

## FEATURESTORY

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## There's still time to fix the city schools

The question is, what lessons can we learn from this year's controversies?

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It was past 11pm on Thursday, March 3, and after four hours of deliberation the Charlottesville City School Board remained divided over how to balance the 2005-06 budget due the next day to City Council. Six of the board's seven appointees were present, along with Dr. Scottie Griffin, the division's superintendent. The sour atmosphere in the Charlottesville High School library was made no better by board members behaving like uncooperative first-graders. Eyes were rolling, snide comments were flying.

During the first hour of the marathon meeting, which ended at midnight, the board had voted to raise out-of-district tuition next year. But on matters like putting money into a K-8 math program or raising teachers' salaries, there was discord. Among the few diehards remaining in the audience, the agitation was getting loud. Casey Beeghly took the lectern. As an out-of-district parent, she told the board, she had been proud to send her two kids to city schools. "This year I'm embarrassed," she said. "I'm amazed that you think this is an attractive school system. Some of you have no idea of the impact of this on the school system.

"Wake up and smell the sewer!"

Since July, when Griffin got here and Dede Smith was elected School Board chair, parents had grown more outraged over fast-paced, unexplained changes and declining morale as teachers faced sharp rebukes to their work. With five of the division's nine schools narrowly failing State standards, the board had tried to find a new superintendent who could improve the division's standing. But parents protested the changes and disrespect attributed to Griffin, and a much smaller contingent of black leaders fired back. They claimed that the real problem with Griffin, who is African-American, was her race and gender. They said white parents didn't want black children to improve. Parents and teachers felt insulted. The board said little about it; the superintendent said nothing. There was hardly any substantive discussion of achievement strategies and little said about the schools' many successes. Mostly the talk about the schools concerned "failure" and "racism."

Meanwhile, Griffin, with Smith at her back, took a "we know what's good for you" stance. She wanted to cut direct student services such as guidance counselors and add four vague administrative posts that she claimed would fix achievement discrepancies. But, she couldn't say exactly how the new jobs, budgeted at about \$80,000 each, would fashion that. Public frustration mounted. At a mid-February board meeting, Melissa Schraeder, an instructional assistant at Greenbrier Elementary, summed it up: "If someone would show me how the budget closes the achievement gap, I would appreciate it."

Yes, the school division—or at least the discourse about the school division—has become messy. But is it really a sewer? What if it's more like a leaky latrine? Can we fix it?

That hundreds of people would attend dozens of school meetings over the past six months suggests the public really wants to be involved. Moreover, the \$57.7 million budget that the School Board eventually approved is a compromise. Naturally, it's imperfect (teachers' modest raises remain controversial, for instance), but it's far from Griffin's first document. They were called unresponsive at times, yet the leadership apparently took some criticisms to heart.

Those facts inform the assumption in this article that people want to and can work together to make the public schools worthy of, as one critic put it, "the myth of Charlottesville." Even if Griffin has all but packed her bags to leave, as has been widely rumored [see sidebar, p.27], most parents and teachers are here to stay. There's a good conversation awaiting everyone who cares about fixing what's broken about Charlottesville's public schools. Away from the rancor of School Board meetings, many have ideas for how to build on what's working.

## Start with a plan

As recently as early February, Griffin described her goals for the school system in general terms—“we are expecting that all of our students will achieve on an exemplary level.” But a division that faces the possibility of more State- and federal-level intervention if certain test scores don’t improve needs more deliberate goals than that. A vision of higher-achieving, more critically thoughtful students seems indisputable.

The real work? Making a plan to get there. Washington takes a hand now that Charlottesville, with its 4,400 students, is among the small minority of Virginia school systems that have failed to make annual progress requirements. Last year Clark Elementary, for instance, had to offer parents the chance to send their children to other city grade schools as a consequence for its low Standards of Learning (SOL) passing rates, off by a few percentage points in most cases.

If, in what school system personnel call the “unlikely event” that Clark doesn’t have an acceptable passing rate in math and English later this year, Washington will not only continue with the schoolchoice option. It will also require that students have extra services, such as personal tutoring, made available to them at the school division’s expense. And the sanctions will just keep getting tougher.

