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Global Guilford

Diversity of county schools creates challenges and opportunities

On the eve of the release of the 2010 census information, the Guilford Education Alliance released a report on the increased diversity in our schools, "Faces of Change: Addressing Diversity in Our Schools" (for the full report, go to www.guilfordeducationalliance.org). The 2010 U.S. Census will provide a "formal" accounting of our community and tell us what we observe on our streets, in our stores and in our schools: Guilford County has a very diverse population.

As a consequence, our school district is challenged to educate children who represent more than 142 different cultural/ethnic groups and speak 150 languages or dialects in their homes.

Historically the comparison of the racial and socioeconomic diversity of white and African American students described "diversity" in our schools. Not anymore.

The students filling our classrooms today come from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences. Many are non-English-speaking and many are illiterate or have parents who are. Most have experienced trauma, whether from living in war-torn native lands or from leaving all that is familiar to come to a new country.

Our schools contain significantly more Asian, Hispanic and multiracial students, more students from low-income households, more students learning English as a new language, more students from other countries.

The question is whether we, as a community and as a school system, are responding to this change as an obstacle or an opportunity.

There are many challenges that come with greater diversity in our schools, from academics to parental involvement to health and social issues. These challenges are not unique to Guilford County, but they are real concerns that require serious attention.

For starters, the number of students living in poverty-level families has increased more than 13 percent in the past decade, crossing all racial/ethnic groups. In today's schools, more than 53 percent of our students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches.

This means there are fewer family resources for nutritious meals and health care, much less such "enrichment activities" as playing on a community sports team. Plus the added stress on parents to cover the costs of basic needs greatly impacts the children. Add to this stress the complications of not speaking English well enough to visit a child's classroom and communicate effectively with the teacher, or help with a child's homework, or even read the fliers in a child's backpack.

The bottom line: All minority groups graduate at lower rates than white students. Economically disadvantaged students, students with limited English proficiency and students with disabilities all graduate at rates below the district average.

These challenges are daunting. However, there are many more opportunities if we as a school district and larger community embrace them and make the investment necessary to turn the opportunities into reality.

We must celebrate the diversity among our student population, recognizing each student's value and building cultural understanding. We can view diversity as an asset, teaching our students to respect differences and develop curricula aimed at helping them to understand more about themselves and others.

But first our school leaders must have the competencies necessary to build a successful multicultural school system through the following steps:

- We must infuse the curriculum with content and instructional resources that reflect the demographics of the students. That means teaching critical and higher-order thinking and equipping students to consider multiple perspectives and engage in relevant dialogue about the curriculum content.

- Our college and university teacher training institutions and our district professional development must revise content so that all teachers are prepared to teach reading and writing skills from a multicultural perspective; teachers must continuously work on issues of personal prejudice and understanding of institutional racism and its impact on our society; curriculum content must be engaging to students' current life situations; all teachers should be prepared to address language skills; and teachers working

with refugee students must understand the difficulties and experiences they bring to the classroom so as not to misinterpret behaviors.

·We must continue to support and enhance the Newcomers School, which is unique in our district as a place where recently arrived refugee/ immigrant students in grades 3-12 who are novice English language learners can begin to acclimate to the U.S. and to our education system.

·We should develop opportunities for parents to make stronger, more supportive connections. Many of the parents feel disengaged from their children's schools, are lonely and are reticent to reach out to other parents. The PTAs and school leadership could establish partnerships between individual parents that could become supportive friendships.

·We must continue the early childhood programs in our county that include Head Start, Guilford County Schools' Pre-K Program and the More at Four Program administered by the Guilford County Partnership for Children. These programs help prepare more than 70 percent of Guilford County children who are deemed at risk for school failure. Also offered are English classes for mothers of children age 4 and younger while the children are provided quality child care. Additionally, Guilford Child Health provides a medical home to a large number of children who are eligible for Medicaid. During each visit, the parent is given an age-appropriate book in the family's native language to read to the child.

There is much opportunity to strengthen our schools and thereby strengthen our larger community by celebrating our diversity. We are a stronger, more interesting community because of it. It drives our economy and our democracy. But we must recognize the challenges and work together to ensure success for all in our schools and in our county.

MARGARET ARBUCKLE