

Education gap

Among many problems Meriden public schools face - in common with every other Connecticut school system - is an education gap.

State-wide, this gap widens to a 37 percent difference between standardized test scores recorded by Hispanic and African-American kids and those recorded by the rest. Meriden does a little better with a 30 percent gap - but not as well as surrounding towns, and not as poorly as larger cities.

Each town and each school district, under the Connecticut system, is left to work on this problem by itself. The state Supreme Court defined an issue years ago, calling it "racial isolation," but gave no suggestions for its remedy. Meanwhile, Washington enacted "No Child Left Behind." Though touted as a means of increasing accountability (a momentary buzzword), it was aimed at least as much at teachers and their unions as at teaching and children. The result is that Connecticut's racial isolation issue is now measured by standardized testing required by NCLB.

It can only be frustrating for talented and dedicated educators like Meriden's Mark Benigni to work his brains out trying to devise teaching approaches which will reduce the gap defined by heartless and rigid CAPT and Mastery Tests. While there are education issues, underlying problems include early environment. Rich or poor, black or white, the sort of attention and education youngsters receive in their homes is critical to later performance, and any kid in a family with serious financial or social deficits will be at a disadvantage.

Treating underlying issues requires major infusions of unavailable cash. We therefore work on what is defined by standardized tests. Then, while apostles of NCLB stand by, tapping their toes impatiently, neither Congress nor General Assembly is in a position to offer help. Ironically, thanks to our economy, districts are looking at severe cuts in state support. In Meriden's case, that could be as much as \$11 million.

In addition, therefore, to attacking our infamous achievement gap, Benigni and his administration must find ways to save money. Among the options is consideration of avoiding costly outplacements of special needs kids (mandated again by federal laws for many years). Towns are responsible for the first \$55,000 in tuition costs for these placements and it could save money to provide environments for these kids within their own school systems. While this would generally reduce transportation costs, overall saving is an open question, since each teaching environment established within a district comes with costs. It's a situation businesses face in deciding whether to solve problems in-house or to outsource work.

Meriden is fortunate to have not only a capable administrative team headed by Benigni working on both ends of this school issue but also sound community support from groups such as Children First, headed by David Radcliffe, backing the system up. We urge citizens to become involved and to support the efforts our community is making to address the issues facing our schools.

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