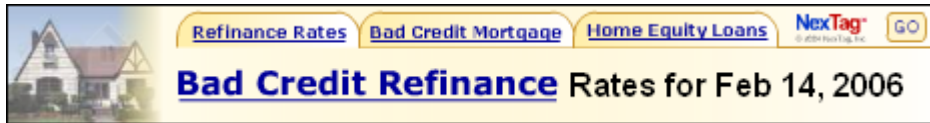


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Winds of change at city schools

By Sarah Barry
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Forces are converging within Charlottesville schools to create a perfect storm of change and possibility.

This year, the division has not only hired Rosa S. Atkins as its new superintendent, but it is also drafting a new five-year Strategic Plan and will have three School Board seats up for election in May.

With new leadership and a new plan, many parents and educators are thinking about what changes they would like to see in the division, and what they would like to see remain the same.

The first thing some would like to see addressed is the so-called achievement gap. "The achievement gap is what everyone talks about," said Paul Wagner, who has four children in the Charlottesville school system. "There's a real concern about the schools serving the needs of all kids."

Closing the achievement gap would mean that all students - regardless of race, class, gender, or family structure - can and do succeed in the city school system.

One measurement of the gap is the disparity between black and white students' scores on the Standards of Learning tests. Across the division, the percentage of white students who passed their 2005 English SOLs was 87. For black students, it was 52.

Black students fared even worse in math and science, with only 49 and 51 percent passing those subjects, respectively. Also in 2005, 83 percent of white students passed the math SOLs and 89 percent passed the science tests.

In terms of black student achievement, out of the 132 school divisions in the state, Charlottesville is third from the bottom in English and math. In science, the city is the lowest.

To address this issue, the School Board has made increasing "student achievement and success for all students" its first goal in its new strategic plan.

Bobby Thompson, acting superintendent of city schools, said that tackling the goals set forth in the strategic plan would be the first step Atkins would take in her new job. "I guess it's her blueprint for the next five years," he said.

Atkins is well aware of the problems Charlottesville faces and is not afraid of the challenges ahead. "Actually it makes me more excited," she said. "In applying to Charlottesville, it was really thrilling to think about responding to the needs that Charlottesville has. There are so many positive aspects of the school division that it excites me to think about the potential."

City Councilor Kendra Hamilton also believes that the city school system's strengths make it in some areas second to none. She hopes that this year's school budget can allocate resources to make the division stronger in all areas.

"I'm going to be looking really hard at the budget to see where it addresses these achievement issues," Hamilton said. She believes it is unacceptable for one of the best places to live to have some of the lowest student achievement levels in the state.

"It's going to be very painful for us to look at the areas where we don't live up to the lofty rhetoric," she said. "But, we're going to be a better division for having done so."

Emily Dreyfus, community education coordinator for Just Children at the Legal Aid Justice Center, would absolutely like to see more students achieving, but she believes it's more complicated than just black and white.

"To my mind, you can't separate race, poverty, special education status and the setting where these students are getting educated," she said. "They are all interconnected."

Dreyfus is a parent of two children in the city school system, one of whom has Down syndrome. She would like to see the achievement gap narrowing between students who receive special education services and those who don't.

In 2005, only 29 percent of the third-graders labeled as "disabled" received a passing score on their SOLs. The passing rate for students without disabilities was 78 percent.

And the numbers get worse in middle school, with only 17 percent of "disabled" eighth-graders passing the SOLs, compared with the 64 percent passing rate for students without disabilities.

As the mother of a fourth-grader with Down syndrome, these statistics are of particular importance to Dreyfus.

While she realizes that some special education students have cognitive disabilities that affect their SOL scores, she believes students with speech issues or minor learning disabilities can and should be successful. "But the data says they're not," Dreyfus said.

There also is a disproportionate number of black students in special education classes. Of the 690 Charlottesville students receiving special education services outside of the regular classroom, 413, or almost 60 percent, are black.

For the 139 students who are in special education classes for more than 60 percent of the day, 96 of them are black - more than 69 percent. The total population of black students in the division is less than 50 percent.

"That's why I feel like you can't separate all these issues - race, income, special education and achievement are all parts of the problem that need to be remedied," Dreyfus said.

Thompson said the school system is moving toward the inclusion model, which has special education students spending more time in regular classrooms. "I have high hopes that this inclusion model will make a difference," Thompson said. "The fruits are in the pudding but I am very optimistic."

This is one of the first years that the inclusion model has been followed in Charlottesville and new instructional methods have been emphasized. "These kids are exposed to other students' dialogue

and discussion, which, to me, are the most valuable things you can have in a classroom other than teacher instruction," Thompson said.

The division won't be able to measure the success of the model until June, when the results from this year's SOLs are in. It might also take a couple of years before the effects of inclusion can really be felt.

Thompson said that the new superintendent will definitely have to look at this year's scores to check for signs of progress. "That will be a measure to look at and if we are improving, to continue in that direction," he said.

For this budget year, the Special Education Advisory Committee has asked the School Board to fund the creation of two positions at Walker and Buford, one of which would be an inclusion specialist. So far, neither position is funded.

Amy Lankford, who spoke before the School Board on behalf of the advisory committee, said the positions would help provide individualized services and address the racial imbalances in special education classes.

"The truth of the matter is that the Charlottesville City Schools does not provide sufficient inclusion for special education students," Lankford told the board. "This is evidenced by the fact that SOL scores are abysmal and this will not change unless we support better access to the general curriculum."

While Thompson sees the potential value of these positions, he said he had to make some very difficult decisions when it came to this year's budget proposal. "When you go into a budget year and you are eliminating staff in the classroom, how can you justify adding these two positions," he said.

Dreyfus knows the constrictions the division is working with and is sympathetic. "It's hard to figure out what the solutions are," she said. "That's why I really hope the new superintendent is creative and ready to move forward."

Atkins is confident in her own past and abilities. "The experiences that I have had over the years have been experiences that can respond to a multitude of issues," she said. Over the last two years, the SOL passing rate for black third-graders in Caroline County increased from 56 to 67. Out of the 132 districts in the state, Caroline has the 68th highest passing rate - compared with Charlottesville's standing at 130th.

But Atkins has no illusions about making these changes single-handedly. She firmly believes in team effort. "Charlottesville City Schools already has a culture that is developed," she said. "I came into this position not to only use what I have learned, but to use the knowledge and skills of those that are already in place."

With two of his four children still in elementary school, Wagner is eager to see how the division will address these problems. "I hope people are realistic about what they expect a new superintendent to do," he said. "She seems really sharp and bright and really talented, but I didn't see her carrying a magic wand. It's not going to happen overnight."

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[Go Back](#)