Throughout the fall and winter many, including City Councilors, criticized Griffin for speeding to reroute the school division without first justifying it. In January, Councilor Blake Caravati said he wouldn’t support her budget because there was no guiding plan. Earlier this month, Councilor Kendra Hamilton agreed.

“Blake is right. A strategic plan is the physical articulation of your vision,” she says.

The School Board’s most recent strategic plan dates to 2000 and Griffin has said she needs a year to write a new one. Absent something fresh, the superintendent said select recommendations from a division-wide audit conducted in November would guide her first budget. The audit, by Phi Delta Kappa International, came to the polarizing conclusion that Charlottesville’s gap in standardized test scores had to result from teacher inadequacies and a legacy of racism. Clearly, PDK said, the allocation of resources—at about \$12,000 per student—isn’t the issue. (PDK made short shrift of socio-economic issues, not really paying attention, for instance, to poverty measures among low-scoring kids.)

Griffin’s unspecified reference to the PDK audit at budget time didn’t fill in for a strategic plan. In February, Karl Ackerman pleaded with the board: “In all of these discussions, I have not heard the School Board decide to choose or not choose recommendations. It seems it would make [the process] easier to go through them. Why hasn’t the board chosen recommendations?”

Clearly, in Charlottesville, where open government is treated practically as a birthright, the public wants a transparent vision of what the school system should look like at its best, and a set of steps to get there.

In February Smith said she expected the division to begin strategic planning in April. The public, she said, is urged to get involved.

## Start small

After a couple of years of volunteering with the reading program at Burnley-Moran Elementary, Casey Beeghly observes, “school readiness is key to having children succeed.” Some kids enter

kindergarten knowing how to read; others can't tell which side is up on a book. "When you have kids entering school where there's already a gap present on Day One, you don't have as great a chance of reducing the achievement gap," she says.

Andy Block and Angela Cioffi agree. He runs Legal Aid's Just Children, a child-advocacy project that in the past three years has looked at public education, and she is the staff attorney. "If kids are coming to school behind because their families don't have a lot of education," Block says, "the way things are now, and until we close the gap...it's going to get uglier and uglier for children as they get older." What he means is that once denied a full SOL-certified diploma, a kid has seriously diminished options ahead of him—jobs, enlisting in the military and so on. "If you don't have a high school diploma you end up contributing less and costing more," Block says.

To give underprivileged kids a better chance and get them hooked on school early, Block and Cioffi want to expand city preschool programs by one year to include 3-year-olds. Indeed, Cioffi suggests that it is financially irresponsible not to fund early childhood education for the youngest kids, complete with "wraparound" social services to keep families functioning well.

"There are amazing studies that have been done on how high-quality preschools are the key to success" in school and later life, she says. "Even if you have to put a lot of money in, the output is just... It's something that we have to do."

## Support the teachers

But it all comes down to teachers, and Charlottesville's—like all public school teachers—should get the respect and support they deserve. City Councilor Hamilton, who is an editor for the journal *Black Issues in Higher Education*, cites research that shows teachers and principals have the most impact of any other factor on a school system.

Obviously, salary is a measure of support. The final budget approved by the School Board on March 9 included an increase of 4.5 percent for teachers, putting starting salaries at slightly more than \$36,000. As the public pointed out repeatedly, the rising cost of housing here puts new teachers in the horns of a dilemma. Who can afford to rent, let alone buy, on \$36,000 a year?

On top of that, other school divisions are competing hard for the best teachers. In Albemarle, first-year teachers will start at about \$37,500, if the current proposed budget is approved.

If salaries in Charlottesville fall below regional standards, how soon would it be before the best and brightest instructors opt to live and work in surrounding communities instead of Charlottesville? If that happens, the dire analysis of the PDK audit will start to ring true.

Teachers also need support on a day-to-day basis in the classroom. Specifically, they need to work together and be able to count on the principal's leadership. Over the past decade being a good principal has come to mean something new. Now "the best principals are instructional leaders," says Bruce Benson. He's the county's executive director for curriculum, instruction and technology. A principal's job is to help teachers figure out the best way to teach, Benson says.

