

New teaching strategies needed for new times

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First published: Sunday, March 23, 2008

approximately 2,500 educators from across the country will converge on Albany to consider one of the most critical questions facing American educators: How do we raise the level of academic achievement in urban schools?

How critical is this question?

Consider that over the four days of the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education's annual conference, an estimated 24,000 students will drop out of school nationwide. Those numbers will be greatest where the economic needs are the greatest, straining community resources already stretched beyond the limit by poverty and increasing the number of young adults at risk and disadvantaged in an economy driven by knowledge.

Ending this cycle in urban schools will be at the heart of every discussion during the conference.

In the Albany school district, which serves about 8,600 students in 18 schools, we are addressing the question of increasing high school graduation rates -- and the related concerns of closing the achievement gap and providing every student with a quality education -- by fundamentally changing the way we teach.

We are rebuilding and renovating facilities to provide smaller, more nurturing learning environments. We are offering innovative educational programs that introduce students to real-world challenges and careers. With the support of the best educational resources available, including the National Urban Alliance, we are developing research-based, culturally responsive teaching that allows our students to build skills and confidence through enriched, exciting instruction.

As a result, key changes are happening in classrooms across the district. It begins with the acknowledgment that the needs of our students have changed, and the realization that our methods of educating them need to change, too. Gone are the days when we can expect students to sit in neat rows and absorb information presented them in much the same way it was presented their parents. And perhaps their parents' parents.

In Susan Fowler's second-grade classroom at Delaware Community School, students are building vocabulary, word knowledge and self-esteem through National Urban Alliance strategies such as dancing definitions -- the use of rhyming and rhythm to create patterns that reinforce difficult words or concepts -- and synonym triplets -- "hap-py, e-lat-ed, ex-u-ber-ant."

Thinking maps, graphic designs that help students focus on the individual elements of critical thinking to better develop and organize thoughts, aid with writing and reading comprehension.

Fowler reports gains in her students' vocabulary -- "Please speak up," one 7-year-old said to another recently, "you aren't audible" -- their writing skills and their enthusiasm.

Fowler, an Albany public school teacher for 12 years, also says this "has also energized their teacher."

At Philip Livingston Magnet Academy, sixth-grade teachers Kandie Antonetti and Lisa House also can be seen and heard in their classrooms dancing, rhyming and using thinking maps to help students better connect to abstract concepts. Many of the strategies they use have come from the district's partnership with the alliance.

It is one reason that sixth-graders at Philip Livingston last year saw a 35 percent gain in their performance index for English language arts and a 30 percent gain in their performance index for math.

Certainly, more time is needed before we can point to definitive quantifiable success. However, data from the first two years of Albany's partnership with the alliance reflect some of the district's strongest gains ever in academic performance. As a district, there were gains in both math and English language arts in grades 3-7 in 2006-07 compared to the previous year.

Notable gains in performance indices included 57 percent in fifth-grade math at North Albany Academy, 55 percent in fifth-grade math at Sheridan Preparatory Academy and 52 percent in sixth-grade math at Hackett Middle School.

In English language arts, the district saw a 43 percent gain in the performance index in sixth grade at Myers Middle School and a 68 percent gain in

fourth grade at Philip Schuyler Elementary School.

At the heart of it all is the belief that every child has the capacity to succeed, and that it is our responsibility as educators to find the key to that success for every student. From Thursday through Sunday, Albany will be the focal point of this work.

The National Urban Alliance conference offers an opportunity for us to focus on a promising future for our children and to advocate for quality education as a civil right for all children. C. Joseph, Ed.D., is superintendent of the City School District of Albany. Eric J. Cooper, Ed.D., is president and founder of the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education.

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