

Confronting Crisis In Our Disadvantaged School Districts

As a former principal in the Benton Harbor Public School district, Sherry Collins has seen the decay, witnessed the brutality and experienced the frustration confronting disadvantaged schools. Drugs, weapons, gang mentality, decrepit buildings and a growing apathy among teachers are preventing students from reaching their potential.

Collins has heard the rhetoric. But talk is cheap unless there is a plan of action to back it up.

"Even though we're a weapon-free and drug-free school zone, we still have a lot of gang activities and weapons problems, and have to expel kids," Collins said. "We have problems with drugs showing up at our school. A lot of the crime on the street shows up in the schools."

Collins, who currently serves as assistant professor in the graduate division of Grand Valley State University's School of Education, has experienced every one of these problems firsthand. They were happening at her school. She retired as principal of Benton Harbor's Gifted & Talented Academy in 1997. It is an elementary school.

To make matters worse, teachers who have been in that district for years are beginning to retire and it is becoming increasingly more difficult to replace them with a new generation of educators.

"Benton Harbor is a typical urban school district. We can't seem to replace teachers because of the low salaries and condition of the schools and buildings," Collins said. "The buildings are run down – some are over 100 years old – and need refurbishing or need new buildings altogether.

"It is nearly impossible to pass bond issues for new buildings because there is a lot of apathy among voters and many of the people who can afford to help fund bond issues have either moved out of the district or are sending their children to private schools."

The problems confronting Benton Harbor are not unlike those in Grand Rapids, Detroit, Muskegon or Kalamazoo.

Funding, or lack thereof, is always a problem. Repeated failed bond issues have forced administrators and educators alike to face that fact. They must come up with alternative methods toward educating our youth by making the most of what they have and what is available to them.

"A partnership with a university would be very helpful," Collins said.

The School of Education at Grand Valley State University is taking a proactive approach toward preventing urban decay in our schools by forming partnerships with disadvantaged districts.

Partnerships with GVSU are currently taking place with several schools in Grand Rapids and one at Muskegon Heights High School. The benefits are twofold. They help provide field experience for student teachers while at the same time providing the partner school with the much-needed personnel resources, excitement, expertise and additional staff members that a partnership creates.

The partnerships have been created to form programs and curricula, write grants and provide extra personnel to assist with tutoring. They have been successful in contributing to the professional development of student teachers, as well as those already on staff. They have enhanced curriculum and focused on learning needs and staff development. The results have included better test scores, a drop in absences and truancy and an improved environment for learning and teaching.



Student teacher Matthew Mollica interacts with students at Aberdeen Math/Tech Elementary in Grand Rapids.

"It has been wonderful for our children," says Barbara Todd, principal at Aberdeen Math/Tech in Grand Rapids. "We have been supported in terms of resources and have had one-on-one tutors for math and reading. Any time the kids get that kind of special attention, support and encouragement, the odds are that they are going to be more successful at learning."

The partnerships with GVSU, combined with the expertise and possible financial benefits a growing number of businesses are willing to contribute, help offset some of the shortcomings facing disadvantaged schools.

The grant-writing expertise provided by the staff at GVSU for Buchanan Elementary School in Grand Rapids helped create additional learning programs for children and also contributed to staff development objectives. Similar programs have been in place in Muskegon Heights, Aberdeen and Iroquois Middle School in Grand Rapids.

Partnerships that include GVSU student teachers and pre-teachers also help reduce the student-to-teacher ratio at those schools. At Aberdeen, GVSU professors have contributed to class lessons by presenting topics in their areas of expertise – from anthropology to geology – as a community service to the school.

"Being able to draw expertise from our people on campus really enhances the curriculum," GV field coordinator Patsy Fox said.

GVSU's partnership with Muskegon Heights has existed since 1992. It is aimed at staff development and school improvement. Ten separate grants – based on Goals 2000 and Standards Based Teaching and Learning – have been written toward enhancing curricula in science, language arts and math with additional expertise provided by GVSU professors. It has helped faculty earn the school North Central accreditation and improve MEAP test results, especially in areas of reading and writing.

"The partnership has made a tremendous difference there," GVSU faculty coordinator Loretta Konecki said.

"What I've found is the people who work with needy people really care about education and want to improve learning and work with students. Learning is important to them."

Partnerships alone will not cure all the problems confronting disadvantaged school districts, but they are becoming another option to help fill the voids created by lack of funding, teacher apathy and lack of teachers.

"There is a lot to be done and the future still holds many, many needs," Konecki said. "You need a cheerleader on an everyday basis to support every effort of every teacher, every child and every family. You need a support system for the achievement of actual learning."



GVSU Professor Charlene Beckman shows that hands-on experience is part of staff development at Muskegon Heights.