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'Raising the bar' on Trenton's schools

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TRENTON -- In an effort to improve city schools, a newly formed coalition met for the first time this past weekend to develop steps towards change.

The Coalition for Hands-On Achievement of Necessary Goals in Education, also known as the CHANGE Coalition, broke into eight focus groups to brainstorm and study various issues within the district Saturday morning.

The meeting marked the beginning of a strand of monthly meetings that will culminate with the coalition presenting action recommendations for Trenton's school system by December, in time for the school budget process.

Created by Mayor Doug Palmer in the wake of the June release of the Newark-based Education Law Center's Abbott report -- Tracking Progress, Engaging Communities: Trenton Abbott Indicators -- the coalition is made up of parents, teachers, researchers and public officials.

Palmer said the recommendations will be a road map, promoting and inciting change in Trenton's schools.

"If they're not educated, their roots will not grow from the pot," said Palmer who expressed his faith in the city's youth. "I want them to have a life they will be able to sustain. I want every student to be challenged -- I want to raise the bar to have first class schools in Trenton ."

The eight committees -- which were created out of particular concerns that were expressed during Palmer's school issue forum in March -- examine safety and security, communication between the schools and community, parent involvement, curriculum and instruction, college and career preparation, addressing Hispanic students' needs, special education, magnet schools and schools for the 21st Century.

ELC developed the report after an 18-month-long process of interviews with district and school officials along with some public data, according to a press release. The research also compared Abbott schools -- designated districts in New Jersey that receive state financial assistance -- with Trenton schools.

Harry Luna, member of the Latino Chamber of Commerce and a member of the coalition, expressed concern about the future of the city.

"We expect our graduating students to buy a business and run a household, but how can they if they can't read and write or balance a checkbook," Luna said. "It takes everybody to help our students because if we're not teaching them, who is."

Luna suggested programs, such as his chamber's summer business mentoring program, to engage young children into learning and growing.

"We need to start investing in our children," he said, "They can either end up in jail or be a productive citizen. We need people to help and guide these kids -- most of them can go 50-50. You can push them to steal a car or to do something productive with their lives."

Some of the brainstorming during the meeting sparked discussions about the introduction of school uniforms to eliminate gang paraphernalia, notification of moving families from one area of the city to another and performing arts and science technology magnet schools. In terms of curriculum, the coalition also talked about a district-wide curriculum, college preparatory classes and a re-examination of students' who are enrolled in special education classes.

Reverend Julio Guzman, senior pastor of Living Hope Alliance Church and a member of the special education committee, stressed the importance of vocational schools and specialized technology schools to seal the future of Trenton's youth.

Guzman said while he was growing up in New York, he was enrolled in a vocational school which eventually sent him in an unexpected path towards college. He believes that by introducing students to things that interest them, they can discover life long goals.

"The community needs to be involved to make change," he said. "Children need to gain life skills, vocational skills so they can survive."

"I hope that the recommendations will be concrete and that the city takes action to see it happen, instead of a nice document that gets shelved," Guzman said.

Pat Sanaghan, an independent organizational consultant with the coalition, said he knows the recommendations will impact the city's school system.

"I think we're going to do something real, something to enhance the school district," said Sanaghan. "It's not a paper exercise to make things look good. It is going to happen."