

Panel tackles charters and vouchers

BY LAYLA GARMS
THE CHRONICLE

A diverse group of experts debated the pros and cons of changes coming to the North Carolina education system during a public forum at Wake Forest University on Tuesday, Oct. 8.

"School Choice, Charters and Vouchers," as the event was dubbed, drew a near-capacity audience to the university's Welcome Center. The discussion was a collaboration among the Wake Forest Department of Politics and International Affairs, 88.5 WFDD radio and the nonprofit Forsyth Education Partnership. It featured commentary from Darrell Allison, president of Parents for Educational Freedom in North Carolina; Sara Dahill-Brown, an associate professor of politics and international affairs at WFU; North Carolina Association of Educators President Rodney Ellis; Arts Based School Principal Robin Hollis; and former Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools Superintendent Don Martin. WFDD's Keri Brown moderated the discussion, which explained the differences among the three educational options.

The panelists discussed charter schools, which will be more prevalent throughout the state since lawmakers removed a cap that limited the number of charters that could operate.

Charters are publicly-funded but are not required to provide transportation, free or reduced lunch options or provisions for special needs pupils, but have more flexibility to innovate and create their



Panelists (from left): Darrell Allison, Darrell Allison, Dr. Donald Martin, Rodney Ellis and Sara Dahill-Brown.

educational approaches based upon the student populations they serve, panelists said. Hollis, who has led the Arts Based School — one of five charter schools in the city — for over a decade, said charters have more power to decide how to prioritize their funds and educate their students than traditional schools. Teachers and administrators at charters are typically not tenured, and, thusly, are challenged to live up to the schools' standards each year or risk termination, Hollis said.



Keri Brown

"Really, I think of charter schools as the opportunity to improve education," she said. "...We use dance and drama and visual arts to teach the Standard Course of Study, but each charter school has its own passion and its own vision for what it's delivering to its students."

Area public schools also offer a variety of options for families, through magnet schools and "choice zones," where students can opt to attend any of the schools in a given area, Martin said. The Choice Plan, which was rolled out in 1995, has received both criticism and praise; some appreciate the expanded choice options,

while others contend that the plan has resegregated the school system.

The controversial private school vouchers — or "opportunity scholarships," where students whose families meet certain income requirements will be eligible to receive up to \$4,200 in public funding to attend a private school beginning in the 2014-15 school year — were a hot topic of conversation at the forum. Allison, whose organization bills itself as "a statewide organization that supports greater educational options through parental school choice," believes the scholarships could be the answer to equalizing the educational system for the state's poorest students.

"Where you live determines the quality of education that your child is going to get in public schools," he said. "...We believe that the more options that you have on the table, the better the chances for the family — regardless of your income, regardless of your zip code — to have a school that works for you."

Dahill-Brown, who has researched school outcomes in Wisconsin, home of the oldest school choice program, said that similar programs in other states have not achieved significant improvements in the academic performance of the

students who take advantage of the vouchers.

Ellis railed against the plan, which he called "by far the most detrimental legislation for North Carolina students" that the General Assembly has passed. The vouchers would only be offered to students whose families are at or below 100 percent of the federal poverty level and dissenters say they make no provisions for transportation, fees and other costs associated with attending a private institution. Private schools are not required to accept voucher students, Ellis noted.

"I think the biggest problem for me is that it's not actually addressing the issue. At some point, the conversation has to turn to how do we provide the best quality education for every child?" said the former WSFCS educator. "...I don't think that the voucher bill lets us get to the root of the problem here."

If private schools are going to receive public funding through the vouchers, they should be held to the same accountability standards as public schools and charters are, Martin said.

"If we're not assessing the students, we will not know whether we're closing that gap or not," he noted.



Pride WS Photo

Pride Festival is Saturday

CHRONICLE STAFF REPORT

The 2013 Pride Winston-Salem Festival — "Live Proud Winston-Salem" — is coming to the streets of downtown on Saturday, Oct. 19, beginning at 9:30 a.m. with a "Breakfast Crawl & Parade Viewing Party" at several downtown eateries.

The parade will start at 11 a.m. It will begin at Spring and Fourth streets and end on Trade Street, where the heart of the Pride Festival will be held. For much of the day on Trade — the downtown Arts District — more than 85 vendors will set up booths, rapid HIV testing will be available and a kids' zone will be buzzing with games and activities. OUTLaw, Wake Forest School of Law's group for LGBT students and allies, will also be on hand to offer pro bono legal services and a long list of performers will take to a soundstage. Old country soulster Hannah Thomas is this year's headliner.

Frank Benedetti and Gary Trowbridge, who have been together for 50 years, and Lennie Gerber and Pearl Berlin, who have been a couple for 47 years, will serve as the grand marshals of the parade.

On Sunday, Oct. 20, Pride Winston-Salem will launch "Pride Gives Back," which will challenge those in the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community to show in-kind support to those that support the community and help to foster a more inclusive Winston-Salem through charity and volunteerism.

The event is free and open to all. See a full schedule of events at pridewinstonsalem.org.

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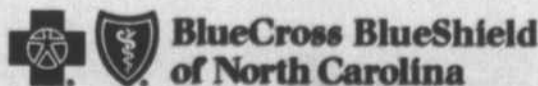
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10:00 a.m.
Kernersville YMCA
1113 W. Mountain St.
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Thursday, Oct. 24
10:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m.
Village Inn & Golf Center
6205 Ramada Dr.
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