy Institute.

"Incremental steps are not enough," Lee said. "Everybody must be willing to make sacrifices. It's going to take leadership, somebody who is willing to take the blows to do the right thing."

Markell said the effort will be critical for Delaware's children.

"This is not just a discussion of policy at the 30,000-foot level," he said. "This is about real kids."

Markell has made detailed proposals for early childhood education, recruiting good teachers, continued teacher training, vocational education, special education programs, and expanded alternative programs.

Both would scrap the Delaware Student Testing Program. And both believe the state can eliminate the achievement gap that exists.

Asked if they knew who they would appoint as secretary of education, both said they had no one yet in mind.

Fred Hofstetter, professor of education in the masters and doctoral programs at UD, said he was impressed with the vision cast by Schoenhals.

"There were some very hard words, and the challenge for the next governor and the next secretary of education will be to make the state make the hard decisions that are ahead," Hofstetter said.

Hofstetter said it might be wise to pose a statewide referendum on the Vision 2015 proposals so the public could register its opinion.

Howard Weinberg, executive director of the Delaware State Education Association, which represents most of the state's teachers, said Schoenhals veered from "data-based" proposals when he talked about teacher compensation. Changes should be dealt with through collective bargaining, he said.

"In his role as provocateur, he challenged us, but he failed to recognize that we already have done many things in a leadership role," Weinberg said.

Schoenhals hit all the right notes -- especially in attacking the achievement gap, said Claibourne Smith, retired DuPont Co. vice president who served for 16 years on the Delaware State Board of Education and has just been named interim president of Delaware State University.

"He has taken most of the excuses off the table," Smith said.

Hofstetter said both candidates made dynamic presentations -- "both acted presidential," he said -- but he liked Lee's response to the plan better.

"In order for the plan to work, it needs to be executed well, not slowed down. That Lee supports it down the line probably is what it needs. Mr. Markell wants people around the table willing to disagree with him, but the question is whether there is time for that."

Alison Willey of Seaford, pursuing her masters degree in public administration, liked Markell's approach.

"He said he might not agree with the whole package, but he wants people who challenge him and that's the way to get change," she said. "He had well thought-out views in my opinion."

Schoenhals wouldn't give the nod to either candidate, but he saw good news ahead for Delaware school children.

"Either candidate would provide dramatic leadership for education improvement in Delaware," he said. "I don't think children can lose with either one of these candidates."
