

Community Talks with the Superintendent

Questions and Answers

April 28, 2014

The following questions were submitted during the “Community Talks with the Superintendent” meetings. The responses are below in a question-and-answer format. Similar questions were grouped together.

If you do not see an answer to your question, please e-mail your question to the Gaston County Schools Communications Department -- communications@gaston.k12.nc.us -- and we will get an answer for you.

■ Why do some schools have instructional facilitators and others do not?

The district currently has 24 instructional facilitators who work in schools that receive Title I funding.

■ Who designed the *Read to Achieve* program and how is it affecting our students?

In July 2012, the N.C. General Assembly passed the Excellent Public Schools Act, which includes the *Read to Achieve* program. The program is designed to ensure that every student reads at grade level by the end of third grade. Third grade students take an end-of-grade test in reading to determine proficiency. If a child does not score at proficiency level on the end-of-grade test, there are other ways for the school to evaluate the child’s ability to read.

■ How do we receive more textbooks and library books for our schools?

Because of state budget cuts over the past five years, less money has been made available for purchasing textbooks. We realize this is a significant concern and we are working on ways to provide resources for our students. To provide more resources for our schools, the Board of Education is asking the County Commissioners for funds to purchase books for all elementary schools (\$500 per classroom), provide additional library resources for schools, and subscribe to digital science textbooks and streaming media resources for other subjects.

■ What can be done to ensure that students know about scholarship opportunities?

The following website is an excellent resource for students to learn more about college scholarship opportunities: www.GastonCountyScholarships.com. We also encourage students to check with their school counselor on a regular basis about applying for college scholarships.

■ When my child entered the ninth grade, he had an opportunity to meet with a school counselor about high school registration. Is it possible for my child to participate in an advising process each year?

Each spring semester, the high school counselors begin the registration process for the next school year. The process includes providing advising services for students and an evening informational session for parents. We invite students and parents to schedule an appointment

with the school counselor to discuss registration, course selection, course of study, plans after high school, and other topics. Our counselors are available to answer questions about the high school advising process.

■ **How will Gaston County Schools provide information to parents about the Common Core curriculum and instructional practices used in the schools?**

Our central level and school administrators will continue to work with teachers to provide curriculum information for parents. Teacher and school newsletters often include tips and suggestions for parents. The Common Core curriculum was implemented during the 2012-2013 school year. During this time, we offered Common Core information sessions for parents. Parents are encouraged to contact their child's teacher, the school principal, or the district office with questions about curriculum and instructional practices.

■ **How can parents become more involved in their child's school?**

Parent involvement is critical to a child's education. A variety of opportunities exist for parents to become involved in their child's school, including volunteer opportunities, PTO membership, family night programs, and other events. Please contact your child's teacher or the principal about parent involvement activities.

■ **Why does Gaston County Schools spend money on athletics when academics are more important?**

Our athletic programs are generally self-funding and do not take money away from academics. A few years ago, the school system had to make necessary repairs to the bleachers in several high school football stadiums to ensure safety. The district used capital funds (money designated for maintenance) to pay for repairing the bleachers.

■ **What can be done to improve the quality and appearance of a school's athletic uniforms?**

The athletic uniforms are on a rotating schedule for replacement. To replace uniforms outside of the school's replacement schedule, the school's athletic booster club, parents and community members may raise money for new athletic uniforms if they determine that an update in the quality or appearance is needed.

■ **How can we inform our elected officials about school issues?**

The Gaston County Board of Education meets annually with the elected officials who represent Gaston County in Raleigh to discuss legislative priorities. The Board also meets with the Gaston County Commissioners on a regular basis to discuss school issues. Citizens may contact their local and state elected officials to share suggestions and concerns about public school education.

■ **Who will be our voice to the county commissioners and state legislators about adequate funding for schools?**

The Board of Education and Superintendent Booker have made a commitment to be the voice for our schools, but also need the community to address local and state leaders about the importance of adequate school funding.

■ Senate Bill 402 is designed to offer teachers a contract in lieu of career (tenure) status. Is this required?

Senate Bill 402 is state law. The legislation requires each school district to develop criteria to identify 25 percent of teachers and support personnel and offer these employees a four-year contract and an annual \$500 pay increase. Teachers and support personnel who accept the contract and pay increase agree to give up career (tenure) status.

■ Are there plans to increase the number of nurses and social workers at schools?

The amount of time a social worker or nurse spends at a school is determined by the number of students at the school and the specific needs of students. Over the past few years, we have received grant money to pay for more social workers and nurses. Our goal is to have a full-time nurse and a full-time social worker at each school; however, adequate funding for nurses and social workers continues to be an issue.

■ What is Gaston County Schools doing about low teacher morale and teacher turnover?

