Chris Belcher, outgoing superintendent of Columbia schools, talks about achievements

By Fred Broschart

Note from MU News Bureau: See Belcher’s comments on state support for higher education on pg. 2

COLUMBIA — Chris Belcher, superintendent of Columbia Public Schools, announced Wednesday he will retire at the end of the 2013-14 school year to accept a position with MU’s College of Education as an assistant teaching professor of leadership and policy.

On Monday, he talked about his time at the School District, his accomplishments there and his thoughts regarding the future of education in Columbia. The following are excerpts from that interview.

As far as your accomplishments here at Columbia Schools, which ones are you most proud of?
You know, I think if you had to pin it down, I think we’ve really reconnected with the community, and I think we have public support and good public dialogue about our programs. And that’s what I felt was lacking when I came here. Now that doesn’t mean everything is going super great, but I think it means that people see that we’re open, that we have discussions, that we really focus on serving the parents and the students and the community.

It’s about going to functions and listening to the needs, about trying to solve complex problems that may not make everyone happy. We’re taking them on, and we’re having public forums for that. I feel like that’s sort of been the hallmark that you’ll hear people say here — that we’ve really engaged with the community, the parents and the students.

When you first came to Columbia, you identified the achievement gap as the biggest problem the district had to solve. Has it improved?
No. I think that’s a disappointment, but Columbia is just a mirror of the national problem.

We have started a lot of initiatives that may be a year or two away from producing some benefit. We spent a lot of time reorganizing the entire secondary structure. We had to build a building. We had to redesign our middle school model. We had to reorganize staff, change boundaries, bus times and start times. But ... because of the change, we now have six middle schools that are smaller learning environments. They have a much more personal feel. Part of the achievement gap is relations with students — that we know how to guide them and gear them toward higher student achievement.

I think that’s going to pay huge benefits, and we’re already seeing lower discipline issues and a better organized environment for learning.

**Do you think the federal or state government can do anything to improve education?**

We as a state have, I think, often abdicated our responsibility for public education. I’ve been here five years. There’s been a decreasing state fund base every year I’ve been here. As a state, we’re in the bottom 10 percent of states in state support for public education, which simply means local has to pick up more of that support. So you get a much broader range of resources in the schools. So what you tend to find is the more wealthier areas — where people can pay more taxes — support schools, the others don’t, and you get disparities.

I think that’s inexcusable. I think we have to say, “It doesn’t matter where you’re born in the state of Missouri. You should get access to a high quality education.”

We’ve put no money behind teacher training and preparation. We’ve talked about it for 30 years.

If you really want to change the system, you have to do what Finland does, which is invest in the resource of developing teachers. Make it a job with prestige and good compensation, and then you have to build it from the base up.

**How do you see your new opportunity at MU as a way to help improve education?**

I’ve had a lot of opportunities, and I’ve taken them. Sometimes it was stressful. I’ve had experiences in rural schools and suburban schools. I’ve worked with personnel and
curriculum development. I’ve worked with classroom management. I’ve had this really broad set of experiences, and that’s why I think my last five years have been the most successful.

I was in a place that needed someone to have that broad overview to get things done.

The idea of starting my second career in preparing school leaders is very exciting. I will take what I have learned and what I have been exposed to to new, young leaders. I know how stressful that is. We talked about the resource issues in Missouri, and training our leaders is really important — to have them go out to be the champions for the kinds of things we’re talking about. It has to be broader than one or two voices in the state; we have to start organizing as an educational body.

The latest plan from University of Kansas athletic officials to pamper their student-athletes is yet another indication of how out-of-whack the priorities are becoming at too many colleges.

It could cost an extravagant $265,000 per resident to build an apartment complex primarily designed to woo men and women basketball players to play in Lawrence.

That’s four times higher than is being spent at the school to build two new residence halls for regular students.

We get it: People love sports. American colleges are asking private donors to give until it hurts to build new stadiums, weight rooms and other projects to benefit a small number of athletes.
That includes the University of Missouri, which is in the midst of an over-the-top $200 million fundraising campaign for athletic-related improvements.

And the money is flowing in; the proposed basketball apartment complex at KU would be partly supported with private funds, not tax dollars. So what’s the problem?

Here’s a big one: Universities already are far behind the curve when it comes to maintaining first-class educational facilities for their students — which would seem to be really important to attracting young people to their campuses. Buildings are outdated. Sidewalks and driveways are crumbling. Meanwhile, tuition rates are climbing.

True, at KU and elsewhere, large giving campaigns are underway to try to deal with those ills.

But the campaigns are asked to fill larger gaps as states, including Kansas and Missouri, cut the percentage of taxpayer funds they pour into one of the most important investments that could be made in states — a high-quality public education.

The Kansas Board of Regents this week is scheduled to review the KU apartment project, which should not be a high priority on the school’s capital improvements agenda. Board chair Fred Logan said he has not made up his mind about the KU project, but added he thought Kansas colleges previously had not rushed to get into an “arms race” on athletic spending.

KU basketball, with its rich tradition, doesn’t need to stand out in offering lavish housing to its athletes. The regents should reject the current apartment plan and require a revised, less costly one.

POLICE INVESTIGATING GREEN-BECKHAM DRUG CASE

By Dave Matter dmatter@post-dispatch.com 314-340-8508

COLUMBIA, Mo. • It could be months before the prosecution can file charges related to Friday’s arrest of Missouri receiver Dorial Green-Beckham on suspicion of drug-related activity in Springfield, Mo.
Springfield police were still investigating the case Monday and had not submitted their case to Greene County prosecuting attorney Dan Patterson, Patterson said in an email.

