Public sessions serve citizens, school officials

District 3 residents will enjoy an opportunity to meet with their representation on the Pitt County Board of Education tonight as those members host a question and answer session about upcoming issues involving public schools. The event intends to keep residents informed and provides them with the rare opportunity to express concerns directly to elected officials.

As the school board prepares for another redistricting effort in the coming months, this type of outreach could prove invaluable to ensuring the public remains an integral part of the process. Other members of that board should hold similar sessions to ensure that all voices are heard as the board takes action on that contested and emotional issues.

Our Views

Jill Camnitz and Marcy Romary have been capable, steady and accessible members of the school board for many years. Camnitz has served for 14 years, and served as chairman of the board from 2003-04. Romary won election in 2004, and has been a reliable contributor to that body in her six years of service.

Given that track record, it is little surprise that those two officials would actively seek ways to engage the public about the school board’s work. Pitt County Schools finds itself at a critical juncture as it prepares for the next round of redistricting in advance of the 2011-12 school year. It is crucial that the public’s input is welcomed and incorporated into that process, and there is no better way to do that than by inviting residents to share their concerns.

Five years ago, the school board began a difficult redistricting process in a similar fashion, holding listening sessions and public forums to collect views on how to create a workable student assignment plan. Unfortunately, the result of that effort was deeply flawed, and resulted in a sharply divided community.

That included a vocal faction that wanted the school board to prioritize “community schools” — assigning students to those schools closest to their homes — rather than racial balance.

The scars of those battles are still raw and tender to the touch. The resentment remains. And the school board cannot afford to repeat those mistakes as it proceeds with this latest redistricting round.

Camnitz and Romary offer a sound example of how to avoid those pitfalls, but involving the public at the outset and keeping an open mind as they hear from their constituents. That should lead to better policy and a plan the public can support. Other members serving Pitt County on that board would do well to emulate their example.
Dentist wants help to broaden care

Some North Carolina dentists hope to create a new kind of mid-level dental worker as a way of expanding care to people in poor and rural areas of the state. But the effort faces a long and arduous road.

Dr. Steven Slott, a Burlington dentist who founded a traveling free clinic, wants the state legislature to study the idea of an entirely new work force of mid-level dental positions. Such an approach has been tried in Alaska and is gaining ground in several other states.

"We have got to get something done in this state," Slott said. "There a huge problem." He noted that four counties have no dentists, six others have severe shortages, and even rich counties struggle to provide care to poor people.

Slott said a mid-level worker could provide simple services more cheaply than regular dentists. Like nurse practitioners or physician assistants, a mid-level dental worker would have extra training and duties.

Notably, the mid-level worker could perform uncomplicated extractions and fillings currently performed only by dentists; hygienists are restricted to such jobs as cleaning teeth.

But the idea is not widely embraced by dentist groups. The American Dental Association has opposed an advanced dental hygienist practitioner model and has fought to limit Alaska's efforts.

The N.C. Dental Society, which in the past has opposed efforts to give hygienists greater autonomy, has not taken a formal position on the growing trend. Dr. Alec Parker, executive director of the state society, said the group is open to considering the prospect of mid-level practitioners.

Is timing right?

But Parker said now is not the best time to press ahead, given the sour economy and plans to expand the dental school at UNC-Chapel Hill and to build a dental school at East Carolina University.

"It just seems to me, and this is my personal opinion, that we would want to see how that goes before we started throwing another unknown into the equation," Parker said, noting that the dental school expansions will result in an additional 68 graduates a year moving into practice. Many of those are likely to be in North Carolina.

Misgivings

A dental society newsletter raised concerns about the idea of mid-level practitioners as momentum across the nation has grown. Aside from Alaska, Minnesota has made the most headway, establishing
a new university major for people to learn advanced skills. Connecticut, Maine and Washington are also pressing ahead to establish the new position.

"In other words, they suggest allowing lesser-trained people provide oral health services on the underserved," the N.C. Dental Society newsletter stated.

Slott, the Burlington dentist, said there is no evidence that mid-level practitioners would provide subpar care, and he called for a study group to examine the available research and make a fact-based analysis.

"If we saw a danger, we wouldn't have to proceed," Slott said.

