

Great Ideas for Great Public Schools

ARKANSAS

Union perceived as a ‘force for positive change’

In 1957, nine black students enrolled in Little Rock’s Central High School with the help of federal troops—a seminal event in the civil rights movement. Fifty years later, with support from NEA’s Public Engagement Project, a coalition led by Community Advocates for Public Education (CAPE) and the Little Rock Educators Association, conducted community conversations about closing the achievement gaps that persist to this day. The **graduation rate has since risen by nearly 5 percent** in the Little Rock School District—from 74 percent in 2007 to 78.5 percent in 2010, according to the Arkansas state report card. Recent initiatives revolve around meeting the needs of the whole child—for example, Breakfast in the Classroom, a program sponsored by NEA’s Health Information Network. “Schools and the community are working together to change the culture and children’s lives—not just their lives, but generations afterward,” says Cathy Koehler, president of the Little Rock Educators Association.

Background

- In its landmark 1954 decision, *Brown v. Board of Education*, the U.S. Supreme Court declared that “the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place” in public education and ordered desegregation with “all deliberate speed.”
- Nonetheless, Arkansas schools remained segregated until 1957, when President Eisenhower sent federal troops to safeguard the historic “Little Rock nine” who finally integrated Central High. In open defiance of the law, Governor Orval Faubus had mobilized the Arkansas National Guard to keep them out.
- Today, the Little Rock School District has more than 24,000 K-12 students and is 69 percent African American, 23 percent white, and 7 percent Hispanic; 70 percent are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

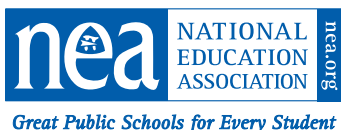
Community takes responsibility for raising student achievement

- Little Rock’s community conversations reflected the African-American community’s frustration.
- “It’s like going back in time. The legacy of Central High School is still around,” says Dana Fisher, a 24-year resident of Little Rock who worked closely with CAPE before joining NEA’s staff. “The community learned it must get involved. We can’t leave it to everybody else because we are everybody else.”

- “The community conversations engaged people who hadn’t previously been concerned with achievement gaps,” said Koehler. “People now see us as a force for positive change, when they used to see us as obstructionist. It’s a huge paradigm shift.”

Recent initiatives

- Little Rock is one of 21 communities—more than 300 applied—that the U.S. Department of Education awarded a Promise Neighborhood planning grant in 2010. Modeled after the Harlem Children’s Zone, the hallmark of this program is providing “cradle-to-college and career” services for students and their families.
- The Dream Team Mentoring Program at Forest Heights Middle School has grown from 15 student-mentor pairs to more than 100 in two years, and ultimately hopes to provide one-on-one help for all 600 students.
- In an unusual service-learning program called the EAST (Environmental and Spatial Technology) Initiative, students throughout the district identify and solve community problems using state-of-the-art technology: GPS/GIS mapping tools, architectural and CAD design software, 3D animation suites, and more. Current projects include a documentary about the Dream Team Mentoring Program.
- Breakfast in the Classroom began in January 2011 in five schools and plans to add nine more this fall. As the name implies, students eat breakfast in their classrooms. They also learn to cook nutritious meals, and then teach their families what they have learned.



For more information: Cathy Koehler, president, Little Rock Educators Association, 501-773-1533