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FEATURED

Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools chided for racial achievement gap 'crisis'

Katie Jansen Oct 29, 2015



Wanda Hunter (foreground left), co-chairwoman of the Campaign for Racial Equity in Our Schools, speaks about inequities district Wednesday as other stakeholders stand behind her. (The Herald-Sun/Katie Jansen)

CHAPEL HILL — Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools are in a “crisis situation,” some community members allege in the aftermath of a recently released report that shows racial inequities in schools and a gap in achievement between minority and white students.

The report, compiled from school system data, shows that 85 percent of eighth-grade African-American males did not pass the end-of-grade reading test during the 2012-13 school year.

"The 15 percent you see left here are the only ones who went on to high school with the necessary tools to be successful," said Wanda Hunter, co-chairwoman of the Campaign for Racial Equity in Our Schools. "These other 85 percent we let go, and we have to wonder where they went. What happens to students we fail to educate?"



Stephanie Perry, co-chairwoman of the campaign, said previous conversations with the district have been "empathetic in tone, but cautionary and slow in action." She called for a meeting with the CHCCS Superintendent Tom Forcella and the Board of Education to discuss the report.

The report is new, but the achievement gap isn't.

Elizabeth Carter, who served on the CHCCS Board of Education for 13 years, said the gap between white and minority students has existed nearly 50 years, since the schools were integrated in 1966.

The system's past efforts to help minority students haven't solved the problem, said the Rev. Robert Campbell, president of the Chapel Hill-Carrboro chapter of the NAACP.

Campbell said he remembers when the Blue Ribbon Task Force began to work with African-American students around 1999.

"We don't want another 16 years and we are back at the podium talking about inequity in education," he said.

Forcella said the low percentage of students who passed the 2012-13 test could be partially attributed to a new test that rolled out that year after a switch to the common core curriculum. The new test resulted in lower scores across the board, he said.

Forcella added that the district has made great strides in the past two years; the district is in the second year of its five-year long range plan that will implement changes in the system.

Scores from 2014-15 showed 43.9 percent of African-American students — both male and female — passed the eighth-grade end-of-grade reading test. Forcella said that although the statistic still isn't where the district wants it to be, it shows improvement.

But the gap is apparent in more than test scores, said members of the campaign Wednesday. Current and former minority students spoke of being discouraged from taking honors and Advanced Placement courses, and retired teacher Judy Jones said teachers are "distressed that our high schools have become re-segregated."

"When you walk into classrooms, you can identify the level based on the ethnic percentages represented," she said. "Standard classes have an overabundance of students of color, while honors and AP classes will often only have one student of color, if that."

Forcella said a program that is part of the long-range plan called Equal Opportunity Schools seeks to remedy this imbalance by seeking out minority students, enrolling them in more rigorous courses and providing support throughout the courses.

Some members of the campaign criticized the district for creating disconnected programs that don't tackle the overall problem.

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But Forcella said the district is beginning to see success and that long-term change will take patience.

Starting next year, the district will be implementing a new incentive plan for teachers called Project Advance. In the past, teachers have received local monetary supplements as they gained more years of experience.

Through Project Advance, teachers will be rewarded based on how they're growing as teachers. They must demonstrate how they're reaching every student in order to advance professionally.

"This is a culture-changing initiative," Forcella said, explaining that teachers can advance more quickly but that the process will be more rigorous.

He said he agreed with many of the concerns presented by the campaign and said both the district and the Campaign want the same outcomes.

Forcella said that although scheduling a meeting with the members of the campaign will be up to the Board of Education, both he and the board are listening.

"We're more than willing to consider their report as part of the conversation," he said.



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