

Photo by Chanel Davis
Alvin Atkinson addresses community partners last week at Flat Rock Middle School.



Program promoted as prison deterrent

BY CHANEL DAVIS
THE CHRONICLE

The Center for Community Safety (CCS) thinks its S.T.A.R.S. (Students Taking Action and Reaching Success) program can help clog the so-called "school-to-prison" pipeline that overwhelming favors blacks and Latinos.

The Winston-Salem State University-founded Center - in conjunction with Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools - launched S.T.A.R.S. at Philo-Hill, Hanes, Flat Rock, East Forsyth and Northwest middle schools two years ago. Last school year, 432 students took part in the program, which focuses on building students' strengths and goal-setting, while also stressing positive self-esteem, social competency and conflict resolution. Activities are held during the school day and after-school.

"We have to work together to do things positively for our youth so that they can begin to take advantage of what is put in front of them," CCS Executive Director Alvin Atkinson said last week at Flat Rock as he touted the benefits and potential of the program. "We need to help our students really get to know themselves by connecting them with positive adults. S.T.A.R.S. really does help that student who is below the average grade level."

CCS says the need for S.T.A.R.S.

and programs like it is great. According to the agency, last year, 720 local children were referred to juvenile court for intake - 100 more than were referred the year prior. Furthermore, CCS found that black children were five times more likely to be referred, and Latino youth were three times more likely. The kids' problems can be traced back to the classroom, according to the agency. Seventy-five percent of those referred reported having moderate to serious problems in school.

"Over 80 percent of the crime committed in our community is by youth 16 and over. We have a disproportionate number of African American and Hispanic male suspensions, as well," Atkinson said. "That's a societal issue because resources are not available to help give alternatives to that referral."

Carol Montague-Davis, assistant superintendent of middle and high school administration, is a fan of S.T.A.R.S. and thinks it allows the school system to be preventive instead of reactive.

"Anything that we can put into place to help our students become leaders and make great choices and decisions that will not impact their futures negatively but positively is good," she said.

Flat Rock Principal Laura Hodges said 65 students at her school are enrolled in the program, so many that

there is a waiting list. The Flat Rock S.T.A.R.S. program now includes an after-school tutorial component.

"I saw a big change in the students' confidence level. I saw a tremendous turn-around in several of the students' attitudes (and in) students who had lots of behavioral issues or were struggling in class," Hodges said.

She said that she has received great feedback from parents and teachers.

Eighth-grader Tymarrah Dubose said that the program has allowed her to come out of her shell.

"All of sixth grade, I was never confident and was nervous around everybody. I feel more open now with people and I can ask teachers questions that I don't ask my regular teacher," said Tymarrah, who enjoys the extra curricular activities the program offers, especially martial arts.

Atkinson has faith that S.T.A.R.S. can keep students out of court and focused on the things that matter.

"If we are able to really keep our middle schoolers from choosing crime as an option, what a benefit. If these students begin doing what they need to do, then our community will flourish, because they will then be better educated, bring in more income and become more civic-minded," he said. "We believe we can do it if we work together. It does take a village."

To donate to S.T.A.R.S. or sponsor one of the kids in the program, visit www.starsstrategy.org.

Mitchell at Wake



Wake Forest President Nathan Hatch (right) engages former U.S. Sen. George Mitchell in conversation on Wednesday, Oct. 1 on the WFU campus. During his more than 15 years in the Senate, the Maine Democrat served as Senate Majority Leader and was credited with helping to broker landmark legislation. The talk was part of Wake's The Leadership Project, which aims to engage members of the campus community with compelling stories of personal leadership. A crowd of 300 student leaders attended the invitation-only event. They were nominated by faculty and staff.

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