

Editorial: Best practices for kids

Sunday, November 16

Comments

Guilford Education Alliance's education summit Thursday was a time of uplift, of focusing on programs both here in Guilford County and throughout the nation that benefit kids.

Under the theme "What Works," the several hundred community members who attended the conference at the Koury Convention Center heard syndicated newspaper columnist and Pulitzer Prize-winner Leonard Pitts Jr. speak about programs he sees as valuable in helping children get ahead, from the Sunflower County Freedom Project in rural Mississippi to the Harlem Children's Zone in New York.

Those who stayed for a panel on the topic also heard Guilford County Board of Education Chairman Alan Duncan talk about the many good programs taking place in the Guilford system: from the Newcomers School for recent immigrants, to the system's early colleges to the variety of learning approaches provided by the system's many magnet programs.

Proactive and pragmatic

The positive, "what works" focus was more practical than Pollyannaish. As Pitts said, it makes more economic sense to invest a small amount "on the front end" than a large amount later.

The upbeat approach also served as an antidote to the negativism that has been pervasive in recent years about education in Guilford County. Superintendent Maurice Green alluded to as much, saying that he feels, because of his "listening and learning" tour around the county, that "we have got to turn the page" and "highlight the positive" here.

Pitts on what works

Pitts summed up the characteristics of programs that benefit kids. Smaller class size. Parental involvement. Structure. The empowering of principals. Letting kids know you care.

Pitts saw the power of that last point at St. Francis Academy, a Catholic school in Baltimore, where the teachers feel free to hug their low-income students.

Pitts' knowledge of programs benefiting kids grew out of a series of columns he wrote on the topic. (See "What Works" at www.leonardpittsjr.com.) He solicited readers' knowledge of successful programs, then read through more than a thousand responses to find ones he wanted to visit and write about.

The Harlem Children's Zone was probably the one that most impressed him. It takes a holistic approach, providing services not only to children but to their families that range far beyond the field of education to include health care, parenting and nutrition and fitness classes.

Guilford County success stories

The summit made it clear that many things are working in Guilford County. A comparison with North Carolina's other metro school districts made by the Guilford Education Alliance puts the district in a good light, especially connected to dropout rates. For the 2006-07 school year, it had the lowest dropout rate of the state's major metropolitan counties. This success is probably largely the result of the district providing a wide variety of alternative learning environments, such as The Middle College at GTCC.

The county also benefits from having organizations outside the school system providing programs for children, as board member Amos Quick pointed out. Groups such as the Black Child Development Institute and Win-Win Resolutions.

Superintendent Green indicated there's an initiative he'd like to see come to Guilford: the Knowledge Is Power Program, or KIPP. Participating public schools receive training and become college-prep schools for low-income children. The Charlotte-Mecklenburg system, where Green was the deputy superintendent, has such a school.

The road ahead

Despite the successes, there's still plenty of work to do. Too many Guilford children still drop out of school. Too many end up in the court instead of the classroom.

Or, as Pitts said, too many "children are missing their own destinies," often without even realizing it. He told the story of one youth, seen by countless teachers and administrators as a hopeless troublemaker, until an art teacher asked him to draw some wildflowers. That one drawing uncovered a talent: The troubled boy was an artist.

Never forget, says Pitts, "what one person can do."

That will especially have to be remembered in the years ahead as the recession will force all of us, including school districts and nonprofits, to do more with less.

But the summit provided hope. Besides showing there are many creative education programs helping children in Guilford County, it also showed that there are many people here who truly care about children.

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