



School board to consider partnership to boost success of black male students

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The Beaufort County Board of Education meets at 6 p.m. Tuesday in County Council Chambers in the county administration building, 100 Ribaut Road, Beaufort

Beaufort County's public schools could cement a partnership with a local nonprofit organization today that will become part of a strategy for improving the academic performance of black males and students in low-income neighborhoods.

Board of Education Chairman Fred Washington Jr. said a formal agreement with Neighborhood Outreach Connection, a community-development group already operating on Hilton Head Island and in Bluffton, will come before the board tonight.

"This is the kind of partnership that I want to highlight and I want to see more of," Washington said.

The outreach group's chairman, Narendra Sharma, spoke to the board about a partnership Jan. 8, a day after members received a report from an independent consultant that indicated the academic performance of black males lags every other subgroup in the district.

In response, board members voted to make raising academic achievement – particularly that of black male students – its top instructional priority.

Washington told other board members that organizations like the outreach program will help the district solve the problem, and he hopes this partnership will be the first among many the district builds.

"They're helping us provide beyond what we're capable of doing," he said.

Sharma agreed.

"The schools can't do it by themselves," he said. "That's the reality."

The neighborhood outreach focuses on fighting poverty by bringing support directly into low-income neighborhoods consisting primarily of black and Hispanic families. Its outreach programs include workforce development, health, and education, such as tutoring programs.

The organization has centers at The Oaks Apartments on Hilton Head and at Bluffton House Apartments. It also has agreements to offer tutoring at Hilton Head's Sandalwood Terrace Apartments and Bluffton's Simmons Cay Apartments, Sharma said.

He hopes to raise enough money to expand this year to other neighborhoods, such as Shady Glen Mobile Home Park in Bluffton, Woodhaven Apartments on Hilton Head and the Sheldon area of northern Beaufort County. The organization is funded through grants and donations from individuals and businesses.

Sharma said a partnership with the district will allow the program to bring the school curriculum directly into neighborhoods at a low cost. The district has the organizational structure, knowledge and human capital to make that possible, and the outreach group has facilities and social capital.

"We have a presence in low-income neighborhoods," Sharma said. "We have developed trust and relationships."

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The outreach group will manage program centers, recruit families to participate and find tutors and volunteers. The school district will help identify students who need extra help, train tutors and ensure what's being taught matches what children are learning in school.

The district would lend the group surplus books, computer software, technology or other supplies needed to ensure students have access to updated resources outside school. Some of this is already happening. Hilton Head IB Elementary, for example, has loaned computers to the group. Washington said outlining each group's role in a formal agreement will provide accountability.

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