

New project seeks to improve schools

Achieve Together aims to help 11 sites where test scores are low and poverty often is high.

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Carrie Gibson leads a meeting last week at Johnson C. Smith University. TODD SUMLIN –
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A new project in Charlotte is designed to create advocates for Mecklenburg's lowest-performing public schools.

Three west Charlotte organizations last week became the first hosts for Achieve Together, a volunteer service project organized by The Lee Institute, a nonprofit leadership development organization.

Groups of concerned citizens met for the first of five weekly community circles at Friendship Missionary Baptist Church, Johnson C. Smith University and Philip O. Berry Recreation Center.

Each group is working to develop theories for change in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools' Achievement Zone, which is composed of 11 schools where test scores and achievement are low and poverty often is high.

The ideas each group develops could include policies or practices for reducing the dropout rate and improving success rates for students.

"It's not becoming involved with one particular child. It's driving for change at a school or the Achievement Zone," said Libby Cable, director of The Lee Institute.

The project is funded by a two-year, nearly \$490,000 grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which has a history in Charlotte. In 2007, it awarded CMS a three-year, nearly \$1.5 million grant for training and staff, said Chris Williams, spokesman for the foundation.

The purpose of the CMS grant is to help Achievement Zone high schools collect information they can use to find ways to improve.

The foundation awarded a separate grant to The Lee Institute to get the community involved in supporting Achievement Zone schools. CMS officials say this is vital for boosting student achievement.

The Lee Institute found three locations for community circles and hopes to create more in the future. Each group has up to 10 members.

The groups will be "looking at data nationally and getting some training in how to get their voices heard and navigate complex systems and push for positive change in their community," Cable said.

The idea of supporting schools appealed to Deborah Brown Quick, chair of Johnson C. Smith University's Social Sciences Department. She joined the community circle on the campus.

"I'm really concerned, particularly about the high dropout rate among young black men," Brown Quick said.

The number of black CMS dropouts was 1,404 last year, compared with 445 whites. In 2006-07, more than 1,500 blacks and just under 600 whites dropped out.

"What will emerge probably is a myriad of things to be done," Brown Quick said. "Some of them will be advocating for policy changes. Some people were also saying volunteering to be mentors also would be good."