

# THE PLAIN DEALER

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## Cleveland Mayor Frank Jackson and Ohio Gov. John Kasich could use some help: Brent Larkin

By Brent Larkin

[http://www.cleveland.com/opinion/index.ssf/2012/03/cleveland\\_mayor\\_frank\\_jackson\\_2.html](http://www.cleveland.com/opinion/index.ssf/2012/03/cleveland_mayor_frank_jackson_2.html)

Columbus -- At church last Sunday, Gov. John Kasich asked parishioners for their prayers.

He wasn't requesting divine intervention for himself or his administration. It was for Cleveland.

Sitting in his 30th-floor office in the Riffe Center the next day, Kasich recalled telling those at his small Anglican church here, "I could bring 50 things to you every Sunday I need you to pray for. But today I'm going to bring you only one.

"Mayor Jackson, the mayor of Cleveland -- he's a good guy trying to do a really big thing to give kids a future. We need Democrats to be co-sponsors so we can move a bill through the legislature helping him to do that. We don't have a lot of time, so would you pray that people would have some courage to put kids first?"

With that, the Republican governor left church and called Cleveland's Democratic mayor, leaving him a voice mail. Jackson listened to it a couple hours later.

"The message was merely a confirmation of what I had already concluded -- that this is real for him," Jackson said of the governor. "We disagree about some things, but he's all in on this. He's genuine about it."

Jackson needs the legislature's help in enacting a school reform plan that, without question, qualifies as innovative and bold. If enacted, it could triple the number of students attending first-rate schools within a half-dozen years, dramatically increase the availability of quality preschool, phase out underperforming charter schools, eliminate rules making seniority the deciding factor in teacher layoffs, and institute a form of teacher merit pay.

If it's not enacted, the Cleveland schools will essentially slide into bankruptcy -- and guarantee that the same families Democrats rely on for their votes are consigned to another generation of poverty.

Because they fear evoking the wrath of the teachers unions specifically and organized labor in general, this is a tough issue for Democratic legislators. Those legislators deserve a process that includes time to ask questions about the plan -- and get honest answers.

But at the end of that process, Democrats will face a stark choice: Do they side with organized labor, or with a plan that gives children in the nation's second-poorest city a better chance to succeed?

Innovation Ohio, a Columbus-based think tank that doubles as a wholly owned subsidiary of organized labor and an unofficial office of the 2014 Ted Strickland for governor campaign, has already made its choice. Not surprisingly, the group concluded the Jackson plan is "a reasonable place to start, but would be a terrible place to end up."

Terrible in the eyes of Innovation Ohio's funders, perhaps. Hardly terrible for a school system with a dropout rate approaching 50 percent.

But while the initial lack of Democratic support for a plan offered by a Democratic mayor has garnered most of the attention here, neither are Republicans entirely trustworthy on this one. Some downstate Republicans don't much care about Cleveland. And in Monday's interview Kasich acknowledged some GOP legislators may object to a provision in the proposal that would punish poorly performing charter schools.

But the legislator under the most pressure is House Minority Leader Armond Budish. The Shaker Heights Democrat's legacy is on the line here. For now, Budish says only that he's concentrating on "efforts to get the various parties together and work out an agreement."

Meanwhile, Cleveland City Council has been strangely silent. One would think a 19-member body composed entirely of Democrats might weigh

in with a resolution of support -- one indicating members care about the future of the children they represent.

Until that happens, most of the heavy lifting on this must be done by Jackson, the coalition of Cleveland leaders supporting him, and its chief cheerleader in state government.

Jackson's plan might not work. But given the state of Cleveland schools, not to try something dramatic borders on criminal.

Like any governor of a big and diverse state, Kasich makes policies that arguably have not all been good for a place like Cleveland. But no one should doubt for a moment that Kasich cares about cities.

"Cleveland was once as great a town as you could find," he told me. "And it can be a great town in the future. This is a golden opportunity for Cleveland to shine, to raise itself up and become a model for the country, a model for other urban education systems.

"I told the mayor I will use my last breath to help pass his plan. Can you imagine this opportunity being blown?"

Unfortunately, yes.

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