

## Johnson's equal to the test

**Boston's School Committee has taken an exciting first step in getting the best superintendent on its bus. Its decision is a hopeful sign for the continued strengthening of Boston's public schools.**

### **AS YOU WERE SAYING ... Rabbi Joshua Elkin**

As Carol Johnson takes the helm as superintendent of the Boston Public Schools, I welcome her. Though we have not met, her accomplishments are well known. Boston is fortunate to have her.

For 20 years I was the head of a Jewish independent school in Newton, and for the past 10 years I have served as the director of a philanthropic partnership focused on strengthening and growing Jewish private schools in North America.

Despite different professional tracks and differences in the types of schools led, we share common bonds. Paramount is our mutual goal to help young people become solid citizens in their own communities and in the world.

"Back to school" is a golden opportunity to offer advice to Johnson and invite other educational leaders to join this effort to break down the silos and learn from each other.

First, encourage educational professionals at all levels to define and refine their vision regularly.

Schools — whether public, independent or religious in nature — are concerned with helping children develop their unique identity and equipping them with the attitudes, skills and knowledge to succeed in life.

While the No Child Left Behind law has contributed some positives to America's public education, there is too much focus on "teaching to the tests," which se-



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**SHARED VISION: Carol Johnson with Mayor Thomas Menino.**

verely limits opportunities for educators to dream about futures for students that move beyond basic literacies.

Visions are the engines that drive education toward excellence. Supportive leadership in this vital area will have a powerful effect on Boston's educational system.

Second, invest in leadership training. In working with schools and community leaders, focus intensively on the principals of each school, but don't leave out the vital number two, and others in middle management.

Recent success in effecting change in Jewish day schools underscores the power of leadership coaching to guide top school personnel through the complexities of school improvement.

Third, embrace the advice of Deborah Meier, an acclaimed leader in the U.S. school reform movement, to bring as many adults as possible into each school.

Teachers and parents cannot do it alone. The student-adult relationships that are built, beyond

those with teachers and parents, provide vital links between the school and the outside community.

School leaders should be urged to invite adults from the community to serve as audiences for students to present their portfolios.

Fourth, consider the K-8 grade configuration for as many schools as possible.

Free standing middle schools are the most troubled part of the public school system. There is solid evidence that each move from school to school lowers academic achievement. A K-8 configuration keeps young people for nine years in one setting where they become better known. There are undoubtedly severe constraints to moving quickly in this direction, but hopefully there can be progress over time.

Finally, inspired by Jim Collins' recent monograph, "Good to Great for the Social Sector," it is imperative to get the "right people on the bus."

We need to bring the best and brightest minds to the tasks of education. This means attracting the next generation of impassioned teachers, fostering the professional development of those already teaching and instilling a shared vision in school board members.

The Boston School Committee has taken an exciting first step in getting the best superintendent on its bus. Its decision is a hopeful sign for the continued strengthening of Boston's public schools.

As preparations are made for a new school year, everyone is cheering Johnson on. I join them and look forward to not only working with her, but learning from her.

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*Rabbi Joshua Elkin is executive director of Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education. We invite readers to submit pieces of 600 words. E-mail to [oped@bostonherald.com](mailto:oped@bostonherald.com). Submissions are subject to editing and become Herald property.*