

From the Ground Up

Our voices
working together
for change
in North Carolina's
Education World

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EDUCATION & LAW
PROJECT

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Welcome!

Welcome to the NC Education and Law Project's newsletter, *From the Ground Up*. We hope this newsletter will spur new dialogue about public education within North Carolina's grassroots community! In this inaugural edition, we've decided to focus on community involvement in education.

Traditionally, there is an assumption that parents are the only parties with a vested interest in public education. For example, the No Child Left Behind legislation requires a parent involvement component. The Parent/Teacher Association [PTA] is another traditional venue for parent involvement. Parents, logically, should be included as advocates in their child's education.

However, being an advocate for the public school system isn't relegated to parents alone. Advocates can be grandparents, bankers, real estate agents, retirees or just regular folks – anyone who believes in the importance of providing quality public education for all children. We believe it is imperative that public education officials recognize the importance of involving these other community members in the dialogue about public education.

It is vitally important that these same community members voice their opinions to the wider public. More often than not, education issues are discussed and resolved in an arena of policymakers and politicians. In other words, only certain voices contribute to the decision-making process. The grassroots perspective is equally

important, if not more so, for it is the *whole* community that feels the repercussions of budget cuts, high suspension/expulsion rates, and increases in the dropout rate. Therefore it is the *whole* community that should contribute to the public education debate, not just parents and policymakers.

We hope this newsletter will be the platform for bringing needed community insight into the public education debate in NC. To all local organizations, individuals and grassroots groups: join us in becoming a force for education reform across North Carolina!

If you are interested in contributing to future publications, please contact Rebeca at rebeca@ncjustice.org or (919)856-2154.

Down on Jones Street

By Rebeca Gomez Palacio

The general assumption is that when the General Assembly is not in session, all policymaking stops. Even though the Legislature is not technically in session, legislators still meet periodically. In fact, they meet more frequently than the public realizes. Several committees meet during the downtimes with the express purpose of reviewing issues that will resurface in later sessions or need further scrutiny before the following session officially starts.

One of the committees charged with reviewing public education issues during these downtimes is the Joint Education Oversight Committee. This committee consists of all types of legislators: Democrats, Republicans, Senators and

Representatives. It is essentially a representative cross-section of the General Assembly as a whole. As such, issues regarding education as a whole are presented to gauge responses to issues prior to the following session. This education committee is like all the other Interim Committees in that they focus largely on the big picture and debate specifics among each other.

Recently, the Orange High School Woodworking/Furniture vocational education class presented their work to this Committee. Several students explained to the legislators why these types of classes are so important, particularly in reaction to budget cuts the previous year. The New Schools Project, sponsored by the Governor's Office and the Gates Foundation, also testified about this new program and its potential impact on NC's public education system and budget. Lynn Cornett from the Southern Regional Education Board offered her interpretation about "Questions Policymakers should Ask" regarding North Carolina's teacher shortage. All of these presentations feed into legislation and budget decisions for the next legislative cycle and consequently play an important role in the process.

The two students who presented from Orange High School testified to their achievements in the furniture-making class and about their amazing teacher. Embedded in their presentations were concerns about teacher pay, school funding for vocation education classes, and the stereotype that all vocational education classes are superfluous. The impact of their presentations was felt because legislators all responded enthusiastically.

So you ask, "How is the Joint Education Oversight Committee" relevant to my education work on the grassroots level? It is important, largely because you can get an insider's peak into the legislator's world before session starts. It is a great time to advocate for your cause, be it increased funding for low-wealth schools or improving teacher quality. While the Committee tends to address issues on a broad, categorical level, issues that filter down to you as community members are equally important and need to be voiced. Your input can help inform your elected officials as they weigh in on the larger political picture – even during Legislative downtimes.

Here is the link to the members of the Education Oversight Committee:
http://www.ncga.state.nc.us/gascrpts/committee_lists/interimcommittees.pl?nBoardID=110
 and to the Legislature's main webpage:
<http://www.ncga.state.nc.us/homePage.pl> for the Current Schedule.

