CAMBRIDGE MATTERS - 2021-08

Stephen Rideout

[swrideout@aol.com](mailto:swrideout@aol.com)

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On October 20th, the J2W Foundation, established by John and Janice Wyatt, in collaboration with the Partnership for Learning and a host of partners held an event to signal the start of the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading here in Dorchester County. Those partners included the following:

Boys & Girls Club at Leonard’s Lane

Dorchester Community Partnership for Children and Families

Dorchester County Chamber of Commerce

Dorchester County Public Schools

Dorchester Public Library

Harvesting Hope

Healthy Families Dorchester

Hyatt Regency Chesapeake Bay

Mid-Shore Community Foundation

New Beginnings

Pine Street Committee (Empowerment Center)

SHORE UP! / Head Start

United Way of the Lower Eastern Shore

YMCA of the Chesapeake

The campaign is aimed, among other things, at having more children reading on grade level by the time they reach 3rd grade.

As we know, the education of many of the children in Dorchester County has been a challenge for years. The causes are multiple and known, and the efforts by the school system to address those efforts is also well known.

Over the years that I have lived here, I have seen and participated in several efforts to support the school system in its mission with most of those efforts failing or having limited success. The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading has, with community participation and engagement, the best chance in years to make real change to benefit the children of our community and the entire county in many ways.

The data on reading competencies show consistently that having children able to read on grade level by the 3rd grade is critical. We also know that children arriving at school who have not been read to by the parents, grandparents, or caring adults are going to be behind and will stay behind unless given extra help. Here is a link to the Annie E Casey Foundation Report that will provide you with more detail on how important this goal is. ([**https://www.aecf.org/resources/early-warning-why-reading-by-the-end-of-third-grade-matters**](https://www.aecf.org/resources/early-warning-why-reading-by-the-end-of-third-grade-matters)**)**.

We also know that children who are not successful readers are more likely to skip school and become involved in delinquent activities including drugs and alcohol. Helping them to be successful in their school activities provides them with the baseline skills that they will need to obtain an education, develop life skills that they will need on into the future, and prepare them for post high school training or education.

While this initiative has the power to change Cambridge and Dorchester County for the better in so many ways, I know that change is not something that is normally welcomed here. I would like to suggest to you, however, the kinds of change that I see are possible if this initiative is successful, are ones that everyone should want. These are some of the changes that I saw in my prior hometown when I was on the bench.

What I have seen elsewhere in the way of good change that come from this kind of an initiative are the following:

* Fewer absences – less truancy from school
* Fewer class disruptions that allow for more and better learning
* More good teachers who are willing to come here and stay here because they can do what they are called to do – teach
* Happier children
* More happy and proud parents
* A happier Dorchester County
* Less drug and alcohol involvement by youth
* Higher graduation rates
* Improved standing in Maryland for Dorchester County Public Schools
* More students going on to college
* More college and post high school training opportunities available
* Less delinquency
* Fewer youth being court involved
* Fewer youth being detained or sent to the state
* Fewer youth being transferred to adult court for serious criminal offenses
* Companies that are willing to move here with jobs because we have an educated work force
* Companies willing to move here because we have an excellent school system to which their employees can send their children instead of having to send them to a private school
* Significant economic development beyond what we have not seen here until recently
* Our tax dollars being spent for prevention and early intervention for youth rather than for incarceration and more expensive programs

All this change will not come immediately or automatically. Much of it will take years to achieve, although we will be able to see bits and pieces of it through data that will come from the programs that are already going such as the Boys and Girls Club and some that are in the process of being developed.

The change, however, will not happen if our community, which is all of us, sit on our hands and wait for someone else to do the work. The Wyatt Foundation is committed to this effort and is funding important parts of it. The school system is committed to this effort in its willingness to collaborate with groups and individuals who are ready and willing to help.

There is also an initiative called Moving Dorchester Forward that will be part of the Partnership for Learning, a local nonprofit, and a part of this solution. It has a number of projects that it is working on, seeking funding for, and planning also to be part of making a difference here.

To keep the initial excitement and interest going for the long term, however, you need to be part of the solution. You may already have or be part of a group that is already doing something. If so, how can Moving Dorchester Forward help your effort? You may have an idea that you think will help. If so, how can Moving Dorchester Forward work with you to develop your idea into a plan for which we can help you find funding? Please contact me at the email address above or at 703-655-6149 to talk about your ideas and work.

Our focus is in several areas of interest and are led by some of our group and the Wyatt Foundation. The areas that are currently our focus are:

* Mental Health – with the focus on children
* Advocacy – How do we engage mothers, fathers, and family in their child’s success – How can we make this a partnership with DCPS
* Court Involved Children or those that have been diverted from the court system– up to age 21 – truants, delinquents, child welfare, contested custody
* After School Programs – throughout the county
* Early Learning – Campaign for Grade-Level Reading

Each one of you has something that you can contribute. It may be an idea or a skill that a program could use or a nonprofit needs for a greater impact. It may be a willingness and ability to contribute financially to one of the efforts that are going or starting up. It may be a program that you are doing that we do not know about. It may be that you need to talk with someone to see what the need is, what your contribution can be, and how you might be able to help in some way.

While I know that Dorchester County is hesitant to embrace much change, I would hope that the changes that I suggested above and think are possible and in fact are probable would be something that you could see embracing. Understand that without you and others, our chance of success is lower.

During my time on the bench and working with youth in Alexandria and having tried to support program efforts here, I have come to know that the smartest money and the most effective effort is undertaken early in a child’s life to provide him or her with the resources that they need to succeed. The money and efforts that must come, if success is not achieved early, have to address difficulties in school, suspensions from school, expulsions from school, diversion from court, court involvement, and detention or incarceration. These costs both in money and lives are much more than they need to be, if we can undertake the vision and mission outlined above that the Wyatt Foundation, the Mid Shore Community Foundation, the Todd Fund, The Nabb Foundation, Moving Dorchester Forward, and other local groups support.

Please be part of the solution.

Thanks.

Steve