In any school system, teachers don't make it up as they go along. The administration gives them specific guidelines, the way riverbanks direct the flow of a body of water, to use Benson's analogy. But there should be room for creativity and decision making.

Benson says Albemarle adheres to the philosophy that everyday choices about how to move students through new lessons "should be made by the classroom teacher." The administration's job is to make sure teachers know about what's called in education courses "best practices."

In the winter, Tim Flynn, the principal of Charlottesville's middle school, appealed to the School Board to reinstate the dean of students position that his school, Buford, lost last year. Why? He wanted to help teachers focus on learning in their classrooms. He was encouraged by the fact that SOL scores for African-American students, while still short of State mandates, were on the rise. In English, for instance, only 22.5 percent of black middle-schoolers earned a passing grade on the State SOL exam in 2002. By 2004, that number was up to 43.2 percent. In math, during the same period, black students went from 14.1 percent passing to 40.7 percent. A full-time disciplinarian had been "the real key at re-establishing trust" in Buford's teaching staff and getting these results, Flynn said. If someone is charged with working on discipline issues exclusively, it means the principal and assistant principal can get into classrooms more, he added.

The revised budget was ultimately approved to include Buford's dean.

Teachers need to be confident that the administration is on their side. How else can they trust directives from Central Office to teach or test in new ways? The county, for instance, uses "vertical teams" of K-12 teachers in math, English, social studies and science. Led by the central administration, the teams look at student performance—and they rely heavily on teacher feedback.

Dr. Griffin is no stranger to this theory, either. In an interview the day after the School Board approved the 2005-06 budget, clearly relieved, she said, "It's important to have teachers engaging in [curriculum-building] endeavors because they're the ones who actually are in classrooms with students. They will make all the difference in the world. They need to be comfortable with any tools they're using. They need to have a lot of input into what the curriculum should be. They need to buy into anything and everything that we're doing so that they can continue to be committed to what they're doing."

If this is her message, apparently it didn't get through early on. Though the survey doesn't track trends (making it hard to know if teachers' views have changed since Griffin has been in charge), January results from a survey of city teachers show that only 33 percent feel they are treated professionally by "Central Office administration." By contrast, 85 percent who responded to the questionnaire by the Charlottesville Education Association agree that they are treated professionally by "building administration."

## Support the parents

Some parents get to every meeting and can recite the superintendent's resume by heart. For others, a school meeting is nearly impossible. Often poor, single women, their kids don't do all that well in school. (About half of Charlottesville's public school students are eligible for free and reduced lunch, a standard measure of poverty.) "It's unrealistic to expect you'll have these families mostly headed by single women to be able to squeeze one more meeting into their schedules," says Karen Waters, executive director of Quality Community Council, an advocacy and networking organization targeted at the city's poorest neighborhoods. "They're just sort of dealing."

Waters insists that the school division, along with social service providers, must "find a way to engage the folks whose lives they want to impact."

That's the way Harold Foley sees it, too. The Westhaven resident and father coordinates that housing project's after-school program three days a week. He credits Anne Lintner, the principal at Burnley-Moran, for making sure she reaches families at her school who live in Westhaven. Her steps to meet parents outside of the school building, as an example, mark the kind of change in "customer service" that Foley would like to see all around. He estimates that 70 percent of the parents in his neighborhood "feel assaulted about coming into the school."

Not well educated (often by Charlottesville schools), these parents can feel put down. "A lot of parents feel like the staff or principal is talking over their heads sometimes. They don't see the staff

as particularly friendly," he says.

"I don't particularly think it's racist," he adds, "but we are in Thomas Jefferson's town and a lot of African-Americans think if they're not comfortable, it's a race thing. But if you're not comfortable, maybe they don't know. You have to tell [the teachers and principal.]"

Foley recommends that teachers and principals learn how to break the ice.

M. Rick Turner, the head of the local NAACP, hosted a meeting in February on the topic of engaging African-American parents in their children's education. He offered transportation and childcare on the NAACP's behalf to parents who want to go to school meetings.

