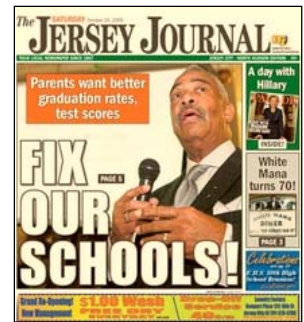


BRAINSTORMING

Superintendent, parents put heads together to improve high schools

By Melissa Hayes
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Mahaley Bowles thinks high school students could focus better if school started at 11 a.m.



If students got a late start and stayed in school until 6 p.m. - when their parents get home from work - it could reduce crime and increase student learning, she told Jersey City Superintendent of Schools Charles T. Epps Jr. at a community meeting this week.

While Epps said he didn't think Bowles' suggestion would work, he did entertain other ideas, like having guidance counselors spend more time with high school seniors.

About 75 people came out Thursday night to meet with Epps, administrators and principals at Metropolitan AME Zion Church.

The event was organized by Parents and Communities United for Education of Jersey City, a chapter of the Statewide Education Organizing Committee, which advocates for better education in low-income districts.

"When our children do not get a good education, we all fail and our community suffers as a whole," parent LueElla McFadden, president of PCUE, said.

PCUE organized the meeting as part of its "Graduation for All Campaign," which aims to have all Jersey City students graduate high school.

The district's graduation rate for the 2007-08 school year was 74 percent, significantly lower than the state average of 93.1 percent, according to data from the state Department of Education.

PCUE members also complained about student performance on the High School Proficiency Assessment tests. Districtwide, 73.1 percent of students were proficient in language arts and 60.1 percent were proficient in math during the 2007-08 school year.

Epps responded that the district is offering afterschool tutoring and restructured the high schools to provide smaller learning communities. The schools now have themed academies, and eighth graders must apply to programs.

Ferris High School, for example, is the Academy of International Enterprise, with a concentration on business and finance. Lincoln is the Academy of Governance and Social Sciences, with programs on law, education, cosmetology and culinary arts.

Dickinson is the Academy of Science and Snyder the Academy of Arts.

Two schools were not changed: McNair Academic, where 100 percent of students consistently pass state tests and go on to college, and Liberty High School, which Epps said was already a small learning community.

The new programs allow students to study things that interest them while still learning the core subjects, Epps said.

Epps acknowledged there is still room for improvement, especially with student attendance, but said it's going to take the entire community.

"We came out tonight because we are real partners with parents," he said. "That's what we do. We need to figure out why children don't go to school. But I can't do that by myself. I need the help of parents and community groups."