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School district, UI collaborate on idea for new Champaign school

Sun, 07/30/2006 - 12:29pm | [Jodi Heckel](#)

CHAMPAIGN – Take a school district under federal mandate to eliminate racial disparities in educational achievement and put more seats in the north part of Champaign.

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Mix with creative community leaders who think big.

What you get is a proposal for an innovative new school that incorporates the best teaching methods and the expertise at the University of Illinois to help students from all backgrounds do well.

The Great Campus initiative envisions a new school at the site of Columbia Center, 1103 N. Neil St., C., that would be linked to Stratton Elementary School and the Champaign school district's Early Childhood Center to the south, to create a preschool through eighth-grade lab campus. The schools would be linked through curriculum, architecture and site design.

The proposal is a way to "bring something exciting and innovative and viable to the table," said Imani Bazzell, head of the Urban League's Center for Civic Engagement and Social Justice.

Bazzell and other community leaders began talking about alternatives for a new school in the wake of the Champaign district's failed bond proposal in March.

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"It's not good enough for the public to say, 'We don't like this,' and 'We don't like that,' " she said. "It's an exciting project to take some responsibility for helping create what we want, instead of leaving it up to other people."

Their concept would do more than just put seats in the north part of the district. It calls for a campus with high educational standards that would pilot the best teaching practices, which could then be used in other schools throughout the district.

"This is an educational vision that needs a facility," said Bill Trent, a UI educational policy studies professor and a consultant for the court monitor for the district's federal consent decree.

It also would help with community redevelopment and form a partnership between the university and the school district so UI faculty and students could work on community problems.

Trent said there is a long history of community activism in education in the U.S.

"This is an excellent example in that tradition, (by) talented, bright, committed people who are parents and longtime residents," he said. "A lot of us are really impressed with the quality of thought that went into it, the vision it embodies for moving forward."

School district officials are aware of the project, although they have not been involved in the planning.

"It is exciting so many people in this community are committed enough to public schools to spend this kind of time and expertise to develop a proposal," Assistant Superintendent Beth Shepperd said. "When this is complete, we look forward to seeing it and sharing it with the administration, board and community.

"Teachers, parents and the community will have the opportunity to review it and to share ideas. This kind of involvement and input is time-consuming, but it leads to a quality product."

The Urban League of Champaign County put forth an outline of the Great Campus concept and a proposal for a "scoping study" to the UI Chancellor's Civic Commitment Task Force, of which Bazzell is a member.

The scoping study would serve to gauge campus interest and assess the feasibility of the ideas proposed for the school.

"What we're asking them to do is help us figure out, is this a good idea? Who's doing this well and how do they pay for it? What are the good reasons for doing this, the bad reasons for doing this? What is the level of success?" Bazzell said. "The real challenge to the UI is, what does a school look like that educates all children well?"

"This is really about how to create an academic and social climate that is equally responsive to the needs

of multiple student populations. How to take kids where they are, be they underachievers or those excelling academically, and ... be responsive to their needs. We'd like to create a place where that does happen."

The task force was looking for ways to link classroom work to community projects, said its chairman, Jim Wescoat, head of the Department of Landscape Architecture. The task force is providing a \$10,000 grant, from the chancellor's office, for expenses.

Trent said the UI's participation fits in with the directives of its strategic plan, calling for partnerships with the community and interdisciplinary collaborations among faculty.

The UI participants will not dictate how the school or campus should be organized, but they will make suggestions of what might be feasible.

"The idea is to explore the range of options," Wescoat said. "The students will be looking not for the solution, but the range of possibilities. It will be more exploratory."

Discussions so far have included concepts such as small class sizes, a schoolwide enrichment program, a green building design, extended day and/or extended year (meaning more school days in the year), and a "full-service" school that would provide access to medical and social services for all family members.

Bazzell said some of the concepts, such as extended day and extended year, would raise issues of compliance with union contracts.

Other questions are whether it might make more sense for some of the additional seats required for north Champaign to be preschool seats rather than elementary, in order for more children to get a start on learning before they reach kindergarten.

Those involved with Great Campus foresee razing Columbia, which now houses the district's alternative education program, and building a new, state-of-the-art school on the site. Trent said putting such a school at that site would send a strong positive message to the black community that their concerns with educational equity are being addressed, and the school district will deliver on the mandates of the consent decree.

