

## **ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION**

### **REPORT TO COUNCIL**

**SUBJECT:** Education Forum with Dr. Alvin Thornton, Chair Prince George's County Public Schools: Blueprint for the Future of Prince George's County Public Schools

**BACKGROUND:** On Sunday, April 28, 2019, Greenbelt ACE, the Berwyn Heights Education Advisory Committee and the Greenbelt Black History Month Committee cosponsored a community forum with Dr. Alvin Thornton. Dr. Thornton opened the forum with remarks about the history of Prince George's County Schools and a discussion of the potential impact of the "Blueprint for Maryland's Future," the new state law shaped by the findings of the Kirwan Commission on Education. After Dr. Thornton's opening remarks, he took questions from the audience. After the question and answer session, the audience broke into four groups to continue discussion of concerns and possible community actions. Members of Council asked Greenbelt ACE to provide a record of the forum. This report is meant to provide this overview.

**QUESTIONS AND ANSWER SESSION:** The following is a list of issues brought up during the question and answer session and some of Dr. Thornton's comments. The discussion was quite long and this is meant as a representation of the concerns brought up by the community, not an exhaustive list.

- 1) Keeping students in local schools: There was a long discussion of the importance of community schools and keeping students at their community schools. However, Dr. Thornton cautioned the audience that we also need to keep in mind the needs of the entire student body of Prince George's County. There is a problem with inequity in the county and the system needs to look at all of the needs of the children and try to balance resources across many communities.
- 2) Infrastructure needs: Many schools in Prince George's County are not in good physical condition. Several participants mentioned the problems with Springhill Lake Elementary School. Dr. Thornton discussed issues with Prince George's County tax laws (TRIM) which have left the system lacking the funds to maintain and construct appropriate infrastructure for our students. Bussing students is also a problem, both because there are inadequate numbers of bus drivers and because many parents would prefer their students not be bussed outside of their community.
- 3) Academic achievement issues: There was a discussion of the school-to-prison pipeline and the racial disparity in punitive punishment. Community members are concerned about the gender gap in academic achievement. The importance of preparing students adequately for college or

career was discussed. The importance of universal pre-kindergarten education was also mentioned. Partnering with existing pre-K programs was discussed as a possible solution to the limited classroom space currently available for additional pre-K programs in the county.

- 4) Support for educators: Concerns were raised about educator pay in Prince George's County. Dr. Thornton stressed the need to have good data for decision-making. Data must be audited, transparent and inspected.
- 5) DuVal name change: The county is looking at changing the name of DuVal High School. A group of community members on both sides of the issue spoke about the change.

### **GROUP DISCUSSION:**

#### **Group 1 Concerns/Comments:**

- ... Who is observing what is happening in the schools?
- ... How do we get executives into the school to see what is happening?
- ... Why stop teaching cursive writing?
- ... Parents/communities need to better understand how schools get funded statewide. How is equity assured?
- ... TRIM (Tax Reform Initiative by Marylanders) needs to be repealed.
- ... Universal, full-day pre-K is needed in the county. Working with existing cooperative preschools may help the county meet those needs.
- ... Early childhood education needs to use play-based training.
- ... There is a need for longer school recess.
- ... Is PGCPs using textbooks from Texas? If so, it should stop.
- ... Need to reinstate an arts curriculum (Note: PGCPs has gone to an arts integration curriculum where arts are used to reinforce the academic curriculum).

**Group 2 Concerns/Comments:** Dr. Thornton met with individuals who wished to discuss the DuVal name change.

#### **Group 3 Concerns/Comments:**

- ... How is Joshua Thomas connecting with local communities and the local education advisory committees?
- ... How was Dr. Goldson's windfall spent? Could it have been used on teacher salaries?
- ... What is being done to reduce teacher's out-of-pocket expenses, especially at the elementary level?
- ... Advantages of MBWA (Management by Wandering Around). Administrators need to spend more time in the schools, observing students and staff.
- ... How are disciplinary actions (or other measurable actions such as grading, attendance, assessments) being monitored? Does this monitoring result in false reporting or possible over- or under-reporting of problems? How are we assuring that data is being reported honestly?
- ... Is the cellphone policy administered equitably among schools? What is the policy? Why can't students be required to leave their phones "at the door?"

**Group 4 Concerns/Comments:**

- ... Parents can make changes by getting involved at the school level. Parent/community advocacy is critical.
- ... Locally, Springhill Lake Elementary needs help restarting their PTA to provide a platform for parent advocacy.
- ... Schools are in need of counselors and nurses.
- ... Schools can/should be a base of support for the whole community, particularly in underserved or low income areas. Schools need to be a source of “wrap around services.”
- ... Parents need to provide advocacy to get laws changed, such as with infrastructure replacement/development.

**RECOMMENDATION:** This report is being provided as a record of the community input from the forum with Dr. Thornton. ACE recommends a copy of this report be forwarded to Dr. Thornton’s office.

Approved by ACE on 06/25/2019 with a vote of 6-0 with 3 members absent.