

The Times

Schools panel meets

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By MATTHEW RUIZ

TRENTON - Back in March, when Mayor Douglas H. Palmer held a school issues forum with the community regarding Trenton's public schools, he said he wanted to hear concerns from parents and teachers and residents.

He did, and he called for them to join a committee to identify issues within the schools and come up with solutions to problems.

Yesterday at 9:30 a.m. at the Trenton Marriott at Lafayette Yard almost 50 of those people did just that.

"We've taken the chief concerns that have been raised by parents and organized working groups," said Kent Ashworth of the mayor's office.

The committee, called the Coalition for Hands-on Achievement of Necessary Goals in Education, or CHANGE, is using as its factual cornerstone the Abbott Indicators Summary Report, a booklet containing facts about Trenton's educational performance.

"I've been having meetings over the past year with the commission on education because I'm not satisfied with the educational outcomes," Palmer said. "I just wasn't satisfied with the schools, period."

CHANGE will meet throughout the summer and fall, ultimately formulating a set of recommendations to improve a bevy of issues plaguing the district, from safety and security to parental involvement and special education.

In yesterday's first meeting of CHANGE, members formed small groups to focus on each issue and drafted mission statements based on their goals.

Leslie Hirsch of the Education Law Center, who is working hand-in-hand with the mayor's office on CHANGE, stressed the focus on the ultimate goal.

"(The idea) is to develop a way to make this happen," Hirsch said, "so people can sustain the focus on the goal, which is better schools for the kids."

Palmer said he believes it is important for him to use reports like the Abbott Indicators and not to let them sit on a shelf gathering dust. "There's no recommendations in there (the report)," Palmer said. "This is just facts. We could have just said, 'OK, thanks for the facts, see you later.'"

Though Palmer's enthusiasm gives the program impetus, it is the committee members, including police officers, parents and concerned citizens, who will be doing most of the work and on whom the project hinges.

But Palmer said he is not worried. Not even a little bit.

"I'm confident with the people we have here," Palmer said. "They're energized. I have the names on paper, but when you see them all together . . . it's like the all-star team."