

Florida Times Union

Duval Schools joins national effort to improve schooling for minority males

District won't wait for new federal money to expand programs, Vitti says

By [Denise Smith Amos](#) Tue, Jul 22, 2014

President Barack Obama this week said 60 of the nation's biggest school districts, including Duval County Schools, joined a national effort to ensure more black and Hispanic boys succeed in school.

Called My Brother's Keeper, the broad endeavor includes everything from expanding preschools and improving early warning systems for struggling students to boosting mentors and anti-dropout programs. Obama pledged \$200 million over five years and said private investors such as the National Basketball Association and AT&T will kick in more.

But Duval schools isn't going to wait for that money, said Superintendent Nikolai Vitti on Tuesday.

The district, which has some of the lowest minority graduation rates in the state, is growing and launching its own strategies to help minority males succeed, he said.

"We see the discrepancies in the percentages of African-American students that are arrested, suspended, and have lower rates of literacy and then a lower level of graduation," Vitti said.

"You can't solve a problem if you don't acknowledge that a problem exists. ... We have gaps and ... we need to do things differently to narrow those gaps."

Many of the strategies he discussed will help all students, not just minority males.

For instance, the district recently doubled preschool seats in schools to boost the number of children who arrive at kindergarten ready to learn. It also is adding personnel in grade schools to help students who are behind their peers catch up academically, he said.

The district also is concentrating on the elementary and middle schools that feed Raines, Ribault and Jackson high schools, where the largest concentrations of at-risk, minority students are, he said.

Under the recently announced Quality Education for All initiative, large pay bonuses now are offered to attract and retain high-quality teachers at those schools, he said, and the district is

buying hundreds of laptops for students to use during the school day on a one-to-one or two-to-one basis.

The district also is launching its first single-gender, leadership-themed school at Butler Middle school, separating girls from boys. It has attracted the parents of 225 students so far, Vitti said.

For Hispanic students, Duval “rebuilt” its English Language Learning department, he said, and is recruiting throughout the state for educators who have track records for helping bilingual and immigrant students. Southside Middle, which has a high concentration of Spanish-speaking students, will also get more laptops and computers, he said.

BRIDGE TO SUCCESS

Duval in recent years expanded its Bridge to Success program, which helps students who are far behind their peers catch up. The program had served only 6 percent of the students who needed it in 2012-13; last school year it served about 50 percent, Vitti said.

Duval has struggled with minority graduation and promotion.

In 2012-13, it graduated 66 percent of its African-American students, 72 percent of its Hispanic students, and 77 percent of its white students. More recent graduation data is not available from the state.

Vitti estimates Duval is among the top three of Florida’s big seven districts when it comes to minority graduation rates and last year had some of its highest growth among African-American grads.

“We know already we’ve moved needle,” he said.

‘MISSIONARY SPIRIT’

But some community members say more progress is unlikely without more community and parental input. Gloriden Norris, a retired educator and member of the local NAACP’s education committee, said the community and parents must find ways to help minority students, especially boys, cope with poverty, crime and other challenges that can affect their behavior and performance in school.

Teachers also have to be aware, she said, and cultivate relationships with minority students and parents.

“At certain schools, you almost have to have a missionary spirit, because it is tough,” Norris said. “When you go into high-poverty schools, you deal with more than academics. If you ignore that, you’re going to lose the child.”