Thoughts on Dropout Prevention: Dr. Andrew Rinko

On Tuesday, December 1, 2015 community leaders came together at the Watson College of Education to participate in the GradNation Regional Community Summit, intended to raise awareness and address the critically important issue of high school graduation. Since 2006, the first year the state began reporting a four-year cohort graduation rate, the percentage of students graduating from our high schools in four years or less has risen 17.1 percentage points – from 68.3 percent to 85.4 percent. (Source: NCDPI September 2, 2015 News Release). This year, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction recently reported it highest graduation rate in the state’s history. Dr. Markley and the Board have done a terrific job with the expansion of programs, student supports and technology to meet the needs of 21st Century learners. In spite of this progress, there remains a compelling need for our community to redouble our efforts help every student succeed in high school, and to help those students who have exited the public school; the outliers if you will, who are now being served by community groups and faith based organizations. The GradNation Summit sparked the conversation; now we need to ignite the spark to make improvements in and out of the school house.

CHOICE OPTIONS
There are those who espouse “choice and vouchers” as the solution, and North Carolina is a state that is particularly “charter friendly” in spite of clear cut statistics that indicate that the charters are not performing any better or worse than our public schools. A far more insidious downside to these school choice options, and in many cases our public magnet schools, is the abject racial segregation that defines their enrollment. While the choice proponents purport that such options increase student performance, studies of show mixed results. A 2009 study of charter schools in 16 states conducted by Stanford University compared charter school student performance to traditional public education student performance (Source: Multiple Choice: Charter School Performance in 16 States. Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2009, http://credo.stanford.edu) and found

• 17 percent of charter schools reported academic gains that were significantly better than traditional public schools;
• 46 percent showed no difference from public schools; and
• 37 percent of charter schools had significantly worse student achievement scores than their traditional public school counterparts.

More recently, the North Carolina School Boards Association has tracked charter school performance and has identified four areas of weakness:
1) Low academic performance
2) Lack of racial balance
3) Lack of innovative transfers to traditional public schools, and
4) Examples of questionable management and fiscal compliance.

Further, they noted at the time “of North Carolina’s 100 charter schools (2011-12), 34 failed to meet their annual measurable objectives.” (Source: NCSBA Governmental Brief, http://www.ncsba.org/index.php?src=gendocs&ref=Charter%20Schools&category=Governmental_Relations)
NORTH CAROLINA VIRTUAL PUBLIC SCHOOL

Others have touted the North Carolina Virtual High School as a possible solution. However, the reported results from 2013-2014 North Carolina VPS Annual Report show that while this is one of the fastest growing educational options available to North Carolina students, the performance results for enrolled students when compared to state averages should be cause for concern. By example,

**Credit Recovery (Source: NCVPS 2013-2014 Annual Report, page7)**

The reported scores for our most at-risk students who enrolled Credit Recovery classes showed

- Biology: 13.6% proficient compared to 53.9% statewide;
- English II: 29.4% proficient compared to 61.2% statewide; and
- Math I: 17.4% proficient compared to 60% statewide.

**Advanced Placement (Source: NCVPS 2013-2014 report, page 8)**

The results for the Advanced Placement Testing by the NCVPS were not much better, with few courses meeting or exceeding either the state or national pass rate.

**ADVANCED PLACEMENT TEST RESULTS 2013-2014**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%Pass NCVPS</th>
<th>Statewide</th>
<th>National</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Art History</td>
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<td>43.0%</td>
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<td>63.1%</td>
<td>54.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: This data strongly suggests that the NCVPS, still in its infancy needs to reflect on its delivery and its support system, and our schools need to consider blended supports, both face to face and through the use of interactive technology.)
WHAT CAN WE DO?
Too often educational discussions have gravitated to the political bully pulpit as a theoretical means to address our GDP, our income and equity gap, or national debt, Medicare and Social Security funding, and a plethora of sociological ills that this country has been unable to remedy for the past 40 years. Apparently, since our public schools have the largest captive audience, we are expected to solve every single social, economic and political malaise! If that were the case, one would expect our prisons to be bastions of civil reform! So let’s get away from tantalizing rhetoric that heralds simplistic comparisons so that we raise our finger and shout “we’re #1.” Let’s focus on what we can change.

1. School culture: James Coleman, as part of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, study inequities in schools and his findings were demonstrably about the lack of equality on the base of race. Almost two decades later, Coleman would revisit the impact of school culture by studying the widespread success of parochial schools. He found a unique commonality that transcends facilities, books, and equipment. They are the characteristics that lend themselves to building community through purposeful engagement of the families and neighborhoods they serve. Not surprising, those same characteristics brand all our most successful schools, albeit traditional public schools or choice options. They lend themselves to building rock solid community relationships with an unwavering advocacy for the children they serve and guide.

