

Teachers, officials spar over high school reform

BY GABRIELLE DE ROSA
SENIOR WRITER

It's been more than a month since an East Chapel Hill High School teacher submitted a petition signed by 47 faculty members protesting an integral piece of the Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Board of Education's high school reform effort.

Michael McElreath, a social studies teacher, and his colleagues asked administrators to cancel plans for optional theme-based academies.

His petition came months after he served on a high school reform subcommittee that suggested high schools be divided into smaller schools, allowing students to build relationships with teachers and classmates.

"The larger committee adopted plans that smaller learning communities would be the centerpiece of the reforms," he said. "I felt like we did it: We got the go-ahead."

But when the superintendent's final recommendations came out in April, optional career academies were the main focus and not McElreath's mandatory smaller communities.

He said the architecture of East particularly lends itself to the creation of smaller learning communities. The school has three areas, each of which is equipped with an assistant principal and counselor's office, teacher resource rooms, four science classrooms and a computer lab.

McElreath said teachers and students should be divided among these "sub-schools" so that students interact with the same teachers and classmates throughout their four years.

When he went to the school board on April 22 after the publication of the final reform recommendations, McElreath was told by Superintendent Neil Pedersen there was nothing in the plans that prevents a school from building smaller communities while at the same time offering theme-based academies.

McElreath then asked that teachers be included immediately in the plans for high school reform. He made suggestions for inclusion of faculty after the board meeting, like replacing time spent in teacher meetings with time devoted to planning new school communities.

He said that as of yet, the board has not addressed his request or his suggestions.

Lisa Stuckey, vice chairwoman of the school board, said the board already has asked high schools to form smaller learning communities and research the idea in general.

"It's a little bit of an open question if a high school wanted to go further (with sub-schools)," Stuckey said. "The board has not addressed that specific question."

The board prefers to act on issues as a group and meetings are the best opportunity to do so, Stuckey said in regard to McElreath's comments to the board in April.

"We don't act on public comment unless the matter is already on our (meeting's) agenda," Stuckey said. "So it would need to be back on agenda for us to address it."

McElreath still was not pleased with the board's overall response.

"(Students) shouldn't have an option when they're ninth graders to go the math or science route versus a less rigorous route," he said. "(Theme-based academies are) going to have the potential to further segregate our school. ... The kids that are already doing well in school will pick the more rigorous curriculum."

By giving the learning communities a theme such as math, social studies or economics, McElreath said less motivated students will opt out of entering the academy.

Stuckey said the academies, which are "not entirely flushed out," were not envisioned to reach only advanced students.

"I think they would appeal to a range of students," Stuckey said. "The courses in them would be designed to meet a variety of academic needs."

Stuckey gave the example of a health academy that would serve students interested in the health industry, and not only those interested in becoming doctors.

Judy Jones, a biology teacher at East, agrees with many of McElreath's views and also served on a subcommittee during the early planning stages of high school reform.

"You don't first set up the topics of the community and then make kids choose," Jones said. "You bring

kids together, and then together as a team, you decide on the focus of the community. I personally don't like having kids pick a major so early."

East Principal Dave Thaden said he doesn't see McElreath's concerns about segregation as being a problem yet.

"It's always a danger, but since the academies aren't described as being academic or nonacademic, it's not a concern right now," Thaden said. "It might be one later, though."

Thaden did not comment on what he was doing to work with McElreath but said that high school reform is something the school board is pursuing. He added that he was working with the school board and the superintendent on a 32-point proposal on high school reform.

"We're not pursuing one topic at the exclusion of the other 32," Thaden said of the academy portion of the proposal.

Jones gave Thaden high marks for his efforts in the process.

"He's very open to having discussion," she said. "Again, there's only so much money, and I don't know what else he can do."

Money has been as much of a source of conflict as the difference in opinion. The proposed \$150,000 budget for high school reform was cut from the final district budget — money that mostly would have funded substitute teachers to give teachers time to plan for the changes.

"If you're not going to fund teachers having the time to do the planning necessary for reforms, you're going to end up with a piecemeal effort that's not going to really reform high school," McElreath said.