He said his efforts are in the formative stages, as he considers taking his request to legislators or forming a coalition of public health groups to push the idea.

Slott said there is good precedence for overcoming concerns about a mid-level dental technician. In the 1960s, the radical notion of nurse practitioners and physician assistants rankled many doctors. Now, both types of health providers are considered integral.

Dr. Rob Doherty, dental director of Greene County Health Care in Snow Hill, said the time has come for dentistry to expand its profession.

"The only fight is to open our minds and open our hearts a little bit and get that information out there," Doherty said. "I'm not going to put on armor and go slashing through a wall of human flesh here. I just want to get some information."

Serving the poor

Doherty said he doesn't think the new dental school at ECU will solve the state's problem for many people, especially the poor. He said his clinic is overwhelmed with patients, many of whom can't afford the sliding scale fees charged by his not-for-profit practice. Instead, he said, they put off painful tooth conditions until a visiting free clinic comes to town.

"Volunteer service is not a system of health care," Doherty said, referring to the dentists, hygienists and others who donate their time for the free clinics.

Doherty and other proponents said mid-level practitioners could provide care less expensively than dentists. They could charge less for simple procedures, because they would not have the massive student loan bills from dental school, or many of the costs associated with establishing a practice.

Many questions remain, however. Among the thornier issues is how much education the new workers would require and who would license them. Currently in North Carolina, most hygienists graduate with two-year associate degrees from community colleges and are licensed by the state's dental board.

Jonathan Owens, immediate past president of the N.C. Dental Hygiene Association, said the national organization of hygienists prefers a plan to create a master's degree level "superhygienist" who could work independently from a dentist and perform some simple extractions and restorations.
Owens said it's only a matter of time before some form of that job becomes common.

"It's going to happen," Owens said. "It's going to happen in the United States first, and then I think in North Carolina we'll start seeing it."

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The New Math on Campus

By ALEX WILLIAMS
CHAPEL HILL, N.C.

ANOTHER ladies’ night, not by choice.

After midnight on a rainy night last week in Chapel Hill, N.C., a large group of sorority women at the University of North Carolina squeezed into the corner booth of a gritty basement bar. Bathed in a neon glow, they splashed beer from pitchers, traded jokes and belted out lyrics to a Taylor Swift heartache anthem thundering overhead. As a night out, it had everything — except guys.

“This is so typical, like all nights, 10 out of 10,” said Kate Andrew, a senior from Albemarle, N.C. The experience has grown tiresome: they slip on tight-fitting tops, hair sculpted, makeup just so, all for the benefit of one another, Ms. Andrew said, “because there are no guys.”

North Carolina, with a student body that is nearly 60 percent female, is just one of many large universities that at times feel eerily like women’s colleges. Women have represented about 57 percent of enrollments at American colleges since at least 2000, according to a recent report by the American Council on Education. Researchers there cite several reasons: women tend to have higher grades; men tend to drop out in disproportionate numbers; and female enrollment skews higher among older students, low-income students, and black and Hispanic students.

In terms of academic advancement, this is hardly the worst news for women — hoist a mug for female achievement. And certainly, women are primarily in college not because they are looking for men, but because they want to earn a degree.

But surrounded by so many other successful women, they often find it harder than expected to find a date on a Friday night.
“My parents think there is something wrong with me because I don’t have a boyfriend, and I don’t hang out with a lot of guys,” said Ms. Andrew, who had a large circle of male friends in high school.

Jayne Dallas, a senior studying advertising who was seated across the table, grumbled that the population of male undergraduates was even smaller when you looked at it as a dating pool. “Out of that 40 percent, there are maybe 20 percent that we would consider, and out of those 20, 10 have girlfriends, so all the girls are fighting over that other 10 percent,” she said.

Needless to say, this puts guys in a position to play the field, and tends to mean that even the ones willing to make a commitment come with storied romantic histories. Rachel Sasser, a senior history major at the table, said that before she and her boyfriend started dating, he had “hooked up with at least five of my friends in my sorority — that I know of.”