School Culture Questions

- Do we consciously make ongoing and sustained efforts to engage our community, during and beyond the school day?
- Does every member of the staff recognize that their job is to serve and guide?
- Does the school get legitimate feedback from parents, and not simply an annual survey?
- Do you listen to parents? Do they have a voice?
- Are we advocates for all children?
- Are we part of the neighborhood and community?
- Do we actionize our mission statement?
- Is school a real place to learn and grow, where young people can explore, inquire, challenge and make mistakes?
- Is it a welcoming school? Does it exercise quality control?

2. School Discipline
The “School to Prison Pipeline” has been widely studied. In fact a 2013 study of the Wake County School System found a host of unsavory practices; I dare say they were not exclusive to Wake County and we can all learn from those findings. The following are direct quotes which are by no means an indictment, but they can serve as food for thought as we look at our own schools:

Prevention
“WCPSS does not have a comprehensive approach to preventing misbehavior or intervening when misbehavior occurs.
“The WCPSS does not have adequate prevention and intervention services across the district.
• The WCPSS has a shortage of counselors, social workers, and psychologists.
• Most schools in the WCPSS are too large.
• The prevention and intervention services that exist are inconsistently available across schools.

Alternative Education
The WCPSS does not have an adequate continuum of high-quality alternative education options.
• The WCPSS invest too many resources in unstudied, failing, punitive alternative programs rather than in expanding its capacity to meet the academic and behavioral needs of students in alternative schools.
• The WCPSS disproportionately segregates male students, Black students, and economically disadvantaged students into low-performing alternative education programs.

**Suspension**
In-school suspension is used inconsistently throughout the district and does not provide sufficient academic or behavioral services.
• While the WCPSS has reduced the use of out-of-school suspension (OSS) over the last few school years, far too many students are still given OSS for minor offenses and for too long.
• The WCPSS disproportionately suspends male students, Black students, economically disadvantaged students, and students with disabilities.
• The WCPSS does not have an adequate continuum of research-based alternatives to suspension.

**Security**
The WCPSS and local law enforcement agencies spends millions of taxpayer dollars on security personnel and equipment without any evidence that these measures actually make schools safer.
• WCPSS school resource officers (SROs) and private security guards lack adequate guidelines, training, and accountability.
• WCPSS students have been seriously injured by excessive force.
• School-based delinquency complaints in Wake County have increased substantially in recent years.
• Black students in the WCPSS are disproportionately subjected to school based delinquency complaints.

**Due Process**
• Due process for students facing suspension and expulsion is unfair.
• There are no hearings for students who are repeatedly short-term suspended.
• The WCPSS has ready access to attorneys but does not provide students appealing long-term suspensions with a list of advocacy resources.
• Students can be long-term suspended for up to 180 school days without ever even being an in-person meeting with the student’s parent.
• Each long-term suspension recommendation is not reviewed in a timely manner by a consistent Superintendent designee prior to the imposition of the suspension.
• Suspension notices are not automatically provided to parents who only speak Spanish, even when the district is aware of their limited English.

**All Areas**
The WCPSS lacks adequate data and does not regularly evaluate and disseminate public information about its prevention, intervention, alternative education, suspension, due process, or security practices.

3. **Extend educational opportunities** “beyond the school day”
• Evening alternative courses
• Saturday courses
• Create centers in neighborhood outreach centers; there are many unused public facilities on evenings and weekends
• Combine educational and recreational activities
• More effective use of the web for connectivity and interactivity
• Parent course
4. Eliminate unduly harsh discipline policies; they mitigate against sustaining students in school.
- Children need to be in school, not out of school.
- For those who can’t or won’t function in the context of the “normal” school, let’s create options.
- Let’s look at the statistics of punitive discipline. More often than not children of color are more likely to be suspended, even as early as kindergarten and first grade.
- Suspension should not be an option for young children unless the child present a severe and distinct safety concern, and even then we need to consider other alternatives.
- Create home and school links for suspended students. Suspension is a punishment. Let’s not add another by not letting them complete their schoolwork.

5. Stop Segregating Children
North Carolina was once a leader in school desegregation. Sadly that pendulum has swung; partly influenced by residential choice, economics and highly segregated choice schools.
Insure that our magnets schools represent the demographic diversity.

6. Improved Teacher Training
Targeted diversity training
Bi-lingual functional fluency training
Multi-modal methods of communicating effectively with parents
Ongoing sustained induction of new teachers