

New campaign urges parents to understand the poor quality of their schools

Posted By Rachel Schneider On Friday, April 16, 2010

In [Parent and Community Engagement](#)

A new statewide campaign is trying to spur parents into action with this message: Your child is not learning as much in school as you think.

At an enthusiastic rally of about 300 people Friday, a group of teenagers presented their report called "When good is not good enough in Illinois public schools." The report focuses on the deficiencies in schools, both in Illinois and the United States, as compared to the rest of the world.

Some points made in the report are that the average school year in the U.S. is 62 days shorter than high-performing countries; teachers here spend less time on math than Asian teachers and the U.S. has low expectations for students.

This event kicked off the Statewide Action and Grassroots Education (SAGE) Campaign, involving 20 organizations across the state. The grant-funded effort has a variety of member organization from Advance Illinois, which is pushing for school reform, to the Inner-City Muslim Action Network.

Patricia Watkins, longtime executive director of the community organization Target Area Development Corporation, is spearheading the effort, which she said will draw people from Bloomington to Oak Lawn.

Watkins said a large part of the problem is that Illinois' elementary standardized test, the ISAT, is too easy and gives parents a false sense that their child is fine. But then students struggle to do well on the high school test, which is nationally normed and includes the college entrance exam, the ACT.

And when students get to college, the classes are difficult.

"Parents aren't recognizing or realizing how far our kids are behind," Watkins said.

Another thing that misleads people about what is going on in classes are teacher evaluations.

Tim Daly, president of The New Teacher Project, said it doesn't make sense that most teachers are getting good ratings on their teacher evaluations while students are dropping out and failing.

"We need an evaluation system that is based on whether or not kids are learning," Daly said.

Daly said good teachers aren't being rewarded and bad ones aren't being punished.

Watkins said parents need to collaborate with business people and research groups to learn how to analyze the quality of education that their children are receiving.

"We do the training on how to become advocates, how to assess schools and how to compare schools," Watkins said.

Once parents are more knowledgeable about education issues, they are expected to speak out about policies and official decisions.

"I think what's been missing is the critical voice of the parent," Watkins said.

Robin Steans, executive director of Advance Illinois, stresses how important parents are in education.

"Parental involvement is critical. It's an absolute. It puts rocket fuel in anything else going on at the school," Steans said. "I'm not sure there is a more important policy priority."

Steans added parents are going to be excited about being more informed and getting more involved.

"The sense I get over and over again is people don't feel like they get enough information," Steans said.