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How to rescue urban education

Robert Z. Nemeth *Commentary*

‘There is no easy way out of the energy crisis,’ John W. Rowe told me, ‘But compared to urban education, it is easy.’

He was in Worcester the other day to speak at the annual meeting of The Research Bureau about climate change and the daunting challenges facing the electricity industry.

It was a homecoming of sorts for Mr. Rowe, who between 1989 and 1998 was head of the New England Electric System and an active player in community affairs in the city. He went on to become president and CEO of Chicago-based Exelon Corp., one of the nation’s largest electric utilities, with 5.4 million customers and revenues of more than \$15 billion.

John Rowe is a leading expert on global warming, and his presentation (“Kilowatts, Carbons and Competition”) was fascinating. But what caught my attention was a reference he made during the question-and-answer period to another one of his involvements — trying to improve public education in an urban environment. That topic is particularly timely in Worcester and Massachusetts.

“I believe education is a great equalizer,” he said during an interview after his speech at Mechanics Hall. Mr. Rowe put his money where his beliefs are. He and his wife, Jeanne, donated \$2 million to fund the Rowe-Clark Math & Science Academy. Frank Clark, an Exelon executive, gave \$200,000, and the company contributed an additional \$2 million, for a total of \$4.2 million.

The donation was made to the Renaissance School Fund that allows private businesses in Chicago to support new schools under Mayor Richard Daley’s Renaissance 2010 program. The initiative aims to close low-performing schools, replacing them with innovative ones.

The academy serves minority and low-income students who traditionally lag behind in sciences. It is in a renovated building in the largely African-American and Latino Humboldt Park neighborhood. “Of the 145 students in the freshman class only one is white,” Mr. Rowe noted. “The Rows and Clarks believe that sound education, both demanding and supportive, is essential to making the good things in this world available to more of its people,” the founders stated when the academy opened last year.

The academy has a rigorous curriculum structure to prepare students for competition in an increasingly technological world. It offers an extra month of school, 33 percent more reading and math instruction than traditional district schools, as well as lab sciences in freshman physics, biology, chemistry and calculus-based physics. There is a robotics club, computer lab and a requirement of six math credits, compared with three at traditional public schools. There is special emphasis on parental involvement, civic responsibility, and respect for the community.

Mr. Rowe is pleased with the school's early accomplishments. "The results are good," he said. "Perhaps not as good as in magnet schools that can select the best students. But nearly 80 percent of our freshman class was promoted to the next grade, as opposed to less than 50 percent in the regular schools. We have outstanding teachers and principals and keep compensation competitive with regular public schools."

Rowe-Clark is an open-enrollment charter high school. Students are chosen by lottery and don't have to take tests to be admitted. A new class is added each year until a four-year academy is in place. When this school opened last year, it was the fourth campus operated in Chicago by the Noble Network of Charter Schools. According to Noble's president and CEO Ron Mandershied, the average daily attendance rate has been at least 95 percent, more than 90 percent of seniors graduate and this year more than 90 percent will go to college.

There are more than 40 charter schools in Chicago. "That is because Mayor Daley and the superintendent he has appointed (Arne Duncan, CEO of Chicago Public Schools) are strong charter school supporters. So is the business community," Mr. Rowe explained.

The academy is a hands-on involvement with the Rowes. "We've probably met all of the teachers one-on-one. Jeanne has her own Girls' Club. She meets with about 20 girls each week to discuss anything girls want to talk about, from teen pregnancy to summer jobs," Mr. Rowe said.

The Chicago story is particularly relevant at a time when both Worcester and the Bay State are struggling with the challenges of urban education. The city is in the process of replacing a retiring school superintendent, and the struggle is on between protectors of the status quo and those who think Worcester deserves better. It is a replay of previous battles pitting insiders who expect to pick the next school chief from within the system against concerned residents who prefer a broad search to produce the best talent available.

On the state level, there are alarming signs that some of the key elements of the 1993 Education Reform Act are being dismantled. If the governor's dubious plan for a bunch of "readiness schools" — a vaguely defined layer of new education bureaucracy — is a subterfuge to keep the cap on charter schools, as many observers fear, it should be fought vigorously.

John Rowe might be right that solving the problems of urban education is more difficult than fighting global warming. But enlightened political and business leaders in Chicago and elsewhere have shown it can be done.

Robert Z. Nemeth's column appears regularly in the Sunday Telegram.