Whitfield County

Monthly Key Accomplishments – August 2011

Dalton-Whitfield K-12 Education Issue Work Group Concludes Capacity-Building Meetings; Seeks Public Input on School Transformation

“We have a smart child that might benefit from going to another school district, but we haven’t pulled our child out of the school he is currently in because we are troubled by inequality. . . . A question we constantly face is how we get good, equal experiences for all kids --- regardless of what district they live in.”

“My non-ADHD/ADD son has lots of energy and does not sit still. His teacher lets him stand at his desk during class, get his hands dirty – and it works to keep him engaged. I guess the question is: how do we meet every child’s needs?”

“I use DVR because I don’t want to watch commercials. I don’t read the newspapers because I don’t want to wade through information that I am not interested in. With so much information out there, I want all of my content personalized. If that is the way I am, then think about how much further a 13-year-old is down that spectrum. We have to find new ways to communicate and to teach/learn.”

“My child has changed schools many times and is now at Morris Innovative High School. The technology is really helping her. Everything is online except for some classroom instruction on EOCT and graduation test preparation. My child watches lectures online and it is really benefiting her. She’s not a regular classroom learner.”

“In Whitfield County there is a 651 to 1 student to guidance counselor ratio. We’ve got to find another way to reach students with career messaging. Can we use social media?”

"For years, we talked about reforming our education system, but now we’re talking about transforming it --- starting from the ground floor and building it back up.”

Over the past 8 months, over 150 citizens have contributed to Archway Education Issue Work Group discussions about how our community can make K-12 education relevant and responsive with comments like the ones highlighted above. Through conversation and study, the group quickly recognized that there are many weaknesses that our community cannot immediately impact, such as teacher tenure, teacher retention, and state funding. However, the group soon focused on four top priority weaknesses where local efforts can be impactful, including: (1) a recognition that we are conducting school in a tired, outdated manner in this digital age; (2) an understanding that our curriculum is not necessarily relevant to today’s society or – better yet – tomorrow’s society; (3) an understanding that we are underutilizing technology and not taking advantage of it as a learning tool; and (4) an awareness that our families are disconnected and are not acting as our partners in education.
Over the course of our community conversations, our parents, teachers, and volunteers provided valuable insight on their dreams for an ideal system. In particular, they repeatedly made the following points:

- We want equal opportunities for all students, but also want to be responsive to the needs and learning styles of individuals.
- We want something fresh and transformative --- not just reform. Key ideas include: (a) Following a learning model instead of a teaching model; (b) Finding opportunities for kids to teach each other and collaborate; (c) Focusing on critical thinking rather than rote memorization; (d) Personalizing education; (e) Making Education REAL; (f) Attracting the best and brightest teachers; and (g) Making our schools responsive to our community --- and even the individual variations in our communities.
- Technology is important, and we want our schools and students to take advantage of it.
- We want to help kids at an early age and “catch” them before they fall through the cracks.
- We want our students to learn and see at an early age what the possibilities are for them in the real world.
- We want schools where our parents can be involved.
- We want well-funded community educational institutions.
- To educate our students, we have to combat social obstacles, like hunger and poor nutrition, that make it hard for students to learn.

On August 16, 2011, the K-12 work group met for its last open-ended community conversation. Moving forward, the group will begin to generate specific and well-vetted recommendations for how we address our top weaknesses and achieve the type of school systems that parents, community members, and educators all claim they value.

To jump start this process, issue work group leaders have begun to develop specific recommendations for transforming our school systems. These recommendations are as follow:

**Recommendation 1: Make the community the classroom by:**

- Making free wireless internet available throughout the city and county;
- Making portable, internet-accessible technology available to all students;
- Exposing all students, including elementary and middle grades students, to opportunities available to them in the technical realm by showing them real world examples in their community; and
- Forming an on-going, community-wide education consortium so that we can keep the community involved in education.

_In work group discussions, it was clear that citizens want to make education real, relevant, and responsive to the community. In addition, citizens want to give students exposure to real world opportunities. Finally, engaged citizens want to involve disconnected parents and taxpayers._

_One option for realizing these goals is to begin to think of expansively of school so that it is no longer a bricks and mortar building but is instead a learning process that can take place in both_
live and virtual settings across the community.

**The case for making our community a virtual community:** While we do not recommend replacing all printed materials with technology, we believe that students will not be prepared for the world beyond high school if they do not have mastery of technology. However, for technology to truly become a learning tool, it must be available to all students in and out of the classroom. If students have access to technology and the internet outside of school hours, they can collaborate on class projects away from the classroom, access tutorials and teaching aids 24/7, and do relevant homework away from the school house.

**The case for exposing our students to opportunities in the community:** In our discussions, it became clear that our students (and even our teachers!) are not aware of the opportunities available to them in the real world --- starting with our community! Through the work of University of Georgia graduate research students, we learned that our students are not opposed to many local opportunities --- they simply don’t know they exist. Without that knowledge and understanding, students cannot make informed decisions about courses of study and plans after high school. To assist our students in making better decisions, we have to engage them in our local community through apprenticeships, job shadowing, field trips, etc.

**The case for an on-going, community-wide education consortium:** We learned through our group discussions that, too frequently, our education institutions and the rest of the community operate separately. We need some on-going mechanism for keeping our community and educators in lock-step.

**Recommendation 2: Ensure that Pre-K is available to all students on an on-going basis.**

How a child performs in school at an early age impacts everything: likelihood of graduating, pursuing higher education, and even likelihood of staying out of prison. Community members have repeatedly voiced their concern about reaching children at an early age and have voiced many ideas for doing so. As state funding for Pre-K is redirected, it is clear that we need a Plan B to ensure that our residents can enroll their children in Pre-K programs. We need assistance in developing this Plan B and would like any well-founded ideas. An example of an idea is to turn students’ senior year into an off-campus apprenticeship year and use the saved funding for Pre-K programs.

Issue work group leaders are currently seeking public input on the proposed recommendations. Over the next month, work group leaders and volunteers will study and refine the recommendations together before presenting them back to the work group participants for further discussion on October 18 at 6:00 PM.