National Notables

Suspensions and Expulsions

The Department of Public Instruction released its Annual Study of Suspensions and Expulsions: 2002-2003 report. On the whole, suspensions and expulsions increased. Here are some quick facts stated in the report: 280, 951 students were short-term expelled. This translates into over one millions school days lost in one school year. Another alarming fact is that while school enrollments increased upwards of 5 percent, long-term suspensions have increased 16-fold. In other words, one out of every nine students was suspended at least once in 2002-2003 for some rule or policy infraction. For more information, read March 4, 2004 News and Observer article at link: <http://www.newsandobserver.com/education/story/3388515p-3013815c.html>

The actual report can be viewed at the following address: http://www.ncpublicschools.org/SBE_meetings/0403/0403_SS01.pdf

Changes to the NCLB Law: Easing Teacher Requirements

On March 15, the Federal Department of Education released its new regulatory changes regarding qualified teachers. Now the requirements of what defines a qualified teacher are relaxed. See <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/03/16/education/16CHIL.html> for more details.

Summer School Called Potent

A new study by Brigham Young University suggests that summer school has lasting effects for younger elementary students. The study said struggling 3rd graders who went to class in June and July continued to improve academically for several years after attending summer school. The results also showed that the students who attended summer school had an advantage over other students. See March 22, 2004 Education Week article at www.edweek.org

Accurate Count of Dropouts Sought

A prominent researcher on civil rights in education will call for the U.S. Department of Education to establish a uniform and honest reporting system of high school graduation rates during a conference in Chicago. Across the nation, researchers and

community groups have shown that school districts are reporting misleading statistics that can hide the gravity of the dropout problem, especially among African-American and Latino youths. One of the more familiar research groups is the Harvard University Civil Rights Project. Visit this website for the report: www.civilrightsproject.harvard.edu/

[Disabled Alaska Students Sue Over Exam](#)

Disabled children and their parents filed a federal class-action lawsuit against the Alaska Board of Education, the latest in a string of challenges to laws of various states requiring students to pass an exit exam to earn a high school diploma. See New York Times article dated March 17, 2004 for more information.

[Survey Briefs From the 2002 National Survey of Latinos](#)

In 2002 the Pew Hispanic Center and the Kaiser Family Foundation conducted a national survey of Latinos, which explored the attitudes and experiences of the Hispanic population in the United States on topics such as identity, assimilation, discrimination, and health care. Five new survey briefs are now available that further examine the findings from the 2002 survey: **LATINOS IN CALIFORNIA, TEXAS, NEW YORK, FLORIDA, AND NEW JERSEY, GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES, HEALTH CARE EXPERIENCES, BILINGUALISM, ASSIMILATION AND LANGUAGE.** These survey briefs as well as the 2002 National Survey of Latinos can be found at <http://www.kff.org/kaiserpolls/pomr031704pkg.cfm> or <http://www.pewhispanic.org>.

[New Report Examines K-12 Accountability Systems in 30 States](#)

A new report co-published by the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and AccountabilityWorks looks at six elements of K-12 accountability systems in 30 different states (as of January 2003). *Grading the Systems: The Guide to State Standards, Tests, and Accountability Policies* includes data from the following Southern states: Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, North Carolina, Virginia and West Virginia. Each state is rated on standards, test content, alignment of tests to standards, test rigor, testing trustworthiness and openness, and

accountability policies. The major conclusion was that few states have successfully tied their standards, tests, and accountability policies into a comprehensive and rigorous system. Massachusetts, Virginia, and Pennsylvania received solid scores for at least three of the six elements. The study is available on the web at <http://www.edexcellence.net/foundation/publication/publication.cfm?id=328>