These sorts of romantic complications are hardly confined to North Carolina, an academically rigorous school where most students spend more time studying than socializing. The gender imbalance is also pronounced at some private colleges, such as New York University and Lewis & Clark in Portland, Ore., and large public universities in states like California, Florida and Georgia. The College of Charleston, a public liberal arts college in South Carolina, is 66 percent female. Some women at the University of Vermont, with an undergraduate body that is 55 percent female, sardonically refer to their college town, Burlington, as “Girlington.”

The gender gap is not universal. The Ivy League schools are largely equal in gender, and some still tilt male. But at some schools, efforts to balance the numbers have been met with complaints that less-qualified men are being admitted over more-qualified women. In December, the United States Commission on Civil Rights moved to subpoena admissions data from 19 public and private colleges to look at whether they were discriminating against qualified female applicants.

Leaving aside complaints about “affirmative action for boys,” less attention has been focused on the social ramifications.

Thanks to simple laws of supply and demand, it is often the women who must assert themselves romantically or be left alone on Valentine’s Day, staring down a George Clooney movie over a half-empty pizza box.

“I was talking to a friend at a bar, and this girl just came up out of nowhere, grabbed him by
the wrist, spun him around and took him out to the dance floor and started grinding,” said Kelly Lynch, a junior at North Carolina, recalling a recent experience.

Students interviewed here said they believed their mating rituals reflected those of college students anywhere. But many of them — men and women alike — said that the lopsided population tends to skew behavior.

“A lot of my friends will meet someone and go home for the night and just hope for the best the next morning,” Ms. Lynch said. “They’ll text them and say: ‘I had a great time. Want to hang out next week?’ And they don’t respond.”

Even worse, “Girls feel pressured to do more than they’re comfortable with, to lock it down,” Ms. Lynch said.

As for a man’s cheating, “that’s a thing that girls let slide, because you have to,” said Emily Kennard, a junior at North Carolina. “If you don’t let it slide, you don’t have a boyfriend.”

Faculty members and administrators are well aware of the situation. Stephen M. Farmer, North Carolina’s director of admissions, said that the university has a high female presence in part because it does not have an engineering school, which at most schools tend to be heavily male. Also, he said, more young men than women in the state opt to enter the military or the work force directly out of high school.

And the university feels obligated to admit the most qualified applicants, regardless of gender, Mr. Farmer said. “I wouldn’t want any young woman here to think that there’s somebody we’d rather have here than her,” he said.

The phenomenon has also been an area of academic inquiry, formally and informally. “On college campuses where there are far more women than men, men have all the power to control the intensity of sexual and romantic relationships,” Kathleen A. Bogle, a sociologist at La Salle University in Philadelphia, wrote in an e-mail message. Her book, “Hooking Up: Sex, Dating, and Relationships on Campus,” was published in 2008.

“Women do not want to get left out in the cold, so they are competing for men on men’s terms,” she wrote. “This results in more casual hook-up encounters that do not end up leading to more serious romantic relationships. Since college women say they generally want ‘something more’ than just a casual hook-up, women end up losing out.”

W. Keith Campbell, a psychology professor at the University of Georgia, which is 57 percent
female, put it this way: "When men have the social power, they create a man's ideal of relationships," he said. Translation: more partners, more sex. Commitment? A good first step would be his returning a woman's Facebook message.

Women on gender-imbalanced campuses are paying a social price for success and, to a degree, are being victimized by men precisely because they have outperformed them, Professor Campbell said. In this way, some colleges mirror retirement communities, where women often find that the reward for outliving their husbands is competing with other widows for the attentions of the few surviving bachelors.

"If a guy is not getting what he wants, he can quickly and abruptly go to the next one, because there are so many of us," said Katie Deray, a senior at the University of Georgia, who said that it is common to see six provocatively clad women hovering around one or two guys at a party or a bar.

Since that is not her style, Ms. Deray said, she has still not had a long-term relationship in college. As a fashion merchandising major, she said, she can only hope the odds improve when she graduates and moves to New York.

At colleges in big cities, women do have more options. "By my sophomore year, I just had the feeling that there is nobody in this school that I could date," said Ashley Crisostomo, a senior at Fordham University in New York, which is 55 percent female. She has tended to date older professionals in the city.

But in a classic college town, the social life is usually limited to fraternity parties, local bars or coffeehouses. And college men — not usually known for their debonair ways — can be particularly unmannerly when the numbers are in their favor.