Once parents get into the building, however, not everyone knows how to press a teacher for answers about their kid. Leah Puryear, who put two children through city schools and who heads UVA's Upward Bound program, has a script when that happens. It begins with identifying yourself and your child. From there explain why you've come in or called and find out what work your child has not completed. Share information that might be news to the teacher and ask for the same in return.

Puryear believes a child's success hinges on parents being involved, and in her role directing a federally funded college prep program for low-income and first-generation college students, she sees the results. "It's very, very important if children know there's somebody there who cares about them. It makes the school process a lot easier," she says.

## Rationalize the curriculum

Do you want to raise Standards of Learning test scores or educate children? Both are necessary but they are not equal. It's important to specify where the division should aim long-term.

Whatever the goal, at this stage of the game, it's likely too late to lament standardized testing, like the Flanagan tests that were essentially dumped into city schools this year.

Griffin says that assessments are "critical" because "you have to know where your students are performing and you have to use that performance data to focus your instruction." Other school administrators in her position say essentially the same thing.

Moreover, there's no point holding off all testing until students take the SOL exams at the end of a school year. By then, it's too late for that group of students, from a compliance point of view.

"It's akin to a doctor doing diagnostic testing as opposed to an autopsy model," says Benson, from Albemarle's school division.

What's the point of the tests? To steer a school division clear of Richmond and Washington by generating acceptable pass rates? School Board member Peggy Van Yahres says, "We need to go beyond the SOLS, particularly because many of our children are passing them."

For the government the acceptable passing rate is 70 percent, which, as Upward Bound's Leah Puryear, points out, "is a D."

"What is passing for the State should not be passing for you. The D is not getting you to where you ultimately need to be," she says of the school system.

Still, if you want to reinforce the value of critical thinking, it probably helps to be sure that all students are covering the same content grade by grade. For all the dispute over Griffin's initial

proposal to organize curriculum from the top down with four highly paid coordinators, the idea that curriculum should be more predictably structured did gain credibility.

Jim Henderson, the principal at Walker Upper Elementary, the grade school attended by every fifth- and sixth-grader in Charlottesville, urged Griffin and the board to adopt a math curriculum that begins in kindergarten and extends through at least sixth grade. Math is one of the areas where Walker just missed State accreditation. "We've been Band-aiding math for too many years," he said on March 3 at the all-night board meeting. "We have to make sure we have continuity when the kids get to us."

Now that the coordinators are axed, Griffin is hearing teachers' ideas about some curriculum development. She says she has teacher committees organized to examine K-4 curriculum. Teachers are "key personnel" in figuring out what works with Charlottesville students. "They need to be at the table," Griffin says. "They are at the table and they will continue to be at the table."

## Respect the history

As the Charlottesville school system has been stretched out on the examining table over these several months, many have made a similar diagnosis: "When you listen to stories now about Charlottesville, sometimes I think we're in two different cities," said Berdell Fleming in February. A graduate of the city's then-black high school, she was one of four panelists the PTO Council recruited to describe the racial history of Charlottesville's schools. While the schools were eventually integrated in 1959, it took several court orders to dissuade local segregationists of their "rights."

Waters sees the same thing—two Charlottesvillees.

"But what's happening now is everyone is paying the consequences for it because of No Child Left Behind and the SOLs. Now it affects everybody so everybody has to be invested in the solution," she says.

While liberal, white parents recoil at the word "racist," it's naïve to think that race is not a factor. Just 50 years ago people running this school system would rather have denied blacks diplomas than let them sit next to white students.

"I think race always matters, because this is America," says City Councilor Kendra Hamilton. "As much as we like to say this is a color-blind society, it is a joke."

"We have to have a civic conversation and understand who people are," says school board member Van Yahres. "Low-income parents have to understand when middle-income parents question the schools, they're not racist. Middle-class parents need to know low-income parents feel the schools have been failing them."

Foley says we have to look at the complete school experience. "More janitors are black than teachers are black. Kids see black cafeteria workers and not that many teachers or principals. It makes a difference," he says. Apparently the division agrees. Michael Heard, the city schools' director of human resources, has a plan to recruit more black teachers to Charlottesville.