On the Road to Quality Education — TRAVELS WITH ANGELLA

By Angella Dunston

The best part of my job as a parent advocate with the NC Education and Law Project is the opportunities that I get to spend time in many communities throughout North Carolina talking with parents and community leaders about quality education. For the past few months, I have had the pleasure of traveling to Halifax, Warren, Wake and Vance counties talking with community leaders about “What is a quality education?” and “How do we ensure that all children obtain this right?” The conversations have been lively, enlightening and, at times, heated. But each and every person who has taken part has come with the goal of working to ensure that schools in their individual communities as well as the state are the best that they can be for all children. Individuals in attendance have expressed genuine concern about high suspension and expulsion rates, overrepresentation of students in special needs classes, high dropout rates among minority students and numerous other education issues including discipline, teacher quality and the achievement gap. These conversations have been part of a series of workshops conducted by Daniella Cook, Education Fellow with the NC Child Advocacy Institute, and myself in partnership with the Area Mental Health Association of Halifax County. Students, parents and community leaders in the surrounding areas have attended the workshops, which were held at Halifax Community College in Weldon, NC. The workshops have provided participants with knowledge regarding the ins and outs of the education system in NC. The

series, entitled 'Education 101-Leave No Education Advocate Behind' provides parents and advocates with the skills and knowledge needed to understand the basics of North Carolina's education system. This four-part series is an on-the-road version of the Project's Education Leadership Institute, a thirty-hour training program that provides participants with a more in-depth, hands-on learning experience in order to fully understand education on a national and state level. Give us a call and we could be coming to your neck of the woods.

For more details about the series as well as for more information about the Education Leadership Institute contact Angella at (919) 856-2567 or by e-mail at angella@ncjustice.org.

■ Watauga County Has New Partnership

By Laura Antunes Cooper, Gloria Rubio, Faith Wright, Board members of High Country Amigos of Watauga County

It's not easy to help Latino parents new to Watauga County become more involved in the public school system, especially for those who face language barriers and an unfamiliar school culture. In Boone particularly, the number of Hispanic students has grown rapidly within the last three years. It is because of this increased growth and interest on the part of the school system that a partnership has grown. This is a promising beginning to an important relationship. This partnership revolves around the High Country Amigos, a local community advocacy group, Watauga County school officials, and local Latino parents.

Upcoming Events of Note

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|----------------------|--|
| March 29-31, 2004 | RAISING ACHIEVEMENT AND CLOSING THE GAPS VIII CONFERENCE
Visit http://www.ncpublicschools.org/schoolimprovement/closingthegap/conference/ for more information. |
| April 17, 2004 | BROWN V BOARD - This free symposium, featuring speakers Julius Chambers, John Hope Franklin, and Elaine Jones is a one-of-a-kind opportunity to participate in a discussion across the generations about Brown's ultimate significance and its meaning now and for the future. It will be held at Hillside High School, 3727 Fayetteville Street, in Durham. Register for free at www.pubpol.duke.edu/centers/brownvboard |
| April 29-30, 2004 | The North Carolina Center for After School Programs will sponsors its own conference "SYNERGY: NORTH CAROLINA AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS TOGETHER IN GREENSBORO. For more information, visit http://www.nccapconference.com or call 919/781/6833 extension 122. |
| April 30-May 1, 2004 | IDEA SYMPOSIUM PROGRAM'S CONFERENCE ON "REAUTHORIZATION AND REFORM: A CONFERENCE ABOUT THE EDUCATION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES." The conference will be held at the Friday Center, Chapel Hill. For more information, contact Brenda Spaanboek at 919/266-9204 or snfinfo@mindspring.org . Registration deadline is April 15. |

Guide to NC Education LEGISLATIVE Calendar

April 1-2, 2004
8:30 am, 7th Floor, Education Building
State Board of Education Meeting
Visit www.ncpublicschools.org for more information.

April 27, 28, 2004
9am, 544 Legislative Office Building [LOB]
Joint Education Oversight Committee
Visit www.ncleg.org for more information.

May 10, 2004
Short-session officially begins
General Assembly
See www.ncleg.org for more information.

This effort got off to a bumpy start. School staff set up an initial meeting for Hispanic parents to discuss issues in Watauga's high school. Six school representatives came to the meeting; only two Hispanic parents participated. Several High Country Amigos members attended the event, as it was a first in the area. Joining with the parents, the Amigos found the school staff open, even eager, to explore other ways to involve more Hispanic parents.