A number of factors contribute to low teacher morale and teacher turnover including the lack of competitive salaries. In the 2014-2015 school budget request, the Superintendent is asking for funds to hire 56 teacher assistants and ten assistant principals and begin the first phase of a five-year plan to increase salaries for teachers, principals and assistant principals. The school system is planning to give teachers an opportunity to apply for a transfer to another school if they so desire. The transfer application process will take place in May.

■ What can be done to help schools with curriculum and testing changes?

We are hopeful that the N.C. Department of Public Instruction will consider a moratorium on changes to the curriculum and testing procedures for the next few years. Such action will give teachers and school personnel time to focus on current practices instead of worrying about how to implement new ones. The Superintendent also is considering ways to lessen the burden on teachers and school personnel so they can concentrate fully on classroom teaching and learning. Hopefully these ideas and others will help improve morale and reduce teacher turnover.

■ Why has the school system implemented curriculum changes over the past two years while decreasing the number of school employees needed to implement these changes?

The Common Core curriculum was a significant change during the 2012-2013 school year. Implementing the Common Core curriculum led to changes in instructional practices, programs, testing, and intervention for students. While the changes were designed to have a positive impact on student learning, they occurred at a time when the school district faced a decrease in funding and reduction in personnel. This created significant challenges for our schools.

■ How can the school system ensure that teachers receive the support they need when changes are implemented?

We realize that teachers must have the technology, instructional resources, and personnel assistance necessary to support classroom teaching and learning. Professional development and

support for teachers are critical; however, the amount of professional development and support that can be given to each school depends on how much funding is available.

■ **Why is it difficult for an employee to get a school transfer for his/her child?**

We have a policy that makes it possible for full-time GCS employees to request a student transfer. An employee may request to transfer his/her child to the school where the employee works or to the school that is closest to the employee's school of employment. The Student Assignment Office will be glad to talk with any employee about a school transfer for his/her child.

■ **Is it possible to have a teacher induction program for international teachers?**

Gaston County Schools takes pride in having international teachers in our classroom. Our international teachers are invited to participate in our Teacher Induction Program for Success (TIPS), which provides support and training for new teachers. We will make a special effort to inform our international teachers about our TIPS program and encourage them to participate.

■ **What can be done to make more training opportunities available for teachers?**

The Office of Professional Learning will determine ways to provide more training and professional development for employees. We encourage employees to take advantage of the professional development opportunities made available during the annual Teaching and Learning Conference, which is held in early August at Gaston College.

■ **What is Gaston County Schools doing to make necessary repairs at schools?**

Gaston County Schools is responsible for maintaining 56 school campuses and eight central office locations – this includes 200 buildings and five million square feet of space. Without question, we have aging school facilities in need of repairs – 50 percent of our schools are at least 30 years old and 30 percent of our schools are at least 50 years old. Funding for building maintenance (often referred to as capital funding) comes from Gaston County. The state does not provide money for maintenance. For the past seven years, Gaston County has provided \$1,277,000 per year for building repairs. While \$1,277,000 may seem like a lot of money, it equates to only \$22,800 per school per year. A major repair such as replacing the equipment that provides air conditioning for a school costs approximately \$300,000. If we encounter a large-scale repair at one school it means less money for maintenance at other schools.

■ **How does Gaston County Schools receive its funding?**

Gaston County Schools receives approximately 65 percent of its funding from the state, 20 percent from the county, 10 percent from the federal government, and five percent from grants. State funding is distributed to school districts based on student enrollment and other criteria that are not controlled by the Board of Education. County funding is determined by the Gaston County Board of Commissioners.

■ How does Gaston County Schools rank in funding when compared to other school districts across the state?

For the 2012-2013 school year, Gaston County Schools ranked 114th out of 115 school districts in total per pupil expenditures.

■ Are schools given equal resources regardless of size or location in the county?

Schools are allocated funds and resources using equitable formulas – a school’s location does not affect the amount of money it receives. Some schools qualify for Title I funds. This money is for schools that have a high percentage of students who qualify for Free and Reduced Lunch. Funds and resources donated to a school by a Parent-Teacher Organization, business or civic group vary from school-to-school. The amount of grant funding for a school depends on the number of grants a school applies for and receives.

■ What is the source of Title I funds? How are Title I funds distributed?

Title I funds are provided to Gaston County Schools by the federal government. A school is identified as a Title I school based on the percentage of children who receive free and reduced price lunch. The amount of Title I funds a school receives is based on the school’s enrollment. For an elementary school to qualify for Title I funds, at least 60 percent of the students must receive free and reduced price lunch. For a middle school to qualify for Title I funds, at least 70 percent of the students must receive free or reduced price lunch.

■ How do schools use Title II funds?

The federal government provides Title II funds for the specific purpose of recruiting and retaining a highly qualified workforce. Gaston County Schools uses Title II funds for teacher recruitment and professional development. The funds also pay for the Curriculum Facilitator and Instructional Technology Facilitator positions in our schools. The facilitators coordinate training for teachers and support classroom instruction.