Hamilton suggests that additionally, the division's young teachers need diversity training: "Just because you're well meaning doesn't mean you have the cultural competence to deal with some of these kids who have real problems."

But honoring the history of Charlottesville's schools means acknowledging the many good things that have happened—and continue to happen—here. Why else would the parents of 223 children

from outside the city pay tuition to send their kids here? Maybe it's the internationally award-winning high school orchestra. Maybe it's the state-dominating band program. Maybe it's the academic quiz team. Maybe it's the good teaching.

Indeed, as the example of Buford Middle School demonstrates, even if some schools haven't earned State accreditation yet, the actual performance of students is improving quickly. Teachers and principals are awake and alert to what needs to be done.

## Accept feedback

Frankly, almost no one comes out of the public school controversy smelling like a rose. During a heated budget forum in February, Hamilton challenged people on every side to examine their motives: "Are you working for the good of the community or do you just want to be right?"

Communication has to improve, plain and simple. Waters suggests small focus groups to get issues on the table, be they problems with advanced math homework or questions of which SOL-aligned testing program to introduce and how.

"Everybody is in the room. That's something we can build on. We have to make a decision as a community that we want to build on it," Hamilton says.

We have to move forward from here and buy into the idea of keeping education local, Puryear says, of "not letting the State come in here and run the public schools."

We have to suspend finger pointing, because larger issues loom, she says. "I cannot be held accountable for what was said 10 years ago, but in 2007 if certain things don't happen, we'll all be accountable."

# City schools at a glance

- 6 K-4 elementary schools
- 1 5-6 upper elementary school
- 1 middle school
- 1 high school
- 4,386 students, including 168 preschoolers
- 48.6 percent are African-American
- 42.2 percent are White
- 3.3 percent are Hispanic

- 2.1 percent are Asian
- 21 percent of students are identified for gifted education
- 17 percent qualify for special education
- 50.3 percent are eligible for free and reduced meal programs
- 56 percent of teaching staff hold advanced degrees

# Will she stay or will she go?

## Rumors run amok about Griffin

Almost since the day she started as superintendent on July 1, rumors have swirled about Dr. Scottie Griffin's employment status. The buzz became even more intense last week when the division gave notice of four closed meetings scheduled to occur in the six days leading up to the next School Board meeting, on Thursday, March 31, beginning at 7pm.

The School Board is authorized to hold closed meetings for three reasons: 1) discussion of personnel matters; 2) discussion of the purchase or disposition of property; and 3) disciplinary hearings.

On Tuesday, March 29, there will be a disciplinary hearing. That kind of closed session takes place when a student is recommended for expulsion or removal to the alternative school.

But what of the other three closed meetings, two of which are scheduled for Wednesday, March 30? Rumor abounds that the topic of those might be the employment status of Assistant Superintendent Dr. Laura Purnell, who is said to be the author of a widely circulated February letter critical of Dr. Griffin's management. Purnell has never confirmed publicly that she wrote the letter.

If Purnell's position is to be cut on July 1, as has also been rumored, there was no evidence of that decision at press time. Ed Gillaspie, the division's director of finance, confirmed that Purnell's salary is intact in the budget he sent to City Council on March 25. Should Griffin decide to dump Purnell, she would need approval of the board to alter the budget they approved on March 9. On this topic, Griffin will not comment, saying "it's a real confidential personnel issue."

City Councilor Blake Caravati suggests that, logistics aside, Purnell is on the way out. He says that two people close to the situation showed him a letter that was sent to Purnell on March 24 stating that her position would be eliminated in the next fiscal year.

Still, that rumor doesn't quell speculation about Griffin, who would earn \$153,540 next year and who stayed at her previous job with the New Orleans schools for only five months. "I know generally that they're a lot about Dr. Griffin," Caravati says of the spate of closed School Board meetings. "It probably has something to do with tenure. I assume they're working toward some end." Caravati implies that Griffin's termination as Charlottesville superintendent is the "end" in question.—*C.H.*

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