

## **As I See It by James H. Buford**

**March 2006**

Recently, the St. Louis Public School Board passed a measure to transform the area's largest school district into an oasis of diversified learning opportunities. Dr. Creg Williams, SLPS' superintendent, recently unveiled an ambitious plan to create specialty high schools, ninth-grade academies, uniform codes, gender-specific schools and year-round classes for our students.

With all of these changes going into effect in the next school year, I commend Dr. Williams on an excellent first year of service. In past years, St. Louis Public Schools has had a checkered past, no clear plan to achieve accreditation and a perennial budget deficit. Today, a clear path has been drawn by the school board and the superintendent to achieve maximum benefit for our schools.

Although the sweeping changes to be made in the SLPS system may seem perplexing to some, there is a definite method to these initiatives. The creation of 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Academies are crucial to helping freshman students make a smooth transition into high school. Research has shown that 9<sup>th</sup> grade schools increase academic achievement, student attendance, participation in extracurricular activities and student awareness of college and career options. In addition, Dr. Williams' election of year-round schools for 9<sup>th</sup> grade students will allow them to wholeheartedly focus on preparing for the rigorous demands for high school and increasing their academic performance.

The move to school uniforms was adopted in order to promote school safety, improve discipline and enhance the learning environment. School uniforms have the potential to decrease violence and theft, prevent gang activity, decrease peer pressure and protect students and faculty from dangerous intruders. SLPS' move to create gender specific schools will also encourage a learning environment that has less distraction and gives the students the potential for higher grades and test scores.

All of these measures are designed to create a stronger atmosphere of learning and opportunities for our kids. The St. Louis Public School Board, Superintendent and the St. Louis Community have also issued an Education Covenant that is built upon the beliefs that our children can learn regardless of their race or socioeconomic status, that the African American Achievement Gap can be eliminated, that parents must be included in the education process, that our teachers must be properly supported, competent and caring, that our community must be involved in encouraging high achievement from our students, and that SLPS is obligated to help students overcome any obstacles that may hinder their learning. I feel that Dr. Creg Williams, his staff and the St. Louis Public School Board has gotten off to a great start in improving the quality of public education in St. Louis. It is my hope that we can continue to work together towards this goal without distraction.