“With regard to the specific matter to which you refer, the matter is currently under investigation by the Springfield Police Department and has not been referred to my office at this time,” he said. “Drug related felony investigations typically require analysis by the (Missouri State Highway Patrol) crime laboratory which typically has a turnaround time of 3 to 6 months.”

Patterson added, “It would not be proper for me to speculate about what charges might be filed or against whom.”

Green-Beckham, 20, John W. McDaniel, 22, and Patrick W. Prouty, 20, were arrested Friday on suspicion of felony distribution of a controlled substance after Springfield police smelled marijuana in McDaniel’s Jeep Cherokee during a traffic stop. Officers found about a pound of marijuana and assorted drug paraphernalia in the vehicle. All three were taken into custody at the Greene County Jail and released after questioning.

John Beckham, the player’s father, told the Post-Dispatch in a text message Saturday that he didn’t expect his son to face charges.

“Dorial very much regrets being in this situation and our family looks forward to this being resolved,” Beckham said.

This is Green-Beckham’s second drug-related arrest since he joined the Mizzou football program. In October 2012, he and two teammates were arrested outside of Memorial Stadium on suspicion of marijuana possession. He later pleaded guilty to an amended city violation of trespassing.

After news broke of his arrest Saturday, Green-Beckham posted on Twitter: “People judge before knowing what happen. Let’s not judge me for what happen and don’t saying anything to me to try to bring me down.”

Missouri football: Dorial Green-Beckham investigation could take months

COLUMBIA — Don’t expect any updates on Dorial Green-Beckham’s drug charges in the next few days. Springfield Police Capt. Vance Holland said a decision probably would
not be made for at least a week because of pending laboratory results. Holland referred to Saturday’s press release as the most current update on the situation.

Greene County Prosecutor Dan Patterson provided a much longer timetable: three to six months. That’s the length of time it could take for the Missouri State Highway Patrol crime lab to determine which drugs, if any, were in Green-Beckham’s system and how much. The Missouri athletics department stands by its official comments from Saturday. “We’re aware of the situation and are working to learn more,” sports information director Chad Moller said.

Green-Beckham’s Saturday morning arrest in Springfield — his hometown — made national sports news. It was the Missouri wide receiver’s second arrest in as many years with the program and the second related to marijuana. The 6-foot-6 former No. 1 high school recruit caught 59 passes for 883 yards and 12 touchdowns this season. He is expected to start for the Tigers in 2014, and some NFL Draft pundits already list him as a first-round prospect in 2015. Green-Beckham (@Dorial GB5) took to Twitter on Saturday to release his first and only statement since the arrest:

“People judge before knowing what happen,” the tweet read. “Let’s not judge me for what happen and don’t saying anything to me to try to bring me down.”

Gun nullifiers follow lead of pot advocates

MU Mention pg. 2

GOP legislators seek strength in state numbers.

Monday, January 13, 2014 at 2:00 pm Comments (4)

JEFFERSON CITY (AP) — Having failed in an earlier effort to bar federal agents from enforcing gun regulations in Missouri, conservative lawmakers are trying a new tack this year: banding together with other like-minded states to defy certain federal laws at the same time.
Supporters believe it will be more difficult for the federal government to shrug off such statutes if more states act together.

Missouri's latest proposal, introduced last week, would attempt to nullify certain federal gun control regulations from being enforced in the state and subject law enforcement officers to criminal and civil penalties for carrying out such policies.

The state's GOP-led General Assembly came one vote shy of overriding Democratic Gov. Jay Nixon's veto of such a measure last year. This year's bill adds a new twist, delaying the effective date for several years to allow time for other states to join the cause.

"We continue to see the federal government overreach their rightful bounds, and if we can create a situation where we have some unity among states, then I think it puts us in a better position to make that argument," said Republican Sen. Brian Nieves, who is sponsoring the legislation.

Missouri's efforts came after President Barack Obama called for expanded federal background checks and a ban on assault weapons.

Courts have consistently ruled that states cannot nullify federal laws, but that hasn't stopped states from trying or ignoring them anyway. Last year, a federal appeals court struck down a 2009 Montana law that sought to prohibit federal regulation of guns that were manufactured in the state and remained within its borders.

A similar Kansas law that makes it a felony for a federal agent to attempt to enforce laws on guns made and owned in Kansas earned a rebuke from U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder.

Peverill Squire, a political science professor and expert on state legislatures at the University of Missouri, said Missouri's nullification plans would probably meet a similar fate in court but that states could hope to send an indirect message to Congress by pushing such proposals.

Republican leaders in Missouri and elsewhere say bringing other states along in the effort might lead to a different outcome.

"This can't be just a Missouri effort. There has to be a groundswell of support by the people — by other states as well — in order for us ultimately to be successful," Republican Senate President Pro Tem Tom Dempsey said.

There's a pattern for states to follow when rebuffing federal laws. Although possessing and distributing marijuana remains a federal crime, about 20 states now have laws that allow people to use marijuana for medical purposes, and the federal government has declined to challenge new laws in Colorado and Washington allowing recreational use of marijuana.

"The idea is that if you're standing alone against a federal law, then you're not as likely to have success than if you're standing with other states," said Arkansas Republican Rep. Bob Ballinger,
who sponsored an unsuccessful attempt to prevent enforcement of federal gun control laws in his state.

Under the Missouri legislation, federal law enforcement officers could face misdemeanor charges punishable by as much as a year in jail and a $1,000 fine for attempting to enforce federal laws considered to be "infringements on the right to keep and bear arms."

The bill cites no specific federal law, but the measure refers to taxes and fees specifically levied against firearms, as well as tracking policies that have a "chilling effect" on gun ownership.

The provisions would take effect in January 2017 — or sooner, if at least four other states pass similar measures before then.

Posted in News, Wire on Monday, January 13, 2014 2:00 pm.