

## **Board challenges new schools chief**

*By Steve Giegerich*

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The rift at the top of the St. Louis Public Schools broke into the open Tuesday night as School Board President Veronica O'Brien and others challenged new superintendent Diana Bourisaw on the eve of a critical meeting between Bourisaw and the State Board of Education.

In particular, city board member Robert Archibald questioned the veracity of some of the data Bourisaw plans to present to the state board in Jefferson City on Thursday afternoon.

"There is no credible evidence in the report we received tonight," Archibald said of Bourisaw's hourlong briefing at Tuesday's administrative board meeting. "To present this to the State Board is to distort what is happening in this district in terms of student achievement and fiscal responsibility."

Among the data Bourisaw plans to share with the State Board are figures that show the African-American achievement gap in the St. Louis schools is narrowing. She said the district is on sound financial footing.

O'Brien also questioned the data, calling it poorly interpreted.

The School Board president — the key player in bringing Bourisaw to the district just four months ago — chastised Bourisaw for failing to consult with the city board before preparing her presentation to the State Board.

"We like self-starters. That's great, we need that sort of thing. But right now it can be dangerous," said O'Brien, citing the possibility of a state takeover of the city schools.

Tuesday's meeting was the public's first glimpse at a split that has been simmering behind the scenes. Bourisaw was hired at an emergency board meeting in July to replace former Superintendent Creg Williams, forced to resign by a coalition of disgruntled board members that included O'Brien. Two months ago the board removed interim from Bourisaw's title in a stormy closed meeting.

Since then, however, relations between the board president and superintendent have deteriorated.

Bourisaw brushed aside the barbs directed at her Tuesday by O'Brien, Archibald and board member Ron Jackson.

"I don't think I have a problem," she said. "I work for seven board members."

After the meeting, the superintendent was unfazed that three of those members criticized administration policies ranging from professional development to a failure to seek grants from leading educational foundations. "There was a split board when I got here," she pointed out.

Board Vice President William Purdy defended Bourisaw, calling her planned

presentation to the State Board an accurate "snapshot" of the district.

But Jackson joined O'Brien in saying Bourisaw should have worked more closely with the city board before making plans to visit Jefferson City.

"In issues of this magnitude the board should have been apprised in a timely fashion — not at the last minute," Jackson said.