The Amigos offered some simple suggestions to the school officials, such as adding Spanish to the "Snow Line" radio notices regarding school closings. Turns out, the Amigo volunteers ended up translating the official "Snow Days" parent brochure as well as preparing Spanish scripts for the "Snow Line." Having established a quasi-partnership at this point, they suggested to the school officials other approaches for generating interest among the Latino community for upcoming parent gatherings.

Here are a few of their suggestions for organizing with Latino parents:

1. **Keep the meeting's topic simple!** We scrapped the "High School Planning" program, claiming it sounded too technical. We suggested the substitute "Understanding Your Child's School" instead.
2. **Focus!** Start out on issues that parents care about most. It is OK to discuss what most of us might take for granted, such as lunch menus or school bus decorum, before you get to the meaty stuff! It is important with this community to provide time in every meeting for parents to ask about their concerns, since so much of it is new to them.
3. **Choose a familiar location, preferably one Latino parents already use.** We suggested a local church that boasts the largest Spanish-speaking congregation, and one that includes many young families. We made sure the schools advertised the meeting as open to all. The meeting was scheduled to follow the Sunday evening worship service. What was most impressive is that the teachers and administrators all agreed.
4. **Send out invitation letters from all the co-sponsors.** We created letters sent out jointly by Amigos and the schools. Two Latino parents included their names along with the Associate Superintendent, and offered their home telephone numbers in case any Latino parents had questions.
5. **Set up a "host" committee to meet and greet participants.** Eight Latino parents met participants, handled greetings, nametags and

refreshments. Parents included in the planning process will invite others they know and give 'expert feedback' afterwards to others. This kind of 'word of mouth' gives credibility to the process and builds momentum.

The Amigos followed these guidelines when creating the initial agenda for the next meeting. There is a series of issues they plan to cover. First, the schools will provide a list of the helpful staff members in each school. Each parent will receive a handout with names and numbers for the following administrators: Principal, Assistant Principal, Guidance Counselor, School Secretary, and all the ESL (English as a Second Language) teachers in each school. Following that introduction, a workshop on 'The "English as a Second Language" Program; How Parents Can Help ESL Students Succeed in Schools' will be presented. After a period for informal Q & A's, we will ask for suggestions for topics for future meeting. The school staff promised to provide 'experts' on the topics parents identify as important for subsequent meetings.

The High County Amigos claim, "It is a new beginning for us as Latino community members as it is for the school system. Watauga County has changed for the better in the last 3 years. And it is with these simple steps that change can happen. We owe our communities that much."

For more information about High County Amigos or this project, contact Faith Wright at fwright362@boone.net.

■ Brunswick Education Transition Center Opens Its Doors to the Public

Interview with Silas Acosta. By Rebeca Gomez Palacio

This project was the seeded within the mind and experience of one Silas Acosta, the current ESL/ELL migrant education coordinator for Brunswick County Public School system (BCPS). When BCPS offered him a chance to pursue his dream, he took himself, his idea, and his drive with him when he took the job. His idea was to provide a transitional center for LEP (Limited English Proficiency) children and adults where they can learn English and American cultural survival skills in order to learn their academics

and compete in school and the workplace.

The promise of the model is to move an LEP student from an English proficiency level of Novice Low designation to Intermediate High in 16 weeks. To do this, the student spends half a day in the transitional center and the rest in the regular classroom. This program is considered neither a charter school nor a substitute school, but rather a supplement to help integrate the LEP student into the mainstream.

His philosophy stems from his own experience in the classroom: “How is a student supposed to learn in an environment where the student doesn’t know English and the teacher only speaks English? There has to be a way to help these students so that they keep pace with their academics and learn English.” Hence, the idea of a transitional center was born. The Brunswick Education Transition Center’s main priorities are to provide a place where students can learn both English and academics; families are welcomed and given opportunities to become involved in their children’s education; and resources are provided in both spoken and written language of the parent and students.

Silas made his way to Mexico as part of a Mexican-sponsored North Carolinian delegation to examine the policies and methodology of CONVyT/inea, a Mexican education model that teaches simultaneous language instruction and academics in Spanish. Recognizing the potential for this model in the US, he introduced the idea to the Brunswick County Public Schools system where it developed support and momentum for all English-Language learners, not only Spanish speakers.

