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Study is over; School Board ready for action

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It is time for the Duval County school system to stop talking and start acting on recommendations for closing the achievement gap, School Board members agreed Tuesday.

Discussing the results of the latest study of the school system, board members said the ideas weren't fresh but the conclusion adds credibility and is fueling a new sense of urgency to take action.

"This is the first time a study directed by the superintendent has been honest," board member Kris Barnes said. "We're ready to act on it."

The study, free of charge through a grant from a national educational organization, was conducted by the Boston-based Community Training and Assistance Center from January to March. It included interviews with 322 educators and community leaders, written surveys of more than 18,000 students, teachers and parents, and analysis of 116 documents and reports.

During Tuesday's board meeting, center representatives outlined seven recommendations to help the county meet its larger goal of closing the achievement gap by 2010.

Reflecting a national trend, Duval County students from higher-income families perform better on standardized tests than their low-income peers and white and Asian students score higher than blacks and Hispanics.

Superintendent Joseph Wise said he was still digesting the recommendations but generally supports them though he has not decided the school system's first priorities.

The seven recommendations are built around themes such as "Leave No Parent Behind," a reference to the need to increase parental involvement and communication.

Study overviews

The Community Training and Assistance Center, a Boston-based firm, conducted a study from January through March into the ability of Duval County public schools to close the achievement gap by 2010.

What they did

Interviewed 322 people, received 18,561 written responses from students, teachers and parents and analyzed 116 documents and reports. CTAC found that the educational issues are related to overall issues in Jacksonville. They believe Duval County is at a crossroads and eliminating the achievement gap is the call to action for the entire community.

Recommendations

- Mobilize the community by allowing the public to have greater input in school district decision-making.
- Improve parental involvement at the school and district level.
- Instead of simply curing the low student performance at each school, study the core causes and come up with plans tailored to each school.
- Act on high priority needs in the district, including the disparity in teacher quality at schools, improving teacher compensation and improvement of the middle and high school curriculum.
- Reshape professional development by re-evaluating the mission of the Schultz Center and providing customized teacher training
- Improve the district's ability to communicate effectively, study data and build its national prominence.

- Continue third-party studies of the district and use the recommendations to make changes to initiatives as needed.

Several sub-themes are also listed. They include "eliminate the teaching gap," which would deploy more experienced and qualified teachers in the challenged schools.

"This information is not new," board member Betty Burney said of the study results. "It's what are we going to do with it."

Wise said it could cost an estimated \$16 million over the next four years to fully implement the training, outreach and initiatives needed to eliminate the achievement gap. Toward that end, the district will immediately began tapping local businesses and philanthropic organizations to raise the needed funds. Though the study was free, the school system would have to pay the organization for additional services in the future.

In the coming months, once he has a development director in place to spearhead fundraising, Wise wants the district to apply for grants from national organizations.

Ruby George, executive vice president of Duval Teachers United, said the union is ready to work with the school system to address the recommendations, especially those that relate to professional development and teacher compensation. However, she hopes teachers will have a say in the direction the county takes.

"I think most of the recommendations are doable, it's the implementation that causes me some heartburn," she said Tuesday.

The NAACP Education Committee participated in the study, and chairwoman Olivia Gay-Davis attended the meeting. She said she was excited about the recommendation to improve community and parent involvement. She agreed with the study's findings that African-American parents feel disenfranchised and undervalued by the school system.

"Many black parents do not feel that the schools are providing the children the education that is needed and they have no input in the schools whatsoever," she said.

The Community Training and Assistance Center will discuss the study results with a group of about 300 educators, legislators and community leaders Thursday evening. There are also plans to link the study to the school district Web site to invite more public review of the recommendations.