

Report on the Superintendent's Community Forum:

Too Many Children Left Behind: How Do Close the Achievement Gap?

Thursday, July 19, 2007

6:30 - 8:00 P.M.

Rosenwald Middle School

In order for us to be successful as educators, we must have the support of the community. I want to build a bridge with the citizens of this community that offers two way communication.

If we understand their expectations and we can help bring about a better understanding of public education today, then, we will all benefit. But, most importantly, students will benefit.

~ James E. McCalister, Sr.

Closing the Achievement Gap between African-American boys and other lads in Panama City-Bay County, FL, is an attainable goal that will require a holistic approach, according to consensus reached among participants in a recent forum on the issue. Bay District Schools Superintendent James E. McCalister, Sr., convened the forum along with School Board member Ginger Littleton and the Ad Hoc Committee that's been reviewing this issue since January.

A diverse group of community members convened at a local middle school to talk about the low academic performance of African American males in Panama City-Bay County, FL. More than 130 people, including students, parents, grandparents, teachers, administrators, pastors, ministers, non-profit workers, volunteers, community college representatives, and others engaged in a two-hour dialogue.

Bay District Schools teacher Janice L. Lucas moderated the forum utilizing the National Issues Forums issue brief "Too Many Children Left Behind: How Do We Close the Achievement Gap." Recorders at the forum were Florida State University administrator Trinia Jackson and City of Panama City Community Development Block Grant Director Michael Johnson. The timekeeper was George Hines, Jr., (Ret. Army), a member of the Ad Hoc Community.

Littleton called the forum "historical," in that it's the first time anything like this has been talked about in such a diverse group. "I thought the format was wonderful," she said. "The bottom line is that we will come out with an action plan. I think the "forgotten community" will have more positive attention placed on it."

At the end of the two-hour forum, participants volunteered to mentor and tutor young black males, volunteered to work with youth programs, initiated a clearinghouse to publicize the programs available, and indicated a commitment to closing the achievement gap.

According to the forum attendees, the low academic performance of African American males in Bay County not only correlates with negative quality of life for the students, their plight also indirectly affects the larger community in several ways:

- Diminishes the quality of the workforce;
- it impacts the ability to attract new business;
- Promotes hopelessness;
- Fosters crime;
- Widens the gap between lower and upper class; and
- Limits the ability to get affordable housing.

Forum Voices

“The reality is that our children—they do not have the support at home that they need. As someone said earlier, the family structure has changed. We have so many grandparents and great grandparents raising our children.”

“Parents need help to help the students.”

“You can love your child but not have enough time to give him the support he needs.”

“They tell me that he’s one of the smartest kids in the school,” said a grandparent about his grandchild. “If he is (one of the smartest in the school), that frightens me. He’s not the sharpest knife in the drawer.”

“Parents don’t parent anymore.”

Again, again during a two-forum, participants voiced concerns about the parents role in creating the result of low achieving black males. Between the concerns about the parents, other voices talked about the teacher’s role.

“Teachers have to have the love, passion, dedication necessary to reach children.”

“Teachers are under a lot of pressure to teach the test.”

“Teachers require hours of homework but then do not take time to review the assignment. They just give students the answers.”

“There’s unfair pressure placed on teachers and students to pass the FCAT.”

The best teachers need to be paired with the most needy students.

Teachers and administrators are afraid of the black males, which results in a disparity of disciplinary actions as compared to other students.

There were fewer voices that addressed the student’s role although one recent graduate said that students who were not college bound did not have much to engage them in school. That sentiment was met with approval expressed by applause from all over the auditorium.

Forum Approaches

The following are the three possible approaches that were considered during the forum.

Approach #1: Raise Expectations and Demand Accountability

African Americans, Hispanic, and Native American students in many schools have become victims of what President George W. Bush calls "the soft bigotry of low expectations." If we are to close the achievement gap, we must push for increased academic performance of all students, and make educators accountable for the results.

Forum participants voiced several comments favoring high expectations. One parent offered, however, that expectations should be high but not out of reach. Another participant noted that a diversity of expectations is needed, not just high expectations for college-bound students.

