Schools take aim at achievement gap

Fred Musante, Editor

November 23, 2004

A school reform organization that has been successful in eliminating the achievement gap at numerous troubled schools across the country is about to tackle the task of improving instruction in Hamden's public schools.

School Supt. Alida D. Begina selected 20 school administrators to meet next month with Eric Cooper, president and co-founder of the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education, and begin what she hopes will be a long-term relationship with the organization.

The state Department of Education is also exploring how it can make the NUA's instructional consulting available to school districts with low-achieving schools across the state.

John Ramos, Deputy Commissioner for Educational Programs, said the state Board of Education was very impressed with Cooper when he made a presentation at its meeting last month.

"Eric addressed the state board at its last meeting and talked at length about closing the achievement gap through instructional improvement," Ramos said.

He said Begina, who was at the state board meeting, "has gotten out in front of the curve and should be commended."

Cooper addressed the superintendent's Diversity Committee last week in what was partly a pep talk and partly a preview of his enthusiastic personal style.

He gave few specifics, but said the NUA's consulting is aimed at showing teachers more effective ways of presenting curriculum to low-achieving students.

As his talk to the subdued group of parents, teachers, and administrators continued, Cooper grew more animated and personal. "You've got to get excited in this committee," he exhorted them. "If you are a Diversity Committee that is going to succeed, you have to be living in hope and believe that all those kids are going to achieve. I'm preaching hope and I'm preaching
Columbia University's Teachers College and The College Board founded the NUA in 1989, though it has since become independent of them.

Its methods are based on three beliefs: that all children are capable of achieving; that intelligence is determined by nurture as well as nature; and that the entire community must be involved in improving teaching and learning and in addressing students' cultural, social, and intellectual needs.

The organization's web site, www.nuatc.org, says its consultants demonstrate effective teaching in the core curriculum areas of math, science, reading, and writing, and then coach teachers how to adopt their methods.

The organization has been praised for its success in raising achievement levels at inner-city schools in Seattle, Indianapolis, Kansas City, and San Francisco, as well as other cities.

A number of the schools NUA consultants have worked with improved so much that the U.S. Department of Education named them "Blue Ribbon" schools.

**A look at Hamden's diversity**

Begina said she formed the Diversity Committee nine years ago to address issues related to racial disparity in student achievement and professional staff employment.

She said 7 percent of Hamden's teachers and 45 percent of its students are black or Hispanic, so increasing the number of minority teachers has been a priority.

A breakdown of student achievement levels in Hamden by race, family-income level, and test scores shows that the racial achievement gap that exists throughout the state and the nation also is found here.

While students from affluent families out-perform students from lower-income families in every racial group, black and Latino students tend to under-perform their white and Asian classmates at the same family income level on average across the board.

And just as Hamden's average per capita family income has declined steadily for the past decade, achievement measured by test scores also has declined.

The group that will meet with Cooper and Marilyn Zaretsky, an NUA consultant, will comprise the principals from each of Hamden's schools, plus special education administrators and the academic discipline directors for each of the core curriculum areas.

Begina said she will pay for the NUA consulting with school budget allocations for professional development and curriculum development, but she also may seek additional funding assistance from other sources, such as corporations and educational foundations, in the future.

Ramos said the state is still working out the details, but he expects to use school improvement funds in the state budget to aid professional and curriculum development in districts that haven't shown sufficient improvement in test scores, to help provide NUA consulting for those districts.

He said the state also might seek additional help from foundations and corporations.

"It won't all fall on state dollars. It can't," he said. Local districts will have to pick up some of the cost, too.
Cooper, who is black, told the Diversity Committee of his own experiences with racism in education and how believing a student can achieve can help make it happen.

He said he had low SAT scores and grades in high school, and his guidance counselor told him he should not expect to go to college.

Instead he went to Duchess Community College, the Universidad de las Americas in Mexico City, and City College in New York, earning a bachelors degree in psychology. But the guidance counselor told him "anyone" could do that.

After Cooper went to Columbia and earned two masters degrees and a doctorate, his guidance counselor changed her tune. "I always knew Eric could do it," he recalled her saying.