

A moral plea to the City of Asheville to close the achievement gap

Your Turn

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Guest columnist

Asheville's citizens have a moral obligation to close the achievement gap between black and white students. This problem has plagued our city for decades and diminishes our chances of becoming a place that truly values the potential contributions of all of its citizens. We need to commit to overcoming this blight and we need to do it soon.

While perhaps not accepted by people in all parts of our community, raising achievement levels for the most underperforming students actually expands learning opportunities for all students. It does this by relieving the frustrations of the most underperforming students and thus making rich learning opportunities much more accessible to all. A rising tide does in fact raise all ships.

There is also considerable research that shows that classrooms in which students are separated into tracks, mostly along racial lines, have a detrimental effect upon both black and white students. This was the most compelling argument behind the Brown vs the Board of Education decided by the US Supreme Court in 1954. And the argu-

ment is as valid today as it was then. Yet it remains unfulfilled.

My specific plea to the City of Asheville is for the entire community – civic leaders, business leaders, parents and those who have decided to retire here – to get behind a comprehensive, well-supported after-school program located in the elementary schools for all our children- beginning with rising 3rd-5th graders, and then in short order embracing all levels.

This effort may not be the only solution to the long standing achievement gap, but it is one that has an established track record and is deserving of strong financial backing. Ultimately, we need to commit to effective after-school programming for every elementary school student. And these programs should be tailored to meet the needs of each student to bring them up to grade level.

About 20 years ago, Isaac Coleman, a revered African-American community leader, now deceased, began an organization called Read to Succeed. Its aim was to ensure that every young person in Asheville, would attain basic reading skills early on. Read to Succeed still exists and has been integral to after school programs in their present form. The connection between the two should be

maintained and strengthened.

We believe that our schools are doing their best to address the achievement gap from 8:30 AM to 3:30 PM. But we as a city have to make a commitment to our children that extends past 3:30 PM on school days, and beyond the 180 or so days of the school year as well. This commitment means after-school time, through holidays and spring break, and even the summer. We as a community have to wrap our arms around our children during out-of-school time. This is where we can bring all of our gifts of time, talent, and resources to support our children.

As a person who has headed up the after school program for the Asheville Housing Authority for two decades it has been rewarding to see the progress students have made, and I received accolades for my work. I have also learned that one does not need to be highly trained to make a difference for kids in our community. Every citizen has the capacity to demonstrate care, give time, and pay close attention to others' needs. These kinds of capacities can be found in every citizen of Asheville. The main challenge after school tutors need to fulfill is to coordinate with our teachers to understand current teaching methods

and the specific needs of each student. People, young and old, can learn how to do this.

When thinking of what all our children need to be successful, we need to resist the following false notions:

That only black people can teach black students. Many white Asheville-ians have attended racial equity trainings and can be effective teachers and mentors.

Opportunities will be taken away from white students by attending to the learning needs of black students.

Some parents believe that summer should be solely for fun and enrichment. I know that to stay on grade level, children must keep working academically on a daily basis throughout the summer. Summer must be a combination of both enrichment and academics to prevent summer slide.

The idea that only a superhero can do this work- it doesn't take a superhero; it just takes people who are committed. As a city, we must make the time and the resources needed to do this job.

I'm not ready to retire yet, not as long as the promise of our young black people is unfulfilled. There's too much to do. Parents please get on board and help us close the gap. I will work with you as long and as hard as I can.

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