



April 2001

An Education CEO: Robert Furek '64 brings accountability to Hartford public schools

Rick Green
Colby College

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Recommended Citation

Green, Rick (2001) "An Education CEO: Robert Furek '64 brings accountability to Hartford public schools," *Colby Magazine*: Vol. 90 : Iss. 2 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine/vol90/iss2/10>

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Robert Furek '64 brings accountability to Hartford public schools

AN EDUCATION CEO





By Rick Green, photos by Jonathan Olson

Armed state troopers standing by his side, an ashen-faced Robert Furek '64 waded carefully through the jeering crowd lining the hallway of the ornate Hartford city hall.

"Racists and fascists!" some yelled. Furek, chairman of the board of trustees running the Hartford, Conn., public schools, quickly left the building, the taunts and finger-pointing. Furek and his colleagues had just voted to remove the district's superintendent of schools, an African-American woman some in this downtrodden community saw as a source of hope and inspiration.

Looking back, it might be hard to find a lower point in this affable chief executive officer's long career. For Furek, this tense moment in May of 1998 made it frighteningly clear that directing a troubled urban school district made the cutthroat spirits industry seem almost low-pressure.

A year after the state of Connecticut voted to replace the local board of education and take over the Hartford schools, it appeared that events were spinning further out of control. Furek had been tapped by the governor to lead a group of no-nonsense executives and community leaders to straighten out the problem. With impeccable business credentials honed during a 25-year career in the wine and spirits business, Furek appeared to be going the way of everyone else who had tried to run this multi-headed beast known as the Hartford schools: down in flames.

Within months, a criminal investigation would begin into mismanaged school board finances. Yet another interim superintendent would abruptly leave. A top administrator would resign in disgrace. Long-forgotten bills—unpaid, of course—would be discovered. And most depressing of all, there were still no signs that the worst-in-the-state test scores of Hartford's 23,000 students would improve any time soon.

This chaotic scene seemed a long way from the hopeful expectations of just a year before, when Furek and six others stood beside Gov. John G. Rowland in the state capitol as they were appointed to run city schools. After years of mismanagement, the state had stepped in to bring order in a first-ever takeover of a public school district in Connecticut, installing Furek as chairman of a hand-picked board of trustees.

Today, Furek's outlook is very different, and so is the prognosis for the Hartford schools. He left the board of trustees late in 2000, completing a three-year term that





brought stability to Connecticut's largest and poorest school district.

What happened in Hartford, a city of 1.2 million people with a school system that is 95 percent minority and where nine out of 10 children come from families below the poverty line, is fairly simple. Furek and his board stayed focused, even when it appeared things were not improving. "I spent a lot of time in business turnarounds. Things almost always get worse. You will be doing the right things but it doesn't show up," he recalled recently. "If we did one thing, we just stayed on course, and even through the tough times we continued to try to pursue those priorities."

It helped, of course, that state lawmakers were committing millions of dollars in new funds to the city. Furek's board of trustees, meanwhile, used the ample powers given them by the state to remove incompetent administrators while also upgrading the curriculum and facilities.

Now, for the first time in years the district is focused on improving student achievement. In 1999, a permanent superintendent, Anthony Amato, was hired. He brought a disciplined new curriculum for elementary school students—and striking progress on standardized tests.

Bills are being paid and spending monitored. Nearly two-thirds of top managers have been replaced. And most revealing: more often media reports are about things that are working in the Hartford schools. These days, the district marches to a new mantra: "we will never be last again."

And Furek, a suburban executive with all the right social and charitable connections, has an outlook one doesn't associate with a boardroom guy. "I think that an inadequate education is a primary cause in the racial differences that exist in the United States," he said. "Very few people are really comprehensively addressing trying to fix it."

"We are telling thousands and thousands of teenagers that their life is over at sixteen," said Furek, 58. "They have none of the opportunities that [middle-class] kids have. It is

stunning to me and scary to me that thousands of African-American children and Hispanics are treated as disposable, cast-off kids."

Nothing, not three decades as a hard-charging corporate climber, including nearly 10 years as president and CEO of Heublein, Inc., prepared Furek for what he found in Hartford. "I have never in any organization seen the level of dysfunction that I saw in the school system. Never," said Furek, a man who once directed North, South and Central American operations for International Distillers and Vintners, where he managed assets of \$1 billion and 4,500 employees.

When Furek agreed to lead the board of trustees after the still-fresh state takeover of Hartford schools, it was a school system that had seen four superintendents in five years. A private company had failed in its attempt to bring order to the district. Finally the state,

Are teachers' unions an obstacle to education?

John Gibbons '64

Mattituck High School, Mattituck, N.Y.

Teachers' unions protect the contractual rights of teachers and perform the function of a collective bargaining unit during contract negotiations. From a historical perspective, teachers' unions have protected the academic integrity of the classroom. What individual science teacher in the "Bible Belt" would feel comfortable introducing the scientifically valid principles of evolution without the support of a professional organization? Your question might really be addressing the issue of tenure and union support for teachers during competency hearings. I would point out that the granting of tenure is an administrative decision derived without any input from the unions.