The proposal is a place to start thinking about ideas for a new school, Bazzell said. No concepts have yet been settled on, and she wants to keep all options open.

"I think a lot of times people are afraid the system isn't capable or there is too much resistance to change. People end up talking themselves out of possibilities," Bazzell said.

The school also could be a training ground for future teachers and administrators interested in urban

education, she said, and it is a way to reinvest in the community near the downtown area.

Already several UI professors are on board and will begin studying issues relevant to the Great Campus proposal in their classes this fall.

Although the Great Campus is still in discussion stages, the proposal calls for eventually producing a feasibility report for the school board and district administrators, including the cost and possible funding sources, and a proposed plan to go forward with the school. Trent said the district might be able to look for state support for such a school.

"I would hope (residents) would recognize the value of what we're talking about – a 21st-century school or campus that all kids could benefit from and that could compete nationally or worldwide," Bazzell said.

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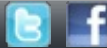
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Champaign school officials tap UI for north side proposals

Fri, 12/08/2006 - 3:26pm | [Jodi Heckel](#)

CHAMPAIGN – University of Illinois students showed off their ideas Thursday evening of what a new school campus in Champaign might look like.

School officials and community members heard about ideas for a Great Campus in north Champaign that would include Stratton Elementary School, the Early Childhood Center and Columbia Center.

The ideas included putting a community building, conservatory and organic garden on the campus; ideas for a curriculum for a dual language school; what a school dedicated to the arts might look like; and how a school media center could get children involved in social issues in the community.

The presentations Thursday were the result of a semester-long "scoping" study – a collaboration among the UI and community leaders to come up with ideas for a preschool through eighth grade lab campus, in which the various buildings would be linked by curriculum and site design. The concept calls for a campus that would pilot the best teaching practices and the expertise of the UI. It could also help the school district meet its requirement under its federal consent decree to put more seats north of University

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Tracy Parsons, president of the Urban League of Champaign County, said the study was "a model of community participation at its highest level."

Carol Ashley, the attorney for the plaintiffs in the district's consent decree case, said the partnership with the UI is what the judge in the case is looking for.

"The notion that different aspects of the community come together to focus on how to create a quality school is tremendous," she said. "It's a great testament to what we'd like to see in the whole consent decree process. This is the spirit of the consent decree."

Imani Bazzell, head of the Urban League's Center for Civic Engagement and Social Justice, said she was touched by the way UI faculty and students took the ideas for the Great Campus to heart.

Those involved with the Great Campus initiative will prepare a report that synthesizes all the ideas presented and make recommendations. Eventually they will submit a proposal to the school district.

Bazzell said several ideas, including small class sizes, an extended day and a full-service campus, offering services to parents as well as students, are critical to the initiative. She said working groups are fleshing out some of the ideas for the Great Campus.

Students plan to stay involved as well. Rochelle Gutierrez, a UI professor of curriculum and instruction, said her students "took very seriously not to let this be a one-semester thing and then disappear." Some of them plan to continue work on the Great Campus ideas through research projects.

Dan Archibald, a graduate student in landscape architecture, enjoyed working on a project with people in the community.

"It's neat when I can meet up with people who are in the community and get involved and try to meet their needs, rather than just whatever I think might be a good design," he said.

He talked with teachers at Stratton while working on his design. He particularly liked the inclusion of a community center to provide health care and employment services for parents.

"Teachers really stressed the community center," he said. "They thought that's what was needed. They want to get parents involved as much as possible."

Janine Prillaman, a graduate student in curriculum and instruction, worked on a plan for a school with an ecology theme that would include energy-efficient buildings built with environmentally friendly materials, use non-toxic cleaning supplies, and have a recycling program, among other things.



"It's a natural theme considering we're an agricultural university," Prillaman said. "It ties in with engineering and chemical science. It's a good fit."

She said such a school would be healthier for children as well, particularly those suffering from conditions like asthma.

Stratton Principal Sandra Duckworth said she's excited to see how existing programs at her school, such as schoolwide enrichment, could be expanded with the Great Campus initiative.

"It seems like a fire has been lit here in Champaign, and that's what's exciting about it," she said.

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