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Some question schools' race relations, policies

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Recent events and a developing legal battle have left some questioning the standards in place throughout the Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools system.

Chapel Hill mother Susan Headen's faith in the system was shaken by an incident involving her son that occurred this summer.

Two months after the incident, an assistant principal at Chapel Hill High School has been removed from her position – although she is still an employee in the district, an official confirmed.



But some members of the community said that action does not address what they see as deep-rooted disparities within the school system.

Headen, who is African-American, arrived at school July 18 at 12:30 p.m. to pick up her son from summer school. But her son never came out.

At 12:50 p.m., she was told that he had been taken to UNC Hospitals.

He had passed out from alcohol poisoning. He had apparently been drinking alcohol from a water bottle another student placed on his desk.

The school had made one attempt to contact Headen, via a message left at home with her 14-year-old son.

Headen said she rushed to the hospital to discover her son had been admitted as a John Doe. No one from the school had ridden with him, and no incident report had been filed.

Headen said she had to leave her son, still unconscious in intensive care, while she returned to the school to get the necessary paperwork.

Then came the waiting. Headen said she was scared and didn't know whether her son would have brain damage.

He was discharged July 20 around 6:30 p.m. and eventually made a full recovery. But Headen is upset about the way the situation was handled.

She blames Julie Hennis, the assistant principal who was in charge that day.

"I just feel like my son wasn't treated right, and I wasn't treated right," she said.

Headen arranged a meeting with the school the next Tuesday, but she said she felt like school officials weren't giving serious consideration to her concerns.

"No one would take the blame," she said. "No one would say, 'I'm sorry; I should have rode with your child.'"

School officials told Headen that there was no emergency policy in place during the summer.

"It's heartbreaking, what they told me," she said.

Members of the faith community rallied around Headen, writing a letter to the Chapel Hill-Carrboro Board of Education to call for Hennis' removal.

Although Hennis was reassigned, Headen has been told she will be appealing the decision.

An email and a voicemail left for Hennis were not returned by press time.

Headen, who has moved her children to Phoenix Academy and Carrboro High School, said she still doesn't feel safe sending her children to school in a system where some say the problems run deeper than one isolated incident.

The Rev. Maria Palmer from Binkley Baptist Church is one of Headen's supporters. She has been involved in the school system for more than 20 years, advocating for both her children, who are Hispanic, and other children from her various congregations.

She said that she has seen unfair treatment throughout her time in Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools.

"The Chapel Hill-Carrboro school system has a history of devaluing certain children, and it has to stop. And it starts with the administration of each school," she said. "This is egregious in that the safety of a child, the life of a child, was compromised."

Palmer said she has seen parents who are unable to communicate with the school to check on their children's progress because of a language barrier.

She said that when minority parents go into the school system, they constantly have to demand respect.

"We have friends that home schooled their kids because they got so sick of it," she said.

Although Palmer does acknowledge that there are programs in place for minority students, such as the Blue Ribbon Mentor-Advocate program, she fears that such programs allow problems within the school system to be perpetuated.

She pointed out that the Blue Ribbon Mentor-Advocate program draws volunteers from outside the community to act as advocates for minority students.

"The school system should be advocating for them," she said, adding that the system only invests in the achievement of its top performers.

Board of Education chairwoman Jamezetta Bedford said that the board is working to change the culture in schools and bridge achievement gaps as part of an ongoing project.



"We've been working on equity for well over a decade," she said. "We recognize there's a problem, and we're working to help change that."

Bedford said that in discussing solutions, the board considers not only minority students or economically disadvantaged students, but other groups as well, such as gay and lesbian students.

Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools also recently hired a new director of equity leadership, Sheldon Lanier.

"The district wants to make sure that all students and their families feel welcome at school," Bedford said.

Minister Robert Campbell, president of the Chapel Hill-Carrboro NAACP, also signed the letter calling for Hennis' removal. But to him, the problem is more widespread than racial disparity.

"This has to do with policy that needs to be implemented," he said, pointing to Atlas Fraley, a Chapel Hill High School football player who died in 2008 after becoming dehydrated during a scrimmage. "What is the policy? What is the protocol?"

He said that the problem in Headen's case isn't limited to one race.

But Palmer is troubled by what she's seen.

"This may not be an issue of race or socio-economic status, but it happens so often to minority children ... no kid deserves to be treated like that," she said. "I cannot imagine them sending a white kid to the hospital with the same circumstances. If it were a white parent, several people would have already been fired."

Headen also wonders what role race played in the treatment of her son.

"I want to know, if I was a white woman who made \$70,000 to \$80,000 a year, what would they be doing for me?" she said.

Some changes have been made since Headen's nightmare began.

During a meeting with Superintendent Tom Forcella, Headen was informed of changes to emergency procedures that would be implemented system-wide.

Jeff Reilly, coordinator of student services, said that changes have been made to existing procedures to make them clearer. He declined to share specifics about the procedures. Despite these changes, Headen said that her experience should serve as a warning to all parents.

"I want to get it out there to tell people you've got to be concerned about your child," she said. "I think every parent should look at this and think it could've been their child."

