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Advocates to CMS: Focus on better black schools, not moving kids

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Speaking at the Tuesday Morning Breakfast Forum, Ken Simmons, a former CMS principal and charter school head, presents a plan for teaching African American students in mostly black schools. (Photo: Ann Doss Helms, The Charlotte Observer)

By Ann Doss Helms | The Charlotte Observer

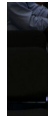
More black principals and teachers. A curriculum that focuses on the unique experience of African-Americans. More effective student discipline and parent engagement.

Those changes, if implemented at Charlotte-Mecklenburg's majority-black schools, would do more for equal opportunity than reassigning students to boost diversity, four African-American education advocates said this week.

Ken Simmons, a former CMS principal and charter school head, presented the provocative education plan at the Tuesday Morning Breakfast Forum, a gathering of political and civic leaders rooted in west Charlotte's historic black community. He said he rejects the notion, voiced by school board members and advocacy groups such as OneMECK, that schools are hobbled by racial isolation and concentrations of poverty.

Students can thrive at such schools, he said, but "it can only occur if you have the right

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ingredients in the school.”

Simmons was joined by Queen Thompson, a retired CMS educator and former school board candidate; Maurice Jones, a vocational education advocate; and Gyasi Foluke, an author and longtime proponent of Afrocentric education.

The four describe themselves as a steering committee hoping to build support for an alternative approach to urban education. Instead of holding racial and economic diversity as a central goal, they called for CMS to immediately launch their eight-point strategy in schools that are more than 50 percent black, while leaving other schools to pursue other tactics.

“We would have trouble on our hands” if the group tried to push the agenda for majority white suburban schools, Simmons said.

Let’s be clear: The foursome doesn’t represent the unified voice of black Charlotte, or even of the 50 or so people who gathered to hear them. They were peppered with questions about everything from the cost and practicality of their strategy to whether they can build the kind of support it will take to get a real hearing.

“Are you going to have some white folks join this group? Let’s work together,” said Sarah Stevenson, a former school board member who was a leader in the school desegregation movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

But their presentation does spotlight the challenges ahead as the CMS board embarks on a review of student assignment. Momentum is building for some type of push to break up concentrations of poverty – and in the process, to increase the racial and ethnic diversity of public schools.

At weekly gatherings hosted by the interfaith MeckMin, racially mixed crowds are holding ongoing talks about the value of diversity in promoting educational equity. Speakers from OneMeck, a recently formed advocacy group, tout the benefits of diversity every time the school board takes public comments.

But Tuesday’s panelists said the value of using student assignment to balance demographics is overstated – and so is Charlotte’s pride in the desegregation process that began in earnest in 1970, after the courts demanded busing.

“Desegregation is not the same as integration,” said Foluke. “Desegregation connotes a numbers game. Integration is a high psychospiritual concept where we embrace each other in community.”

“There has never, never, never been integration in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school system,” Simmons said.

Even the people who agree on the need to promote diversity acknowledge that making it happen is going to be tough.

Likewise, the plan outlined Tuesday includes lofty goals that have proven extraordinarily challenging, not only for CMS but in schools across the country.

For starters, Simmons called for principals who “better reflect the racial makeup of the student body,” adding that any “nonblack” principals should be required to demonstrate a record of success with African-American students. He also decried the shortage of African-American teachers but outlined no specifics for recruiting teachers and leaders.

He said lack of civility and “ridiculous” behavior in inner-city schools is a big part of what’s driving families away but provided no details about how to create a better behavior program. And he called for an “aggressive program” to bridge the gap between parents and inner-city schools – something that was emphasized as a vital need by several audience speakers.

Simmons has faced the challenges of urban education up close, as principal of West Charlotte High School in the 1990s and later as head of Crossroads Charter High. Neither school has come close to emerging as a model of academic success. But Simmons contends West Charlotte could have flourished under his leadership. He said he was forced out after his

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efforts to get more black students into advanced classes alienated some families and faculty.

"I was being too bold as a principal," he said.

After the presentation, longtime community advocate Carlenia Ivory was blunt about the challenge: All four of the speakers have a history of adversarial relationships with CMS. They're going to have to build some serious bridges with people in power, she said, to get their ideas heard.

When Ivory asked the panel about support, Simmons acknowledged a long road ahead.

"This is our first stop," he said. "We're going to make many stops."

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