

BIG APPLE COULD TEACH UTAH ABOUT EDUCATION, LEAVITT SAYS

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Utah could learn a thing or two about education from the Big Apple, Gov. Mike Leavitt believes.

During a trip east recently, Leavitt visited a couple of New York schools that make headlines in educational journals for innovative approaches to teaching. He returned convinced that Utah could borrow some of New York's ideas to make use of technology and create "specialty" schools that put students on the road to job training while they get the basics. "I had two major objectives. I wanted to meet (Chancellor Joseph) Fernandez, who's one of the most energizing people around in terms of innovation, and I wanted to talk about choice in high schools," said Leavitt.

Fernandez, a feisty educator who has cut a wide swath in Miami and New York, two of the country's largest systems, will be stepping down as head of the New York system soon. He created enemies among state education officials when he promoted dispensing condoms in high schools and accepting homosexuality as an alternative lifestyle. Nevertheless, he is recognized across the country as an education leader who has pushed reforms that get results.

New York offers 51 "magnet" schools with a particular focus, Leavitt said. The programs narrow in on a range of topics from super-academics to public sector and transportation jobs. They involve "smaller groups of students with a common interest," said Leavitt. "Students move through the experience together and it enhances the experience for them."

Stuyvesant High School, where Leavitt spent a short time, is New York's premier academic prep school. Of the city's 1.2 million students, 13,000 apply for entrance into Stuyvesant. Only 800 slots are open to sophomores. Its graduates move on to major universities and colleges across the country. The school is impressive, Leavitt said, but the principal put a little perspective into the situation for Utah's governor. These students are the cream, he said. They would succeed anywhere. Stuyvesant just gives them a place to succeed with other students who have the same ability and drive.

Leavitt also heard details about the heralded East Harlem successes with "schools within a school." The junior high school approach is a magnet concept in which students have a choice of subject emphasis within the same building. The program has significantly improved school performance among students who are considered at-risk.

"It's a very successful approach," said Leavitt. "I'd like to see a Utah high school break into smaller schools."

He also visited historic PS1, which has been on the leading edge of technology applications in elementary school. The school uses the same model that is evolving in the private Waterford School in Utah.

PS1 has a program that "could be replicated in Utah," Leavitt said. "I see the same things in many of our schools."

In summary, Leavitt said, "I got a lot out of (the New York visit.) It energizes you to see the innovation that is occurring and can occur when people get enthusiastic."

The governor said he will continue to look anywhere he can find models of educational progress that would be useful in his drive to make education work better in his own state.

"I'll look for cross-pollination ideas anywhere they exist," said Leavitt.

This fall, he expects to begin sharing what he has found with Utah educators interested in

ving for Centennial Schools status. He is determined to make the program a real vehicle for educational reform, not just window-dressing, he said.

Although he originally said up to 200 schools could be identified as Centennial Schools, in the first year, eligible for extra funding appropriated for the program, there may be fewer.

“I don't want to invest money for proposals that are only a good description of what we have done in the past. I don't want the status quo. I want to invest in innovation,” he said.