Michael A. Gerard '92

Mary Institute & St. Louis Country Day School, Webster Groves, Mo.

Teachers' unions aren't an obstacle to education, but they aren't helping change the quality of education in substantive ways. Their agendas focus largely on increasing teacher salaries, and that is only [one] piece of the puzzle. However, I think it is important to note that unions promote the interest of their members, not the general welfare of society, and the teacher's unions are no exception; our job as citizens is to promote quality education.

Arthur Goldschmidt '59

Penn State University (retired), State College, Pa.

Teachers' unions can become an obstacle to education if they penalize the ablest and most innovative of their members. . . . On the other hand, if teachers in a district suffer from low pay and abysmal working conditions, and if they are given no voice in the management of their schools, then I do believe that they should be unionized. I also believe that parents should involve themselves more in their own children's education, not necessarily by home schooling but by visiting their children's teachers and, where appropriate, classes and by expressing to those teachers a desire to be their partners in educating their children.

Facing page, a new Montessori magnet school, one of three new schools in Hartford's "Learning Corridor." Also added to the city school system were specialized schools for science and technology and performing arts. Before Robert Furek was appointed chairman of the board of trustees for the school system, Hartford schools were acknowledged to be in trouble. Below, a stairwell in one of Hartford's aging elementary schools, where problems are being addressed.

spurred by an elected board that couldn't get along—let alone pay the bills or fix leaky roofs—had stepped in.

This was a school system that couldn't accurately count the number of employees it had, where less than 10 percent of fourth graders reached state goals for reading. "I don't think anybody knew how bad it was,"

Furek said recently. "They had measurements of the test scores, but I don't think anybody had a real sense of the incompetence and the lack of leadership and direction. There was a pervasive sense of 'things can't be done' throughout the system."

Soon after firing the superintendent in May 1998, Furek and his colleagues zeroed in on the most basic things: start monitoring spending better, hire more competent administrators, fix the holes in the roofs, balance the budget, negotiate more favorable labor contracts.

"He brought a tremendous vision of how service should be provided," said Mathew Borrelli, an interim superintendent brought in during the summer of 1998. The result was a board of trustees that didn't bow to pressure,

be it the neighborhood pastor, angry parents or its own employees.

When Furek stepped down from the board after three years, he left Hartford with "a focus and consistency" that it has not seen in years, said Theodore S. Sergi, commissioner of education for Connecticut.

Of course officials are years from declaring victory in Hartford. Just two in 10 fourth graders are reaching state goals for reading, for example. But Sergi believes what's changed is that Furek and others have shown that success is possible, even if it has to come under state control.

Schools are cleaner. For the first time in as long as anyone can remember, incompetent school principals are being replaced. Textbooks are plentiful. Test scores are up under a renewed emphasis on reading, writing and math. "He was able to tackle the business end of it. A lot of that got cleaned up," said Kathy Evans, a parent and one-time board member. She says many questions remain about the future, though, and about whether Hartford can continue to improve. No one really knows what will happen when the state turns control of the district back over to the city in 2003. Sergi, however, believes that the tone set by Furek was invaluable. "It's about saying, 'I stick to what we laid out here and I don't waiver on that,'" he said.

"When people say to me, 'do you think people outside of education can run a school system,' I now say, 'I've met a guy I think can do it,'" Sergi said. "I didn't think so before."

Now, the nation is focused on school reform, and Furek sees a lot of similarity in his ideas and those of President George W. Bush. "His focus on accountability is very, very important. I agree with it. But I don't believe vouchers [alone] are sufficient," he said, referring to one of the president's proposals that would give cash payments to parents who want to send their children to private schools.

The problem, he says, is that vouchers only help a small percentage of students—leaving most students in schools that still need to be reformed. "Real reform, particularly reform of broken urban school systems, does not lend itself to simple one-shot solutions," Furek said.

Rick Green is education writer for The Hartford Courant.



Should federal funding be linked to how well students perform on standardized tests?

Dee O'Heron Pederson '70

Teacher's Assistant, The Blake School, Hopkins, Minn.

[Challenged] schools actually need more funding to reduce class size or add more assistants to the classroom to deal with many at-risk students and attract the best teachers. I do want to point out that there are many excellent teachers in the difficult districts, but often they can only do so much to improve test scores when all the factors are considered. I do not favor school funding being linked to how well students perform on standardized tests. I would prefer to see the federal government send a task force into the failing schools to help them achieve better test scores.

Lyn Mikel Brown

Associate Professor of Education and Human Development and Women's Studies.

There's no appreciation that people start in different places. You have very poor communities without the resources to do what they need to do to meet those standards. And then you're going to punish them? It's really outrageous.

Emmanuel Thomann '00

Graduate student, University of Connecticut. Thomann majored in history at Colby with a minor in education.

You're looking for two scapegoats. You're blaming the students. If they do well, they get more federal funding. It doesn't make any sense at all. And you're punishing the school for not doing as well.