Likewise, the Brunswick County Community College (CC) was struggling to address the needs of the ESL community within their own curriculum, specifically for adults. The CC was looking for other ways to effectively support this population, both with vocational and academic [GED] skills sets. The Community College extended the reach of this model to include adult education and skills training in a way that captures not only the students, but the parents of student and adult students as well.

The Brunswick county school system and the Brunswick Community College joined with the Mexican Government to form this unique partnership. This merging of interests and resources provides both parents and student alike the opportunity to pursue their education with assistance from a popular ESL model that proved efficient and effective. Students of all ages will have the opportunity to supplement their efforts at education, and will be able to pursue legal avenues to attain it.

For Silas, and the others now involved, this is a dream come true. “I learned that the goal here was education, the language you use, and how to be creative with your thinking. With all of that comes success.” It is true. Other states are already considering adopting the model for themselves.

On March 19, the public was invited to the opening of the Brunswick Educational Transition Center at Brunswick Community College’s Odell Williamson Auditorium, 50 College Road N.E., Supply, at 2 p.m. A ribbon cutting and reception followed at the Center with Mexican government officials and NC Community College and Public School officials attending. The Center is located at 104 Ocean Highway E. (U.S. 17).

For more information in English or Spanish, call Fernando Trulin at (910) 754-2314 or Silas Acosta at (910)754-2314.

■ Examining the Diploma Pathways: Increased opportunities or a dream deferred?

By Sheria Reid

One of the luxuries of youth is the belief that your opportunities are limitless. Unfortunately, North Carolina’s education leadership has implemented policy that will result in limitations being imposed on many of the state’s children’s post-high-school opportunities.

In 1999, the State Board of Education approved implementation of the multiple graduation courses of study, also known as the Diploma Pathways. With little fanfare, the diploma pathways became effective for ninth graders entering high school for the first time in 2000-01.

The Pathways system was created to provide the option of in-school job training to students who say they don’t plan on going to college. Students have three Diploma Pathways to choose from when they enter high school: Career Prep, which will prepare students for the workforce immediately after high school; College Tech Prep, designed to help the student who plans to enter a two-year college after graduation; and College/University Prep, for students who want to continue their education at a four-year college or university. There is a fourth pathway, the Occupational Course of Study that is limited to

certain students with disabilities who have IEPs (individualized education plans).

In the spring of their eighth grade year, students across North Carolina get to select one of the three pathways: Career Prep, College Tech Prep, and College/ University Prep. According to State Board of Education policy, school systems are to hold meetings and explain to parents that there are multiple graduation pathways, so that parents may make informed choices as to the appropriate pathway for their child. The reality is that many parents have not received adequate information about what may be one of the most important educational decisions that their child may make.

All of the diploma pathways are not equal. While all students are not college bound after graduation from high school, many parents assume that a student who has received good grades and a high school diploma has the option to go to college. That may not be true for students who select two of the offered pathways.

The vocational pathways, Career Prep and College Tech Prep, do not require that the student take any courses in a foreign language. The College/ University Prep pathway requires two units of the same foreign language for graduation.

A fourth math credit became part of the requirements for the College/ University Prep track for incoming freshmen as of the 2002-2003 school year. The Career Prep and College Tech Prep will continue to require only three math credits.

Why are these differences significant? There are sixteen schools that make up the UNC system schools. Among the UNC system schools are the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, North Carolina Central University, NC State and Winston-Salem State, to name a few. Two credits in a foreign language and four math credits are part of the requirements for admission to any of the UNC system schools for the class of 2006, the high school freshman class of 2002-03. Only students who follow the College/University pathway will have the math and foreign language credits necessary for admission to one of the UNC system schools. The math and foreign language requirements are not exclusive to UNC system schools; many other colleges and universities across the country have similar requirements.

Students are not restricted to remaining in the pathway that they select as rising ninth graders, but it may be difficult to get all the requirements for College/ University Prep if a student changes his mind in his sophomore or junior year. It will be difficult if not impossible to squeeze in the four

courses to fulfill the math requirements if the student does not take the appropriate math course beginning in ninth grade.

