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Positive change happening in Harding-area schools

Eric J. Cooper

On Feb. 3, 2009, more than 60 community leaders attended what was cited as an enthusiastic kickoff for the East Allen County Schools and National Urban Alliance for Effective Education partnership. The focus of the partnership is support of Harding-area schools.

For more than a year, we have had opportunities to serve with dedicated teachers, principals, administrators, parents and community stakeholders who are writing a new Harding narrative, with students, teachers and administrators fearlessly learning, teaching and leading.

They are daring to initiate school-system reform one student, one classroom and one building at a time. Led by a dynamic superintendent, the efforts are beginning to pay off.

Teachers and administrators are reporting improved grades and examples of student work suggesting that all schoolchildren and youth are capable of performing highly intellectual tasks.

Students often are leading the way through their use of instructional tools that enable them to improve their vocabulary, reading comprehension, writing and math skills.

Yes, there are examples of adults who maintain low expectations for some of the students and doubts about their abilities. Indeed, students have noted low expectations for their performance on the ISTEP+ test and their capacity to graduate college-ready, but many are not crushed by that negativity.

Students have fearlessly created ingenious and motivational rap songs and school cheers aimed at enabling classmates to develop a "growth mind-set" – a belief that one can improve his or her achievement through individual effort – as opposed to a "fixed mind-set," a fear of being considered forever *not smart*.

Examples of improvements in learning and teaching under way at Paul Harding High School, Prince Chapman Academy and Southwick and Village elementaries are apparent for visitors who enter the hallways with open hearts and minds. Those willing to suspend disbelief while observing student and teacher actions find renewed hope in the inherent capacity of all students to succeed.

At Harding, students involved in the EACS/NUA Student Voice Project have shared, from the heart, their belief in the significant changes of "climate" under way at their school. They are showing a confidence in their ability to take control of their own learning – shared by teachers who guide, while holding themselves accountable for their student's learning. Students are focused laserlike on sustaining their achievement all the way to graduation.

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Positive change happening in Harding...

At Prince Chapman Academy, new beliefs of students' ability to live up to their potential by developing discipline in their learning are growing each day they attend school. These new expectations are now embedded in the schoolwide plan of Prince Chapman as well as an integral part of a grant proposal they hope to secure to accelerate achievement gains.

New instructional strategies are working their way into Southwick. The principal and every teacher are using strategies for student achievement learned in NUA-led sessions as part of our partnership. This focus on improving learning and teaching has led to other principals requesting to send their teachers to observe instructional interventions under way in Southwick's classrooms.

Here as elsewhere throughout the Harding area, academic talent is not viewed as a fixed thing, but as a dynamic process for students that leads to lifelong learning, not as something gained through our genes, but as something gained through disciplined effort supported by highly effective teaching.

And at Village, the principal and teachers are leading a major transformation. Initial testing already indicates growth. Even the preschool teachers have come to embrace and harness the positive effects of NUA strategies for these youngest of learners.

Improving student performance is not without its challenges and not for the faint of heart. Chief among them are chronic underfunding. Whole-system reform requires more than just the will to leave no child behind. It starts when the community cares sufficiently to recognize, understand and support the acts of educational heroism that occur every day – in spite of the family challenges schoolchildren and youth bring into a school. It is sustained when the public finds ways to coordinate and work together on common goals.

Heroic educators in the Harding area, as elsewhere, believe that when the nation talks about leaving no child behind, that means theirs, too. These educators recognize the high potential of their students.


Their expectations are high regardless of students' family circumstances, and they have the strategic pedagogical skills to support students in meeting their expectations for intellectual rigor and academic precision.

These educators get up every morning with the belief that they can dramatically alter the life trajectories of their students. With the help of the community, continued support for the programs and efforts led by Dr. Karyle Green and the board of education, it will be done.

Change is happening, and visitors who take the time will see the improvements under way in our schools.

Eric J. Cooper is president of the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education. He wrote this for The Journal Gazette.

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