Despite the disagreements, Jones emphasized that the city schools, particularly the high schools, are excellent institutions of learning.

"We have a wonderful school system," she said. "We have wonderful administrators and teachers. People can disagree on different styles of educating students, but they are trying their best to create a place where children can learn."

Contact the City Editor at citydesk@unc.edu.

Gadgets help students roll out

BY ANDREW SATTEN
STAFF WRITER

"Don't forget, you need to lean back to stop," sophomore Steven Waters called to a student who was taking a spin on his Segway.

The two-wheeled, self-balancing transportation device is one of a few alternative transit modes that are catching on for campus commuters.

"I've had about 300 people on it and haven't had any casualties yet," Waters said.

The desire for a shortened commute has spurred a few transportation pioneers to opt for Segways, scooters and skateboards instead of the traditional walk or bus ride to campus.

"I ride the heck out of it. It's out here everyday," Waters said of his Segway.

Despite the frequent time he spends in the Pit pitching the Segway's benefits to students, Waters acknowledged the gadget might not be the best fit for everyone. "It's not the end-all be-all," he said. "It has a lot of problems, but it's just another choice."

Riding through congested areas of campus is not an option, so Waters typically uses the Segway for his commute to campus, which is about 3 miles round trip.

"The real issue for me is I think that cars isolate people," he said. "When I'm on this thing, everyone talks to me, whether it's good or bad things."

"Once you get on it, your whole perception of the world changes," he said.

Junior sociology major Ray Martinique uses his Honda Ruckus scooter in a similar capacity. "It's about freedom," he said.

Martinique's apartment complex is on a bus route, but he doesn't like having to be dependent on it.

"My mountain bike got stolen, and (the scooter) just saves a lot of time," he said. "I wanted to avoid the bus, because if you miss it, you are screwed."

His scooter has a maximum speed of 40 mph and turns a 20- to 30-minute walk from his residence to campus into a 5-minute ride.

Martinique, who is originally from Chapel Hill, said he has increasingly seen other scooter riders in the area. "I think it's caught on more in the past five years."

Though Waters and Martinique can't use their unusual modes of



DTH/MIRANDA HARPLE

Sophomore Steven Waters shows second-year pharmacy student Li Li his Segway. Waters uses it to shorten his commute to and from campus.

transit in all campus environments, sophomore journalism major Hunter Scott spends most of his travel time perched atop his longboard.

"It's more or less like you are surfing on concrete," he said about riding the longboard, an elongated skateboard.

Like Martinique, Scott was a victim of bike theft, after which he decided to use longboarding, which is popular in his Florida hometown, to get to class.

"It's so much more efficient than walking or running, and I am there faster without breaking a sweat," he said.

With the longboard, the trek from Morrison Residence Hall to the Pit turns into about a 4-minute ride, Hunter said. "It drives me nuts to walk to class now, because it just takes so long."

He and his longboard also can be seen cruising Franklin Street on the weekend. "I love it, and people recognize me by it," he said.

Though these alternative means of transportation provide their users greater freedom in getting to and from campus, this freedom comes at a cost.

Waters' Segway cost about \$4,000, and the price tag of

Martinique's Ruckus was \$2,000.

Safety also can be an issue. Since scooters are not supposed to be driven on sidewalks, they are sometimes in the midst of cars and buses.

"I would recommend (driving a scooter), but there are setbacks, because it's not the safest mode of transportation," Martinique said.

The reactions of campus pedestrians to these transportation pioneers have been mixed.

"People either love it or hate it," Waters said. "I've had people call me an idiot and 'Don't you know that those things are bad for you.'"

Martinique said he thinks his scooter makes some people uneasy. "People seem to be intimidated by it," he said. "They hear it and think that I am going to run them over with it."

And though most of the students who listen to Waters' Pit demonstrations think the transportation novelty is interesting, few are ready to make an immediate investment in a Segway.

One Pit observer remarked, "As soon as they make these things levitate, I'll get one for any price."

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