

FOR THE RECORD

Live by the test scores . . .

There is palpable concern in the air about the reputation of Chapel Hill High School. It might be a good time in the midst of all the concern about tests and cheating to look for a moment at how we’ve judged that school, and all schools for that matter.

In short, there’s been an emphasis on numbers and not so much on reading comprehension.

In 1999 for instance, a weekend real estate edition of *The Wall Street Journal* contained a chart — one of those little snapshot info boxes — from an Ohio-based research firm. Using a combination of mainly SATs scores and percentage of students taking AP courses, the company named CHHS one the top ten schools in the U.S.

Not long after that, the school and the district were noting quite often that *The Wall Street Journal* itself had named Chapel Hill High one of the top ten in the country.

Folks at East Chapel Hill High, which hadn’t been around long enough to make it to the Journal’s chart, were miffed. But not long after, *News-week*, owned by the same corporate media giant that owns Kaplan testing, gave both schools high rankings based mainly on the number of students taking AP tests. (Kaplan, by the way, makes a good bit of its money by helping kids prepare for those tests.)

For its part, the Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools administration did a lot more student measuring and reporting and was fairly transparent about its struggles to reach all students. And even though disaggregated test scores pointed to trouble, the top ten label wasn’t discarded.

Then the state followed the federal government in getting involved in measuring schools in a more comprehensive fashion. No Child Left Behind, the federal accountability program, has many, many flaws but it did serve to open more eyes to the work before us to live up to education ideals.

By many measures, Chapel Hill High has long deserved its reputation as providing one of the state’s best high school educations. But it is far from perfect. No high school is.

And one of those imperfections, named by students on surveys again and again, is the high stress atmosphere that accompanies the growing reliance on tests and testing to measure student achievement.

The school administration is trying to put the situation in perspective, but in a region where the brand “Chapel Hill High” is highly regarded, the cheating scandal is likely to snowball. It’s one of those “bigger they are/harder they fall” stories and the school community is trying to sort this out under intense and often simplistic media scrutiny.

Just like the athletes on a team disqualified because one of their teammates cheated, the rest of the student body at Chapel Hill High and its many proud graduates will be unfairly sullied.

It’s unfortunate, but it’s also a teachable moment for everyone involved. As this year began, Chapel Hill High’s School Improvement Team recognized that the school needs to improve in the area of honor and integrity. And we have years of reports from students that they feel like they’re in a testing pressure cooker.

As for the scandal in question, we don’t know the specifics or even if reports that this behavior has gone on for a while are true or exaggerated.

The school and district administrations are promising to deal quickly with the issue. Let’s hope that in their haste to get past this episode, they do not fail in fully examining the extent of the cheating and, perhaps even more importantly, the atmosphere that fueled it.



An open letter to Hidden Voices

FRANCESCA HYATT

[Editor’s note: The following is an open letter to Hidden Voices and the participants of The ArtsCenter’s production “Because We’re Still Here (and Moving).”]

I was deeply moved by the performance this past Friday, and grateful that so many were willing to share their stories. Some of the stories were almost unbearably sad — stories of prejudice and fear, of meanness and ignorance. Some of the stories were beautiful — stories of family and tight-knit community, of providing for each other’s needs, of inter-generational relationships. Some things I learned were alarming; I never understood so clearly until watching the performance how damaging integration policies were to the Northside community.

One element that I felt was missing in the performance was even a mention of the need for healing between the Caucasian population of Chapel Hill/Carrboro and the African-American community. I realize that the focus was on telling stories that might otherwise be forgotten, but if we only tell the story of oppression and the desire to overcome, we will continue to create a world where we are all battling for power instead of learning how live together. I’m not suggesting that this is the sentiment of those who were involved in the project — I’m sure that it’s not. But I am wondering — what is the next step and how can I be involved?

The Hidden Voices brochure says that in Stage 3, at the per-

“Sometimes I feel paralyzed, aware that good intentions aren’t nearly enough to bring healing to wounds that are older than the hills.”

formances, “interested audience members will be prompted to choose one of several targeted actions as a means of addressing the issues raised by the show.” I’m not sure if I missed this or if it didn’t happen — but I don’t think it’s too late!

I am a Caucasian female and have been living in the Sunset neighborhood for six months. I realize that I am part of the change that is happening in this community, that I am here because I can afford to rent one of the new houses built on an empty lot where someone probably used to raise chickens and grow vegetables. It terrifies me to think that I might be contributing to the breaking apart of a community, when one of the main things I want in life is to live in a neighborhood where people look out for each other, where grandparents impart wisdom and kids can play freely outdoors.

I would love to sit with residents of the Northside neighborhood and hear more of their stories and ideas, and find out

what can be done to keep this community thriving. I would love to hear what my neighbors would like from me, an outsider. Sometimes I feel paralyzed, aware that good intentions aren’t nearly enough to bring healing to wounds that are older than the hills. I have fears that whatever I do will be wrong, because I’m throwing my white privilege around and can never hope to fully understand the complex issues that are attached to an old community. So I’m asking — can I be part of the conversation? Can I be part of the healing?

Please, if it’s possible to contact the individuals who gave interviews for this performance and find out if they would like to be part of a community-wide conversation about the issues raised in the performance, I would be thrilled.

Thank you again for the wonderful work you did putting this piece together. You stirred up a lot of questions and ideas, and I hope that something wonderful will come out of this.

Francesca Hyatt works at SEEDS Community Garden and lives in Carrboro.

LETTERS POLICY

Letters should be no more than 425 words in length and must be accompanied by the author’s name, address and contact information. We will publish one letter per author per month. Typed letters are preferred and email even more so. That said, send your letters to:

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A series of problems

BY CHRIS FITZSIMON

The crisis in North Carolina’s mental health system is center stage this week in the state’s political debate, something long overdue considering the woeful performance of the system that is supposed to provide care for people with mental illness, a developmental disability or addiction.