"A lot of guys know that they can go out and put minimal effort into their appearance and not treat girls to drinks or flatter them, and girls will still flirt with them," said Felicite Fallon, a senior at Florida State University, which is 56 percent female.

Several male students acknowledged that the math skewed pleasantly in their favor. "You don't have to work that hard," said Matt Garofalo, a senior at North Carolina. "You meet a girl at a late-night restaurant, she's texting you the next day."

But it's not as if the imbalance leads to ceaseless bed-hopping, said Austin Ivey, who graduated from North Carolina last year but was hanging out in a bar near campus last week. "Guys tend to overshoot themselves and find a really beautiful girlfriend they couldn't
date otherwise, but can, thanks to the ratio,” he said.

Mr. Ivey himself said that his own college relationship lasted three years. “She didn’t think she would meet another guy, I didn’t think I would meet another girl as attractive as her,” he said.

Several male students from female-heavy schools took pains to note that they were not thrilled with the status quo.

“It’s awesome being a guy,” admitted Garret Jones, another North Carolina senior, but he also lamented a culture that fostered hook-ups over relationships. This year, he said, he finally found a serious girlfriend.

Indeed, there are a fair number of Mr. Lonelyhearts on campus. “Even though there’s this huge imbalance between the sexes, it still doesn’t change the fact of guys sitting around, bemoaning their single status,” said Patrick Hooper, a Georgia senior. “It’s the same as high school, but the women are even more enchanting and beautiful.”

And perhaps still elusive. Many women eagerly hit the library on Saturday night. And most would prefer to go out with friends, rather than date a campus brute.

But still. “It causes girls to overanalyze everything — text messages, sideways glances, conversations,” said Margaret Cheatham Williams, a junior at North Carolina. “Girls will sit there with their friends for 15 minutes trying to figure out what punctuation to use in a text message.”

The loneliness can be made all the more bitter by the knowledge that it wasn’t always this way.

“My roommate’s parents met here,” said Mitali Dayal, a freshman at North Carolina. “She has this nice little picture of them in their Carolina sweatshirts. Must be nice.”
February 8, 2010

For Students at Risk, Early College Proves a Draw

By TAMAR LEWIN

RAEFORD, N.C. — Precious Holt, a 12th grader with dangly earrings and a SpongeBob pillow, climbs on the yellow school bus and promptly falls asleep for the hour-plus ride to Sandhills Community College.

When the bus arrives, she checks in with a guidance counselor and heads off to a day of college classes, blending with older classmates until 4 p.m., when she and the other seniors from SandHoke Early College High School gather for the ride home.

There is a payoff for the long bus rides: The 48 SandHoke seniors are in a fast-track program that allows them to earn their high-school diploma and up to two years of college credit in five years — completely free.

Until recently, most programs like this were aimed at affluent, overachieving students — a way to keep them challenged and give them a head start on college work. But the goal is quite different at SandHoke, which enrolls only students whose parents do not have college degrees.

Here, and at North Carolina’s other 70 early-college schools, the goal is to keep at-risk students in school by eliminating the divide between high school and college.

“We don’t want the kids who will do well if you drop them in Timbuktu,” said Lakisha Rice, the principal. “We want the ones who need our kind of small setting.”

Results have been impressive. Not all students at North Carolina’s early-college high schools earn two full years of college credit before they graduate — but few drop out.

“Last year, half our early-college high schools had zero dropouts, and that’s just unprecedented for North Carolina, where only 62 percent of our high school students graduate after four years,” said Tony Habit, president of the North Carolina New Schools Project, the nonprofit group spearheading the state’s high school reform.

In addition, North Carolina’s early-college high school students are getting slightly better grades in their college courses than their older classmates.

While North Carolina leads the way in early-college high schools, the model is spreading in California, New York, Texas and elsewhere, where such schools are seen as a promising approach to reducing the high school dropout rate and increasing the share of degree holders — two major goals of the Obama administration.

More than 200 of the schools are part of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation’s Early College High School
Initiative, and dozens of others, scattered throughout the nation, have sprung up as projects of individual school districts.

