

Action Greensboro Task Force on Public Education

Charge: To identify action steps to improve the public schools with attention to:

- (1) emphasizing the positives and promoting excellence;
- (2) serving bright students;
- (3) closing the achievement gap; and,
- (4) developing public understanding and support.

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Discussion:

The Task Force, working with the Superintendent and staff of the Guilford County Schools, identified a number of initiatives that would begin focusing on the two important issues of closing the achievement gap and increasing recognition and programming for talented students. The essential issues are these:

- (1) It is imperative that all students in the Guilford County School System receive an outstanding education and that no student is left behind.
- (2) The curriculum must provide opportunities for students who excel to be challenged and strengthened such that parents throughout the County see the public schools as an important educational choice for their children.
- (3) The citizens of Guilford County must embrace the public schools and commit themselves to assuring that the schools have the resources they need to succeed.

The Task Force decided, with the concurrence and support of Action Greensboro, to move ahead immediately on a major project to initiate a number of programs and services to support the identified initiatives. A fund, named the *Commitment to Excellence Fund*, was created as a vehicle to assemble resources to underwrite the activities.

The Commitment to Excellence Fund:

The Co-Chairs assumed leadership in seeking support for the fund. To date, twenty-six companies have pledged \$1,978,500 to be used over a three-year period. Initial programs, described later in this report, were carried out.

Given the initial fundraising success and the success of the first program efforts, it was decided to make the organization permanent. On June 14, a Commitment to Excellence Fund Committee, composed of the top 25 donors plus all founders, was formed. It will meet three times a year with the following activities: (a) fundraise; (b) collect, hold and disburse funds; (c) with school leadership, design, monitor and adjust programs;

(d) assist in the design, implementation and attendance for the “Celebrating Excellence in Education” event; and (e) promote excellence of K-12 education throughout the year.

An Executive Committee, composed of the co-chairs of the Action Greensboro Public Schools Task Force and representatives of those companies that contribute \$50,000 per year to the Commitment to Excellence Fund, met on July 18. The Action Greensboro Executive Director serves as Secretary/Treasurer.

Justice Henry Frye, a member of the Action Greensboro Core Committee, agreed to head an additional fundraising effort to broaden the base of contributors. Paul Mason and Chuck Cornelio of Jefferson Pilot are working with Justice Frye on the effort. For the first activity, all Action Greensboro Public Education Task Force volunteers were invited to a meeting at the Greensboro Historical Museum. Seventeen volunteers agreed to contact about 200 companies and request a \$1,000 contribution. About 10 companies were targeted for \$25,000 contributions. Brochures describing the Commitment to Excellence Fund were developed by Jefferson Pilot for the fundraising effort.

Commitment to Excellence Programs:

- A. *Recognition and programming for outstanding students:* A three week Academic All-Star Camp opened on July 9 and was held for 90 outstanding rising 9th graders on the Greensboro College Campus. Youngsters studied academic subjects – English, math, science and social studies. Teachers set high standards of excellence.

In English class, students wrote poems based on a specific experience. In social studies, students produced mock television newscasts on world events. Each day students took trial PSAT quizzes to prepare for the test given in the 10th grade to determine National Merit scholars.

One goal of the camp is to produce more National Merit winners in Guilford County.

- B. *Recognition of improved schools:* The “Celebrating Excellence in Education Event” was held on August 16 at the War Memorial Auditorium. About 1,200 teachers, principals, custodians, cafeteria workers and students representing 15 schools attended, along with representatives of the business community. We gave \$8,000 to each of the 15 most improved schools and \$1,000 each to two outstanding teachers at the schools. Top students at these schools selected the teachers. A commemorative program included a list of the contributing companies and comments from the students stating why the teachers were outstanding.

VF’s Mackey McDonald and Sarah Gillespie chaired this event. VF contributed t-shirts for everyone. Jefferson Pilot contributed banners for each school. The school system provided the commemorative program. About 50 volunteers assisted in seating the 1,200 guests, managing the program and hosting the reception.

- C. *Recruitment of outstanding new teachers:* Funds were provided that will allow the School System to award a stipend or bonus of \$7,500 to teachers who commit to teaching for three years minimum at selected schools.

Developing Public Understanding and Support:

A further initiative centered on the goal of securing commitment among the citizens of the County to build an excellent public school system that would include providing the resources necessary to achieve the goal. Avoiding repetition of earlier scenarios in which the Board of Education and the County Commissioners found themselves publicly feuding and taking legal action against one another, it was decided to work at a "grassroots" level among citizens to build understanding and commitment for the schools. Leaders of the grassroots committee that guided the earlier school construction bond initiative were recruited with the idea that there would be a long-term effort to build public support for the schools. An initial goal of developing support to increase funding for the 2001-2002 school budget was pursued and other goals/activities were delayed until that effort was completed.

Recommendations for Further Action:

1. Continue the work of the "Celebrating Excellence in Education" fundraising effort with an expanded base that includes companies and organizations in High Point and across Guilford County.
2. Continue the work of building support and commitment to public education and seek ways to include citizens from across all of Guilford County by creating a countywide education organization, similar to those in other areas such as Wake, Durham, and Mecklenburg counties. The organization would be independent of the schools and serve as a coordinating agency that would (a) organize programs and activities between the external community and the schools, individually and collectively; (b) bring together agencies and organizations that support the schools, volunteerism, after school programs, etc. into collaborative and mutually supportive working relationship; (c) build understanding and support between the schools in the citizenry; and, (d) initiate programs and activities as appropriate.

Implementation Steps:

1. An organizing committee should be appointed to determine the appropriate structure and goals of the proposed organization, including consideration of whether the Celebrating Excellence in Education effort and the proposed organization should be combined into a single effort.

Among the issues that should be addressed are:

- a. Investigate the organizational structure, budgets, goals, staffing, etc. of similar educational organizations in Wake, Durham, and Mecklenburg counties and what could be gained through work with the Public Education Network – a national association of local education organizations. Determine what the relationship to Action Greensboro should be initially and over the longer term.
- b. Design a system to coordinate the involvement of corporate and other volunteer/support activities for the schools that would also capture, codify, and report community/corporate/volunteer involvement in the schools as well as increase the ability of neighborhoods and nonprofits to provide effective out-of-school learning opportunities.
- c. Initiate a broad-based community discussion about the schools, community expectations, and community/neighborhood/parent responsibilities to create a long-term understanding of the support needed for the successful education of our children.
- d. Identify constituent concerns among citizens, parents, principals, teachers, etc. about schools and schooling and work with the Schools to increase the community's problem-solving ability, commitment to learning and commitment to positive youth developments, as well as higher levels of social trust throughout the community.
- e. Define the parameters of parental involvement and responsibility in the schools and work to enhance the relationship between schools and parents to ensure that parents and family members are constructively engaged in their children's learning process.