

Education, Life-Long Learning, & Solving the Truancy Crisis

Introduction

The Mayor's Office must play a critical role in coordinating and improving this community's educational resources and approach to life-long learning. Currently, the City of Rockford expends significant resources in early childhood education through the Head Start program, and the City is involved in the Workforce Investment Board. The City does not, however, have any personnel within the Mayor's office to create and direct a comprehensive approach to the City's education efforts. That must change. This City needs accountability for coordinating and directing its educational resources. As your Mayor, I will hire a Director of Education and Life-Long Learning. The residential and business marketplace needs to know that this City has taken responsibility and action for improving education in our community. As we direct, coordinate, and improve our educational resources, we will see increased demand for living and working in Rockford.

Accountability & Commitment to Excellence

The Mayor of Rockford is elected by all of the members of the community. Not only does the Mayor have political influence, but the Mayor of the City of Rockford can have a direct influence on issues of crime, poverty, and investment in the neighborhoods from which our children come. We must acknowledge as a community that, "as go our schools, so goes the City of Rockford."

First, the Mayor's office must publicly and continually acknowledge that it has a role in assisting both District 205 and other educational institutions in the City. The Mayor's leadership is necessary to provide a clear message that this City is an accountable and problem solving institution. Second, the Mayor's office can coordinate community resources to help. The Mayor's Office of the City of Rockford must continually push this City's commitment to providing excellence in educating our people and meeting the learning needs of our workforce.

Coordination Efforts

Our children are only in school six hours per day, 172 days per year at District 205. The Mayor can use his political power to convene and foster cooperation to solve problems that occur outside the school day such as truancy and to encourage positive educational experiences and opportunities. To accomplish this goal, I will establish the position within the Mayor's office of "Director of Education & Life-Long Learning." This person will be responsible for working every day to coordinate Rockford's education assets in the public and private sector and communicate City policy on issues like truancy, vocational training, and job training. This position will report directly to the Mayor.

The City's Director of Education will work with local businesses (both for-profit and non-profit) to coordinate resources as well as working with both public and private schools,

colleges, and training programs. There are many opportunities for working with those who want to help to solve problems. Local businesses and individuals can provide mentoring, internship and apprenticeship opportunities to provide positive educational experiences and training for our people.

There are numerous public and private entities that can help foster positive experiences out of the classroom to help our children learn. From trade unions to manufacturing companies to health care providers, both for-profit and non-profit private companies can be part of the solution, providing positive experiences for our children. The key place to start is to accept accountability for success and seek solutions.

Truancy & the Save Our Kids Program:

Truancy is at crisis levels in Rockford. With the No Child Left Behind Act, teachers are held accountable. But when kids aren't on school property, who is accountable? The City can and must get involved. With a truancy rate of four times the State average, District 205 loses out in over \$6.5 Million in annual State aid. Rockford cannot afford to lose those funds and those children cannot afford to miss those classes. A solution must be crafted and the following points provide a framework for success:

- ✿ **Provide Accountability, Consistency, and Action:** This community has seen starts and stops in the past when it comes to improving the truancy rate. Unfortunately, the lack of accountability, consistency, and action on the part of the City of Rockford when it comes to educating our children has meant that past community efforts could be dropped with little or no ramifications to elected officials. That will stop under a Morrissey administration. Since I will stake my reputation on this issue, I will demand action, and results.

- ✿ **Address Environmental Conditions at School:** School uniforms and closed campuses must be explored as first steps toward regaining control over the environmental conditions in our schools. Children must be at school ready to learn. Some children may leave school at lunch at not come back. Uniforms and closed campuses can help create a positive and professional learning environment for our children. We must maintain basic order in the environmental conditions at our schools so that an atmosphere conducive to learning is fostered.

- ✿ **Address Environmental Conditions at Home:** Studies tell us that over 20% of Rockford children live in poverty. Rockford has lead the entire State of Illinois two years running in overall crime rate. We must do more to improve the neighborhoods from which our children come to school. A City of Rockford study from 2004 identified failing residential property standards in over half of the City. The City of Rockford is in a much better position than the District 205 to work on the environmental conditions surrounding a child's home or neighborhood. Rockford must reduce crime and increase incentives for home renovations and redevelopment in many of the older parts of the City. We must

also ensure that police and the courts prosecute those who violate property standards and create disorder in our neighborhoods.