■ When will the Gaston County Board of Commissioners issue the remaining \$95 million in bonds that were approved by the voters in November 2007?

The Board of Education has asked the County Commissioners to consider issuing additional bonds to address critical maintenance needs and repairs at our schools. The Board of Education is hoping the commissioners issue the bonds this year.

■ How does Gaston County Schools use proceeds from the N.C. Education Lottery?

Gaston County – not Gaston County Schools – receives lottery proceeds from the state. The lottery funds are primarily used to pay interest on school bonds.

■ What educational choices and opportunities for students are being considered by Gaston County Schools?

Gaston County Schools currently has two high school magnet schools – Gaston Early College High School and Highland School of Technology. Students are chosen through an application

and lottery process. The school district is considering a possible expansion of the International Baccalaureate (IB) Program at Hunter Huss High School, a 45/15 (year-round) elementary school, and a STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics) elementary school. We continue to review Career and Technical Education course options for middle and high school students and Advanced Placement (AP), fine arts, online and other elective course options for high school students.

■ **Why is it difficult for a student to transfer from one school to another?**

It is difficult to approve all student transfer requests because many of our schools are at or above student capacity. Parents are invited to apply for a student transfer to a school outside of their assigned attendance zone. All transfers will be considered if space permits; however, the school system must deny a transfer to a school where adequate space is not available.

■ **When are student transfer requests accepted for the 2014-2015 school year?**

Student transfer requests for the 2014-2015 school year are being accepted now. The application is available on the Gaston County Schools website or by [clicking here](#). Parents may also pick up an application at the Central Office. The deadline to submit an application is May 15. Parents will be notified about the transfer request by May 31.

■ **What are the plans for the *Rachel's Challenge* anti-bullying program?**

Gaston County Schools plans to continue the *Rachel's Challenge* program. The school district began the anti-bullying and character education initiative in 2012-2013, and it became an immediate success for our schools. We kicked off our *Rachel's Challenge* activities for the 2013-2014 year with a series of school assembly programs featuring NBA basketball star and motivational speaker Adrian Branch. Mr. Branch spoke to students about his life experiences and focused on the importance of being responsible and making good decisions. The program has strengthened our efforts to promote character education. Elementary school children are active in KC Clubs (Kindness and Compassion) and continue to create paper chains for display at the school – each paper link represents an act of kindness. In our middle schools and high schools, students are involved in FOR Clubs (Friends of Rachel), which are named in memory of Rachel Scott, who inspired the development of the *Rachel's Challenge* program.

■ **What help is available to at-risk students to ensure a smooth transition into a new school?**

Our goal is to help at-risk students as much as we can to ensure they have a successful school experience and graduate from high school. When a student enrolls at a new school, the student and his/her parents meet with the school counselor to discuss registration, courses, the student's needs, and other topics. Grades are reviewed and a graduation plan is developed if the student needs one. The counselor also discusses our credit recovery program for students who have failed a course – this helps the student get back on track to graduate. If a student is transitioning from Warlick Academy or returning to school after a long-term suspension, the school district's transition counselor works with the students and his/her parents to make the transition as smooth as possible.

■ **What support is provided to students who have behavioral issues?**

Gaston County Schools uses a program called Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) to provide support for students who have social/emotional issues. The MTSS team at each school evaluates a student's situation and determines what services the student needs. Our school social workers, counselors, nurses, psychologists and mental health clinicians are available to provide help to students. We also have an alternative education program for students in grades 6-12 who need intensive behavioral support.

■ **When will all schools have wireless Internet (Wi-Fi)?**

All middle schools and high schools have Wi-Fi. All elementary schools will have wireless Internet by the beginning of the 2014-2015 academic year.

■ **What is being done to make technology such as tablet computers available for student use? Will students be allowed to bring their own tablet or similar device to school for use in the classroom?**

Putting technology in students' hands is a priority for Gaston County Schools, and our schools have computer labs, laptops and tablets for instructional use. To provide a tablet computer for each student in our school system, it would cost approximately \$11 million. Therefore, we will allow students to bring their own computing device to school for use in the classroom once all schools receive wireless Internet access.

■ **What is the current computer-to-student ratio?**

The computer-to-student ratio for Gaston County Schools is 1 to 1.87.

■ **What is the school district's plan to replace out-of-date computers?**

Gaston County Schools strives to update computer technology on a regular basis; however, lack of funding hinders our efforts to upgrade technology. The decision to replace out-of-date computers and purchase new ones is made at the school level by the principal. The school district's technology department is responsible for ensuring that schools and the central level offices have the infrastructure to support technology. The Board of Education is requesting \$1.9 million for new desktop computers in instructional labs and Chromebooks (with mobile carts) for classroom use.



Gaston County Schools

www.gaston.k12.nc.us

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