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County must welcome all students so none is left behind

Posted Sunday, February 1, 2004 - 12:40 am

By Diane Smock and Buddy Puckett

A local study reveals that the transfer option may invite a new set of education challenges.

Nowhere is it more urgent to achieve the goal of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) than at Title I schools, those schools that serve the highest concentrations of children eligible to receive meals at no cost or for a reduced charge. In Greenville County, 15 elementary and three middle schools are considered Title I schools.

During the recent Diversity Leadership Academy sponsored by the Riley Institute at Furman University, participants were assigned to teams to study real life community situations. Our group examined the impact of the NCLB law on our school district, with a special focus on Title I schools.

In talking to principals at some of these schools and other experts, we learned that these students face monumental challenges caused by poverty. Many lack proper nutrition and medical care and come home to neighborhoods where substance abuse, ineffective role models, incarceration or limited parental education are common.

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Diversity Leadership Academy members who studied the impact of No Child Left Behind:

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- **Mary Jeffrey,** The South Financial Group
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- **Linton "Buddy" Puckett,** Willis Corp.
- **Jeff Rogers,** First Baptist Church of Greenville
- **Diane Smock,** Ashmore, Leaphart & Rabon law firm and Greenville City Council

The positive academic and enrichment programs that are in place at the Title I schools we visited astonished us. We found these schools staffed with highly dedicated and motivated faculty and administrators. They provide continuous training to faculty, conduct outreach programs to enhance parental involvement, and encourage participation in the school by outside groups such as Boys and Girls Clubs, the YMCA and volunteer tutors.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

- Diane Smock is a Greenville attorney and former judge who has served as an at-large member of the Greenville City Council since 2001.
- Buddy Puckett, a longtime volunteer and local business leader, is chief executive officer of the Greenville office of Willis Insurance.

The last thing our Title I schools need is another obstacle, yet that may well be the "unintended consequence" of NCLB. The law allows students to transfer from a Title I school that does not meet the "adequate yearly progress" (AYP) standard established by the state for two years in a row. Under NCLB, these schools are deemed "in need of improvement." It is difficult for South Carolina's public schools to meet AYP because our state's standards are the third-highest in the nation, according to the Princeton Review.

In Greenville County, no middle school or high school met the AYP standard, and only 14 elementary schools did so, none of them a Title I school. Eight Title I schools in the county are currently designated "in need of improvement," and thus students at these schools have the option of transferring to other schools identified by the school district. The impact of such an exodus could be severe for both the Title I and the receiving schools.

When parents and students exercise their option to transfer to a school under NCLB, it has enormous implications for both the sending and the receiving schools as well as the children and their parents. At the receiving schools, the special Title I programs are absent. Class sizes tend to be larger than at Title I schools, and teachers who are accustomed to well-nourished and well-prepared students may not understand the behaviors of children who are hungry or sleep-deprived. Parents and faculty may fear that the incoming students will "hurt" that school's AYP.

The parents face their own challenges; for example, in some cases, the student has to take two buses to the new school, and if the child misses the first bus there may be no way to get to school. Because of job requirements it is sometimes impossible for parents to attend meetings at school. If the parent has little formal education or lacks proficiency in the English language, he or she may not be comfortable attending school functions.

Since the Title I moneys are allocated on a per-pupil basis and are tied to concentrated poverty figures, the Title I schools can lose programs that serve all students when only a few transfer away. There is also the possibility of stigma because of the inaccurate and unfair perception that the sending school is "failing." This can discourage new enrollment and erode morale among students and staff.

As schools and families grapple with the implications of NCLB, there must be continued support for the Title I schools' special programs and small class size, coaching for teachers and appropriate testing programs for children with additional needs. "Receiving" schools must be sensitive to differences in backgrounds of the new students, seek support for special programs (such as tutoring and extended day programs), and plan for effective engagement of the new parents.

Perhaps the most important lesson learned from our study is the recognition

of the magnitude of the challenges facing our Title I schools. The federal budget does not meet the commitment provided for in NCLB, and the state appears unable to make up the shortfall. It is up to the community as a whole, not just teachers and administrators, but also parents, business leaders and volunteers who care about the next generation of Greenvillians. We must all become involved to ensure that indeed no child in Greenville County is left behind.

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