Many students living in public housing provided by the Rockford Housing Authority are surrounded by very difficult conditions. The Department of Housing and Urban development has cited the RHA numerous times for the living conditions at those properties. Under the current administration, after spending over \$180,000 on consultants, the City and the RHA withdrew a grant application that could have resulted in millions of dollars to help renovate the homes of public housing families. Winnebago County pursued such a program and received an \$18 Million grant to help renovate their public housing units. The administration must be held accountable for not pursuing these grant funds. A Morrissey administration will have the proper sense of urgency to pursue such funds to help the lives of our families and students living in public housing.

- ✿ Address Self-Image of Students and the Community: The affirmations program designed by Dr. Ed Sharp and Shep Blumenthal called, “Solution Thinking for Excellence” is a great place to start to build self-confidence and continue the City’s open commitment to excellence in educating our community. Expectations must be set high for both individuals and the City. As a community, we have spent millions over the years marketing our community through our Convention & Visitor’s Bureau. That organization sells this community under a title, “We Make Smiles.” We need to also tell the world that “We Educate Our People.” We must tell the world that we provide long-term workforce training opportunities. We must spend our marketing funds wisely to send the message both internally and externally that excellence in education is top priority.
- ✿ Seek Creative Enforcement Options: Currently, Winnebago County has a Drug Court and a Mental Health Court. We should explore a “Truancy Court” working with the County and State’s Attorney’s Office to provide positive reinforcement to our families on how much we value education in our community. Truancy is a crime, but truancy is not currently addressed by our system in a way that both students and parents understand the seriousness of the offense. This community’s value on education will be determined by our willingness to enforce the rules. Funds from the Winnebago County Public Safety tax should be explored to address overall crime and public safety issues, which could include truancy enforcement.
- ✿ Coordinate Support Services to Help Families: Sometimes a child cannot get to school simply because a family does not have a car and a child lives too far from school to walk. We have over 800 children identified by the School District as “homeless”. We can help support a network of individuals and organizations to help get rides to school. We can also use the truancy issue as a “hook” to help focus efforts on parental responsibility and involvement in education. We must bear the full weight of this community on this issue. Our children and our future are at stake.

Life-Long Learning

Education does not stop with District 205. Rockford has numerous educational resources that must be appreciated and expanded where necessary. We must pursue more programs for both four-year degrees and vocational and technical training. The current administration has, however, set its hopes for higher education opportunities on a so-called “Center of Excellence” at the site of the old Barber-Coleman factory on South Main Street along the river. Rather than focusing on a “building”, however, the right priority is to focus on crafting locally available curriculum, classes, and degrees. Rock Valley College’s last President made some similar mistakes when he pushed for multiple millions to be spent on “buildings” that didn’t significantly expand the educational opportunities for students needed training for immediate job prospects in this market. The City of Rockford should not make the same mistake of misplaced focus.

Rock Valley College, Rockford College, Northern Illinois University, the University of Illinois College of Medicine, St. Anthony School of Nursing, and Rockford Business College all provide certain levels of post high school degrees. The Workforce Investment Board also funds other vocational and technical training. Technical training centers have been developed by a combination of public and private efforts.

I have served on the Board of Director’s of the Goodwill Industries/Abilities Center, which has developed the Techworks Training Center at the old Armory Building on 15th Avenue. Technical industrial training at such facilities is not only an option for training displaced workers or drop outs, but might also provide training opportunities for children while they are still in high school as part of a traditional high school degree program. Before a student loses interest and “disengages” or drops out of school, efforts must be made to engage a student through sometimes non-traditional programs.

We need to focus first on partnering and expanding degree opportunities to meet the needs of our local work force before we decide to build a building. Rockford does not lack available space. There are lots of empty spaces that can be used for the right classes and programs. What we lack are the curriculum options. In both the manufacturing field and health care field we have many education needs that go unmet. My Director of Education and Life-Long Learning will focus on expanding our educational opportunities. We will be accountable for results.