

Rowan County citizens are once again asking questions about the state of public education and student achievement in our county. And, the Salisbury Post is putting education on the cover of nearly every newspaper in the last week. Hooray! Rowan Partners for Education, an independent, third-party education advocacy group created through the Chamber and funded by donations from the local business community, welcomes this new level of dialog regarding public education in our community.

The achievement rate of our students is at a critical juncture. Things have to change. In the presentation presented to the Board of Education at their last meeting, Superintendent Dr. Judy Grissom had this message, “We are all working hard, but are not making the necessary gains in student achievement...we need to do something different. We are in this journey together and are committed to doing whatever it takes to improve instruction for ALL students in the Rowan-Salisbury School System.” There is no question things have to change in order for the school system to reach “Adequate Yearly Progress.” The fact that our local school system is entering corrective action is NOT an indictment of the entire system. Many times in business, or personal affairs, situations reach a critical juncture because of a lack of attention and focus. Obviously, not publicly reporting district achievement over the last three years is an example of this. Attention and focus are best honed with effective leadership and with common goals in mind. To this end, Dr. Grissom’s comment about moving Rowan-Salisbury from a “system of schools” to a “school system” speaks volumes about changes already underway. New levels of dialog are not only occurring between citizens but also between education professionals at the central office, principals, and classroom teachers.

As these levels of dialog rise, the last line in the Salisbury Post editorial on Wednesday, December 13th that read “We are better than this” is more than a little correct. In fact, in the sea of data being reported a few important facts need to be reinforced. One, the scores being reported are for the 2005-2006 school year. Two, the Board of Education took strong action in early 2006 to replace the superintendent leading the system during the instructional three years when Adequate Yearly Progress was not met. Three, the board hired a new superintendent with knowledge about the Rowan-Salisbury School System and with expertise in curriculum and increasing achievement to specifically address these issues. Four, numerous steps to increase achievement have been implemented because of this new leadership. The point here is the Board of Education and Dr. Judy Grissom have not been asleep at the wheel during the last ten months. In reality, quite the opposite is true. A district-wide improvement plan is in place and is being implemented on a building by building basis through school improvement teams. A High School Task Force was established to address a variety of issues. In addition, part time and full time literacy coaches or curriculum facilitators have been added in every school. And, an extensive list of items has been implemented to raise parental awareness and involvement.

Rowan Partners for Education understands the critical nature of our situation and is monitoring achievement and changes underway. Partners with our organization are combing through the data, reviewing gaps in achievement, and will release a report on the findings in the near future. Change at a district level takes time. However, we are confident in the ability of our classroom teachers, we are encouraged by the new level of leadership being shown at the central office and principal levels, and we know we can expect more public communication from the system.

Rowan County is better than this. Our school system is already better than last year’s scores show. Leadership and communication are better than previous years. The “new day” for Rowan-Salisbury Schools started nearly eight months ago, on April 1, 2006, with the hiring of Dr. Grissom. Let us embrace the changes brought to us by the Board of Education and let us provide assistance and space when needed to the education professionals we hired. We do expect more accountability and we will seek it. Not only do the state’s expectations need to be met, but also an even higher level of expectations is owed to current and future Rowan County citizens, to parents, to students, and to businesses.