The bottom line is that a student who chooses the Career Prep or College Tech Prep pathway may receive high grades, graduate on time, receive a high school diploma, and be unable to be admitted to college. Isn't such a significant decision far too important to be made by an eighth grader without parental approval?

For detailed information about the diploma pathways course requirements, please go to:
www.ncpublicschools.org/student_promotion/gradreq.html

Perspectives

By Steve Johnston

Hi. I'm just back from a meeting designed to bring everybody together around issues about children. It was a great session. People were pumped. But parts of the puzzle were missing:

- There were no children at the table.
- In a county where most school kids are nonwhite, the crowd was 89 percent white.
- There were few businesses and elected leaders, the very folks that most places depend on to set the public agenda and make it happen.
- The clothes inside, and the cars parked outside, shouted that the system works for the people who were at the table. But what about those who weren't there and the thousands of people that the system is failing?

In my town, and perhaps in yours, disengagement is spreading like kudzu. Disengagement is a five-dollar word for caring first, second, and maybe even third about the Big I. Some people just say this is a "me and mine" era. In this era, helping other people's kids is somebody else's business.

You say you think I'm writing about your town? OK, say I am. Let's move on to solutions. How do you, for example, rebuild - or build for the first time - a link between house and schoolhouse so teachers don't feel alone, so parents don't feel suspicious and unwelcome, so children WILL feel loved and nurtured?

■ **Reach out:** The onus is on both sides to cross the divide. Teachers are glad I'll never be a superintendent, because I'd have every teacher sit at the kitchen table of every one of their students before school begins.

But it's not just up to teachers. Parents need to beckon teachers into their homes. Superintendents need to pay teachers for many hours each summer to make it happen the first time, and then to continue to make it happen throughout the school year, particularly for children who have lost their way.

■ **Invite in:** The caller said she was turned away four times when she offered to volunteer at school. Another said she was allowed to help in the office, but was barred from the classroom where children needed to be read to. If you face these issues, separate out the individual problems from the systemic ones: If the problem is a single teacher lacking self-confidence, shovel on the love. If the problem is that parents are locked out by written or unwritten policy, get organized and get fired up.

■ **Inform all:** People won't tax themselves for schools unless they understand the need. Put another way, you and I must make the case for public support so forcefully that individual taxpayers will absolutely demand that elected representatives place every child in an excellent learning environment. I can't imagine taxpayers continuing to foot the bill unless they have a lot more information.

Some of that information is so-called good news. But most of it, let's be frank, is not particularly upbeat news. It's about the high costs of instructing children whose first language is not English. It's about reminding older adults that children really do need access to computers and expensive lab equipment if they're to be prepared for life beyond the textile mill - or, rather, the pile of bricks that once was, but no longer is, a textile mill.

There are a variety of ways to get the information delivered. If you need advice on delivery schemes, call the Justice Center. But the harder part is mustering the will to gather the information. Don't be deterred. And don't leave the task to the TV station.

...Oops, sorry, I was back thinking about that meeting designed to bring everybody together around issues about children.

We need to meet at school. We need to get messy by dealing with a far broader range of issues - discrimination, reparations, white flight, academic tracking, testing bias, gangs, violence, family instability, child abandonment - indeed, the

soullessness of the lives we as adults seem to choose.

Let's talk. And then let's do something about it. Our children are counting on us to do so.

Steve Johnston in Charlotte is executive director of The Swann Fellowship, which publishes Educate!, a community journal on public education. To subscribe free, go to www.educateclt.org.

North Carolina Education and Law Project

The Education and Law Project is one of several projects that make up the North Carolina Justice and Community Development Center. The overall mission of the Justice Center is to advocate for changes in law and governmental practice and policy that will serve to move low-wealth individuals from poverty to self-sufficiency. The Education and Law Project focuses on the significant role that a quality education plays in providing an avenue out of poverty. The Project uses a variety of methods including political advocacy, litigation and parent and community education to further its mission of ensuring that all children have equal access to a quality education.