The Raleigh *News & Observer* kicked off a five-part series Sunday about the ongoing problems with the 2001 mental health reform efforts under the bold banner headline “Reform wastes millions, enriches providers, fails to serve mentally ill.”

All but two of the candidates for governor and lieutenant governor were scheduled to answer questions about mental health policy Monday before an audience of mental health advocates, patients and providers at the RBC Center in Raleigh.

More details about the candidates and their proposals, or lack of them, in a future Fitzsimon File and on the Progressive Pulse, the N.C. Policy Watch blog, but early presentations were less than reassuring, filled more with clichés and slogans than displays of meaningful understanding of the system’s problems, much less solutions to them.

The first part of the *News & Observer* series included more disturbing revelations about a mental health system plagued by problems since the 2001 reform effort began.

Thirteen people have died since then from suicide or overdose shortly after leaving a state mental hospital, numbers that may have been reported before, but still raise serious questions about access to community services, hospital discharge policies and the lack of effective re-entry programs for patients.

The first installment of the series highlighted two new pieces of information: one the determination that the state has wasted \$400 million on one category of mental health services,

called community support, designed to help people with mental illness or a developmental disability with a variety of life skills, with the goal in many cases to help the patient live independently or with less-intensive care.

The state launched community support services in 2006 and expected it would cost \$5 million a month, according to the *News & Observer* report, but a year later the bill was more than \$90 million a month, prompting a state audit of a small sample of providers of community support services.

The audit concluded that more than a third of the services provided were not “medically necessary.” The *News & Observer* extrapolated the numbers to come up with the \$400 million in waste and assigns much of the problem to a decision to pay companies \$61 an hour for services actually provided by employees with a high school diploma.

The state tried to lower the reimbursement rate to \$41 last year, which provoked a firestorm of protest, so the state compromised with the current figure of \$51 an hour. No one disagrees that providers shouldn’t be charging high rates for services provided by low-wage workers, but the community support issue is more complicated than portrayed in the *News & Observer*.

The story includes anecdotes of workers taking patients to the mall or out for breakfast and charging the top rate. The rate is a legitimate issue, but helping people with mental illness or a disability shop for themselves or overcome their fear of interacting with other people in public is a legitimate service that must be part of treating people in their communities instead of in large institutions.

The story doesn’t explicitly say the services shouldn’t be provided, but many readers are likely to seize on the activity itself as waste, not the reimbursement rate.

There is no confusion over the startling claim by Gov. Mike Easley that his administration opposed the 2001 reform efforts, led by

Health and Human Services Secretary Carmen Hooker Odom, who Easley says “vigorously” opposed the plan in the General Assembly. That must certainly be news to state lawmakers and the media who covered the debate. The Sunday story quoted Easley from a December meeting with reporters, saying that reform “just happened sort of overnight in late October and we never thought they would do it.”

That’s troubling enough — that the governor of the state, with a huge staff monitoring the General Assembly every day, missed one of the biggest pieces of legislation in the last 20 years that directly affects the biggest department in his administration.

But whether Easley knew the reform effort was happening or not, he signed the legislation that created it. Signed it, not vetoed it, not held a press conference to condemn it, but signed it.

And as for Hooker Odom, who resigned last year, she was a fixture at the General Assembly and was involved in every step of process to craft the reform legislation. That might explain why she wrote an op-ed column in November 2001, just after Easley signed the bill, saying she had made “fixing the mental health system a top priority” and that “reform has been attempted many times, but this effort is going to succeed because the time is right.”

Doesn’t sound like very vigorous opposition. The newspaper series resumes Tuesday, so maybe we’ll find out more about the governor who opposed reform but didn’t tell anybody.

One thing Easley has done is unite politicians from both parties, judging from the presentations by candidates to mental health advocates Monday. To a person, every one agreed on the biggest problem with the state’s mental health services — a lack of leadership. Hard to argue with that.

Chris Fitzsimon is director of N.C. Policy Watch. www.ncpolicywatch.com

LETTERS

Thanks, Ken

Though a Chapel Hill-ian, I have grown more and more fond of reading your weekly paper, *The Carrboro Citizen*. In recent weeks, I find myself eagerly awaiting the next installment of Ken Moore’s “Flora” column. His appreciation for the natural world and eloquent expression make his columns a pleasure to read. Most recently I enjoyed a chuckle of recognition when Ken described his “panic” at the “constant assaults of springtime awakenings,” as they prevented him from completing “well-intentioned chores and worthy projects set aside for the winter months.” I thought I was the only one feeling that way each February! I am slowly becoming resigned to the fact that I live in a climate that beckons me outdoors all four seasons of the year, so those winter projects will continue to escape my attention.

Thank you to Ken Moore for reminding me of that fact and letting me know it’s OK.

NILS BRUBAKER
Chapel Hill

Town should act

I was very dismayed to read about the bicycle accident suffered by musician Dave Laney. Particularly so, because I had just written to Mayor Chilton a few days ago about unregulated traffic in Carrboro. Aside from putting up with the speeders and the tailgaters, I have discovered that cars are not stopping as I attempt to go to and from the Century Center, within the crosswalk, at night. This was my second letter in a year, and I have received no reply. Interestingly, a recent letter to parks and recreation about children in the dog park, received immediate attention and response. Not only are human lives at stake here, but surely the town recognizes the potential liability of not enforcing the laws and regulations that it creates.

VIVIAN PHILLIPS
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Published Thursdays by Carrboro Citizen, LLC.

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