- Students can and will respond to high expectations.
- Parents need to be knowledgeable of course requirements.
- It's important to connect with students at their level.
- Give students equal opportunity to learn.
- Diversify expectations to reach more students.
- Unfair pressure placed on teachers and students to pass the FCAT.
- There are instances where teachers are afraid of the black males.

Approach #2: Close the Spending Gap

Schools in low-income, high-minority districts often lack science labs, computers, up-to-date textbooks, and well-qualified teachers who most often choose to work in better-paying, better-equipped suburban school districts. We cannot realistically expect more of poor, minority students until these resource and funding inequities are addressed

Very few participants identified with the second approach. There was general consensus that funds were available for programs. The problem, they said, is low participation, which may stem from lack of knowledge about the programs and services. The Title I Coordinator said, however, that parents who qualify had been sent letters about services that were free to them but had not responded.

- Programs are available but there is a lack of participation.
- Societal accountability in the form of, community involvement, social programs, and poor return on past funding investments.
- Vouchers are draining public schools funds.
- FCAT was designed to privatize public schools.
- Additional funds are needed for parents and teachers to educate the student.

Approach #3: Address the Root Causes

Problems that show up as poor academic performance begin long before low-income minority children come to school. And they cannot be remedied unless we address underlying causes, such as unresolved health problems, poor nutrition, stressful living conditions, and lack of parental support, which are the source of these deficits.

Although some participants talked about the root causes, expressing such concerns as poverty, parents, and socialization as root causes, many participants had turned their attention and comments toward ways to address the issue.

- Our community greatly needs social and cultural diversity.
- Education is not emphasized at the same level as sports and entertainment.
- Positive role models and mentors are needed.
- A systemic holistic approach is needed to take into account funding, intervention, outcomes and objectives.
- A clearinghouse/consortium needs to be put into action.

Flip Chart Notes

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Ground Rules

1. Be respectful
2. Listen
3. Adhere To The Time Limit
4. Be Open-Minded
5. Allow speaker to finish their thought
6. Be recognize be speaking
7. Stay focused on the topic
8. No personal attack
9. Do not dominate

How Does the problem affect Bay County?

1. Negatively affects the quality of the workforce
2. Negatively impact our ability to attract new businesses
3. Negatively impact life chances of the individual
4. Negatively promotes the effects of hopelessness
5. Further widens the gap between the lower and upper class
6. Negatively limits the ability to get affordable housing

Approach 1: Raising expectation and demanding accountability.

01. Students can and will respond to high expectation.
02. Parents need to be knowledge of course requirements.
03. Connect with students at their level
04. Give students equal opportunity to learn.
05. Parent accountability is essewntial and critical (support).
06. Diversify expectations o reach more students.
07. Be sensitive to the message given to students who fails the

FCAT.

08. Limitations of time and funds.
09. Unfair pressure placed on teachers and students to pass the

FCAT.

10. Get back to the basics.
11. Face the fact that there is a problem with a lack of family

support.

12. Effects of past history and socialization.
13. Fear associated with the black male.

Approach 2: Closing the spending gap.

01. Lack of participation in the outreach programs.
02. Societal accountability in the form of, community

involvement,

social programs, and poor return on past funding

investments.

- student
03. Learning environment
 04. No one right answer.
 05. Personal financial responsibility (i.e. taxes)
 06. Partnerships
 07. Additional funds for parents and teachers to educate the
 08. Homework gap
 09. Vouchers draining public schools funds.
 10. FCAT was design to privatize public schools
 11. Skewing the numbers to receive additional funding

Approach 3: Dealing with the root causes

- economic status)
- and entertainment
- intervention,
01. Social and cultural diversity
 02. Economic enhancement
 03. Low wages
 04. Demographic shift/ segregating certain schools (socio-
 5. Family pride/self-esteem
 06. Education is not emphasized at the same level as sports
 07. Pairing the best teachers with the most needy students
 08. Popsitive role models and mentors
 09. A systemic holistic approach that takes in account funding, outcomes and objectives
 10. Healthy decision making as it relates to drugs and crimes.
 11. Clearinghouse/consortium needs to be put into action

Feedback on the forum format

01. It was open, candid, and diverse
02. What do we do now?
03. Students learn differently (modality)
04. Solicit the help of retired teachers to volunteer