



The Times

Plan targets truancy, gangs in schools

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TRENTON - A center for dealing with truancy and a districtwide uniform policy designed to prevent gangs from infiltrating schools were among the key recommendations last night from a coalition to improve city education.

The wide-ranging, 34-page report dealt with issues affecting every aspect of the district, ending a six-month process launched after what Mayor Douglas H. Palmer called the "perfect storm" of March.

That's when one parent begged the city council to transfer her daughter from Trenton Central High School-West to another district, fearing for her safety.

That helped persuade Palmer to hold a forum for parents to air grievances - and eventually led him to establish the CHANGE (Coalition for Hands-on Achievement of Necessary Goals in Education) Coalition to develop recommendations to improve district performance.

Last night, Palmer promised the report will not gather dust on a shelf and the coalition will stay in existence. He then announced he will appoint the coalition's unofficial spokeswoman, Lucy Guzman, pastor of the Living Hope Church, to a surprise vacancy on the school board.

Guzman will replace another member of the Hispanic community, Abigail Ramos, who will not finish out her term for reasons Palmer did not disclose.

"There's a pulse to this (report)," Palmer said. "There's a heartbeat here."

Most recommendations can be implemented, said schools Superintendent James Lytle. He said his administration will report back in a month.

One recommendation already turning to fact is a truancy center, said Assistant Superintendent Gloria Hancock. She hopes that the center eventually will have its own site and go beyond apprehending students, providing counseling and other services.

The report also proposed a districtwide uniform policy to discourage gang colors and paraphernalia from showing up in the schools. Such policies, which are voluntary, are in one-third of elementary schools, Hancock said.

But Board President Bernard McMullan said uniform policies tend to be less effective in higher grades.

Another key recommendation called for delaying Palmer's plan to create magnet schools.

Instead, it calls for establishing a gifted-and-talented program by September 2007. Students could be bused two or three times a week to a center instead of being sent full-time to a magnet school. That would prevent a drain of talent from neighborhood schools, said district official Kelly Creque.

Among the biggest potential beneficiaries of the report is the Hispanic community.

They not only got Guzman's upcoming appointment but argued powerfully for hiring more Hispanics. Hispanics constituted 29 percent of all Trenton students last year, but just 9 percent of district staff.

The report also recommended the permanent establishment of an alternative high school for immigrant students. Such a school is now in temporary South Ward quarters.

The CHANGE report is tied to one put out earlier this year by the Newark-based Education Law Center, which acts as an advocate for special-needs students across New Jersey. The report gave a stark evaluation of Trenton schools.

McMullan, the board president, said the CHANGE report jump-starts the process of change. But, he added, he thought the report would contain more "revolutionary" suggestions.

McMullan was criticized by a working group on parent involvement for failing to show up for meetings, leaving members without expertise to write their report. McMullan acknowledged failing to follow up with the group. NOTE: Contact Larry Hanover at lhanoover@njtimes.com or at (609) 989-5726.

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