"As a nation, we just can’t afford to have students spending four years or more getting through high school, when we all know senior year is a waste,” said Hilary Pennington of the Gates Foundation, “then having this swirl between high school and college, when a lot more students get lost, then a two-year degree that takes three or four years, if the student ever completes it at all.”

Most of the early college high schools are on college campuses, but some stand alone. Some are four years, some five. Most serve a low-income student body that is largely black or Latino. But all are small, and all offer free college credits as part of the high school program.

"In 27 years as a college president, this is just about the most exciting thing I’ve been involved in,” said John R. Dempsey, the president of Sandhills. “We picked these kids out of eighth grade, kids who were academically representative at a school with very low performance. We didn’t cherry-pick them. Their performance has been so startling that you see what high expectations can do.”

Initially, the prospect of two years of college at no cost was less appealing to Ms. Holt than to her mother, Simone Dean, an Army mechanic at nearby Fort Bragg.

“I didn’t want to do it, because my middle school friends weren’t applying,” Ms. Holt said. “I cried, but my mother made me do it.

“The first year, I didn’t like it, because my friends at the regular high school were having pep rallies and actual fun, while I had all this homework. But when I look back at my middle school friends, I see how many of them got pregnant or do drugs or dropped out. And now I’m excited, because I’m a year ahead.”

Because most of the nation’s early-college high schools are still new, it is too soon to say whether strapped states will be impressed enough to justify the extra costs of college tuition, college textbooks and academic support,

A recent report from Jobs for the Future, a nonprofit group that is coordinating the Gates initiative, found that in 2008, the early-college schools that had been open for more than four years had a high school graduation rate of 92 percent — and 4 out of 10 graduates had earned at least a year of college credit.

With a careful sequence of courses, including ninth-grade algebra, and attention to skills like note-taking, the early-college high schools accelerate students so that they arrive in college needing less of the remedial work that stalls so many low-income and first-generation students. “When we put kids on a college campus, we see them change totally, because they’re integrated with college students, and they don’t want to look immature,” said Michael Webb, associate vice president of Jobs for the Future.

The first early-college high schools — Bard College at Simon’s Rock, a residential private liberal-arts college in Great Barrington, Mass., and Bard High School Early College, a public school in New York City — were selective schools intended to cure the boredom that afflicts many talented high school students.

“The philosophy behind the school was that the last two years of high school are not engaging, and we would
set up something that would make them intellectually exciting,” said Ray Peterson, the principal of Bard High School Early College.

But at the City University of New York’s early-college schools, the emphasis is less on preventing the senior slump than on aligning high school with college.

“Our students are actually planning for college-level coursework from their first day in the school,” said Cass Conrad, executive director for school support and development at CUNY, which has a dozen early-college high schools. “And their teachers plan backwards from college, to make sure they'll know what they need to be successful in college-level classes.”

In the pine woods of North Carolina, SandHoke students start in a small Hoke County school down the road from a turkey-processing plant, and begin traveling to the Sandhills campus, nestled among the golf courses of Moore County, only as seniors. Their first college class, in 10th grade, is a user-friendly communications course taught by Cathleen Kruska, a high-energy teacher who had them discussing job interviews, learning which kinds of questions are legally permissible and doing mock interviews.

Ms. Kruska teaches the same course to college students at Sandhills, and said the only difference was that the high school students were needier.

These days, aspirations run high. Ms. Holt, for example, is aiming for medical school. She was disappointed last semester to get three B’s and two A’s.

“That’s not what I was hoping for,” she said, “and I’m going to work harder this semester.”

Her high standards have affected the whole family.

“My 13-year-old is going to apply to SandHoke for next year,” Ms. Dean said. “And I’m actually learning from Precious. When I’m done with the military, I want to get my degree.”

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: February 9, 2010
An article on Monday about programs that allow students to earn high school diplomas and up to two years of college credit in five years at no cost misstated the name of one of the country’s first early-college high schools, which is now a private liberal-arts college in Great Barrington, Mass. It is Bard College at Simon’s Rock, not Simon’s Rock at Bard College. The article also misstated the given name of the president of Sandhill Community College in Raeford, N.C., which has an early-college high school. He is John R. Dempsey, not Rick.