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### Opinion

Where's the outrage over CMS failure to educate students of color? District's performance leaves Black kids behind

Published Wednesday, September 8, 2021 1:08 pm by Arthur Griffin



PHOTO | TROY HULL

Former Charlotte-Mecklenburg school board chair Arthur Griffin cites the school district's inability to prepare Black and brown students for life after graduation as cause for alarm across the entire community.

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The last Facebook post of Heather Hyer (the young white woman killed in Charlottesville, Virginia during the fight white supremacy protest) read, "If you are not outraged, you're not paying attention."

If the 2021 annual African American student performance report card isn't outrageous, then you are not paying attention to our local school system.

We can stop the crocodile tears. We can stop the convulsion of promises to do better. And recognize that we have slipped into a decades long downward African American student achievement spiral that needs an immediate reversal.

There's an adage in the African American community: "when white folks catch a cold, Black people get the flu." The most recent student achievement data mimics this saying exactly. CMS African American student performance declined two to three times that of white CMS students. The decline didn't just start.

The downward spiral started in 2010, when Superintendent Peter Gorman closed several schools located in the Black community. The community was outraged with the merging of several predominately Black K-5 elementary schools with 6-8 middle schools, often without consideration of the negative impact of having middle schoolers learning in a facility built for primary students.

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The resulting outrage was short-lived. Soon after this decision, Project LIFT was announced with one of its strategic goals to graduate 90% of seniors that were college and career ready. Also, there was a promise of \$55 million dollars targeted to nine predominately Black schools.

Shortly after the launch of Project LIFT, the Chetty Study ranked Charlotte last among the 50 largest U.S. cities and Mecklenburg 99 out of 100 counties in upward mobility for poor children, mostly Black and brown. The Chetty Study outraged our local leaders and Leading on Opportunities was born out of this revelation. One of its strategic goals was to increase the college and career readiness of African American students.

Simultaneously, Superintendent Heath Morrison launched The Beacon Schools Initiative focused on 14 center city schools; focused on improving the academic performance of African American and Hispanic students.

Just a year later, in 2015, Superintendent Ann Clark launched the North Star Reading initiative focused on improving the reading skills of many African Americans students. By 2018, Superintendent Clayton Wilcox unveiled Breaking the Link Report and CMS 2024 Strategic Plan, "What Matters Most."

Presently, Elyse Dashew and Earnest Winston are rewriting the 2024 Strategic Plan with Student Outcomes Focused Governance.

Each of the earlier initiatives promised, but failed to deliver a transformed culture, sustainable results, key professional development, improved leadership, additional instructional resources, increased family-community engagement, differentiated support, accountability, and talent management.

Project LIFT failed to achieve its academic goals with seven of nine targeted schools still low performing; The Beacon Initiative failed to achieve its academic goals with 9 of 14 schools still low performing; North Star Reading initiative failed to achieve its goals with a whopping increase of 10 times the number of schools with 50% or more of its third-grade students reading at Level 1, the lowest reading level. Classroom teachers didn't fail. They did exactly what they were told to do. School leadership failed our students and teachers. In fact, CMS third grade College and Career Readiness reading scores declined across the board and the number of low performing schools increased from 37 to 42 prior to COVID19.

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The current rewriting of the 2024 Strategic Plan coupled with Student Outcomes Focused Governance offers little hope so far. At a CMS Board of Education workshop dated April 30, 2021, the board was asked by its consultant, "What was the total percent of Board time spent on student outcomes (achievement) from January 1, 2021, to April 30, 2021?"

Individual board members and the superintendent's answer ranged from 0% to 5%. Basically, the school board and superintendent admitted spending little to no time focused on student achievement at the same time telling the public the exact opposite. (There's a plan and we are working our plan.)

Where is the outrage? How many Black students need to fail before we pay attention; before we get involved; before we attend school board meetings, before we engage at individual schools; before you join the PTA; before you join the School Improvement Team and before you volunteer at your child's school or closest school? Are you paying attention now?

Arthur Griffin is a former Charlotte-Mecklenburg school board chair.

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