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K-12 Educational Options in the Triad

By Lynne Brandon

In the land of choices, we have 55,000 combinations of Starbucks coffee, hundreds of cereal choices and the ability to build a customized computer, just to name a few. Education has followed suit; parents now have the choice of whether to send their child to a private or public school. Both private and public institutions offer a variety of curriculum, but they can be very different in the areas of testing and costs.

Back to the basics...

Triad schools, both public and private, have seen many changes since the days when the three Rs stood for Reading, Writing and Arithmetic. Today's educators follow a new model – Rigor, Relevance and Relationships – as the way to prepare students for the future.

And into the 21st Century...

Last year Governor Mike Easley announced North Carolina's partnership between business and education

with an initiative called The North Carolina Center for 21st Century Skills. The initiative will jumpstart the beginning of a nationwide campaign to improve education in order to produce college graduates who are better prepared to enter the global workforce of tomorrow.

Triad educators are behind the initiative and agree that a new day has dawned for education; global preparedness is crucial for students. Tom Buxton, principal of the Upper School at Greensboro Day School reports that vying for acceptance to a college or university is a very competitive endeavor.

A closer look at private education

Greensboro Day School

Started in a church basement almost 40 years ago, Greensboro Day School is now flourishing and expects to graduate about 90 students next year. Terry Buxton, Upper School Director, calls Greensboro Day School a “laptop” school where technology is evident. Some textbooks are on CD, students communicate with students all over the globe via the Web and some tests are taken online. The school encourages a well-rounded curriculum including critical thinking with participation in the arts, athletics and community service.

“Today, kids understand they need a college degree and that it’s not just a prerequisite to a successful life, but that it is a requirement. They are self-motivated to succeed with a thirst for knowledge,” says Buxton.

SAT scores average about 1,250 – higher than the North Carolina average. Annual costs are approximately \$15,000 per student. Financial aid is available.

Forsyth Country Day School

Forsyth Country Day School (FCDS) has been a strong academic presence in Winston-Salem and its surrounding counties for over 36 years, but it has experienced substantial growth during the past eight years. For 2007, enrollment at the school will be just over 1,000 students.

The school’s curriculum concentrates on college preparatory courses, with an additional but strong emphasis on character education. Headmaster Henry M. Battle, Jr. says the school spends a great deal of effort attracting and retaining teachers who are “the best of the best” from all over the country. He believes this inspires an environment of excellence.

FCDS puts an intentional focus on what Mr. Battle refers to as Emotional Intelligence (EQ) in addition to Intelligence Quotient (IQ), once revered by the workplace. “In the work world, it has been discovered that academic skills are not necessarily valued. However, EQ – or emotional intelligence – is becoming more critical. We believe that the ability to work in teams, to lead others, and to get along with others is what today’s employers are looking for,” explains Mr. Battle. “All of these traits form the essence of our co-curricular courses, as we believe we are preparing our students for life, not just college.”

One of the school’s major themes during the past several years has been working through the transition from good to great, a concept based on the popular business book of the same name by Jim Collins. The idea is that we don’t have great (schools) principally because we have good schools. Because good is the enemy of great, shifting from one paradigm to the next is quite a challenge.

Other initiatives include expanding the school’s already strong performing arts programs, an endowed speaker series, and a leadership and LifePrep pilot program developed in conjunction with Harvard University. All grades have instruction on more than 300 networked computers and Forsyth’s Internet gateway links students to high-powered, full-text databases providing a “campus without walls.” A Forsyth Country Day School education costs about \$8,500 to \$15,000 annually.

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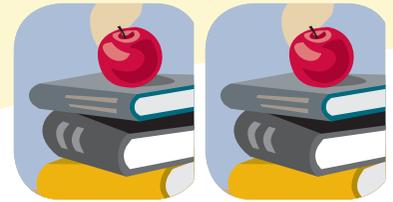


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Wesleyan Christian Academy

Opening in 1971 as a ministry of the First Wesleyan Church, Wesleyan Christian Academy is one of the largest private K-12 institutions in the Triad. Enrollment is approximately 1,000 students and the graduating class of 2007 is expected to be around 75. Tuition costs range from \$5,700 to \$6,700, depending on the student's grade level. Scholarships are available based on financial need.

Wesleyan offers Honors and AP classes and an Enrichment Center program for children with ADD and other disabilities. Creative writing starts in the 2nd grade and continues into the Upper School.

Administrator, Joel Farlow, says that the school offers a full education package that stresses academics but also athletics and fine arts – in a nurturing environment. “Parents choose us because we are a Christian school, we have a good academic record and we offer a safe environment,” says Farlow.

Public education options

Forsyth County

In Forsyth County, Donald L. Martin, Superintendent of Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools, (WSFCS) has more than 70 schools in his district that serve approximately 48,300 students each year. WFSFCS is the 5th largest school system in North Carolina, and the 99th largest in the United States. The average SAT score for the Forsyth County System is 1,015.

Martin is proud of his district and touts the “Schools of Choice”

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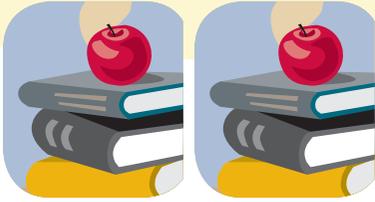
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Last year, the WSFCS system opened the Simon G. Atkins Academic and Technology High School offering three different magnet programs with a diploma offered in each specialization: Biotechnology, Pre-Engineering and Computer Technology.

Atkins is also a Bill Gates Foundation school and receives grant funds that are used for staff development to focus on the Rs – Rigor, Relevance and Relationship. Atkins is equipped with state-of-the-art technology, including eight computer labs. Teachers promote critical thought; they use smart boards (electronic chalkboards) and wireless laptops.

“Atkins offers students, with or without privilege, a shot at the American dream – an opportunity that they may not otherwise have,” says principal, Daniel Piggott.

Guilford County

Guilford County Schools (GCS) offers a variety of educational options including 15 magnet grade schools, four magnet middle schools and 16 high school option schools. GCS is the 3rd largest school district in the state, 48th in the nation and has enrollment of 70,000 students. Dr. Terry Grier, GCS superintendent, is working toward the goal of graduating responsible citizens who are prepared to succeed in higher education or the career of their choice.

“Kids will rise to your level of expectation. Colleges like Duke, Davidson,

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North Carolina A&T and others, look at the rigor of coursework of incoming freshman more than class rank or GPA," says Grier. With this in mind, GCS has championed Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB) and the Early/Middle College high schools to put a national spotlight on GCS for its innovation and demanding course work.

"Our goal is to get students college ready and then, work ready, so they can get meaningful jobs with benefits. These are not mutually exclusive," says Grier.

Understanding the education paradigm shift, GCS has partnered with area businesses to start the Early College Academies, two of which guarantee teaching positions to students who enter the program. A partnership with Moses Cone Hospital has started a Medical Careers Academy in which students attend Early College Medical Academies with scholarships for college paid by Moses Cone.

Rob Gasparello, principal of Grimsley High School, started four years ago with the 2002 freshman class. The former coach believes in the new three Rs and says that academics are stressed but they also embrace tradition complemented with a rich history of community service.

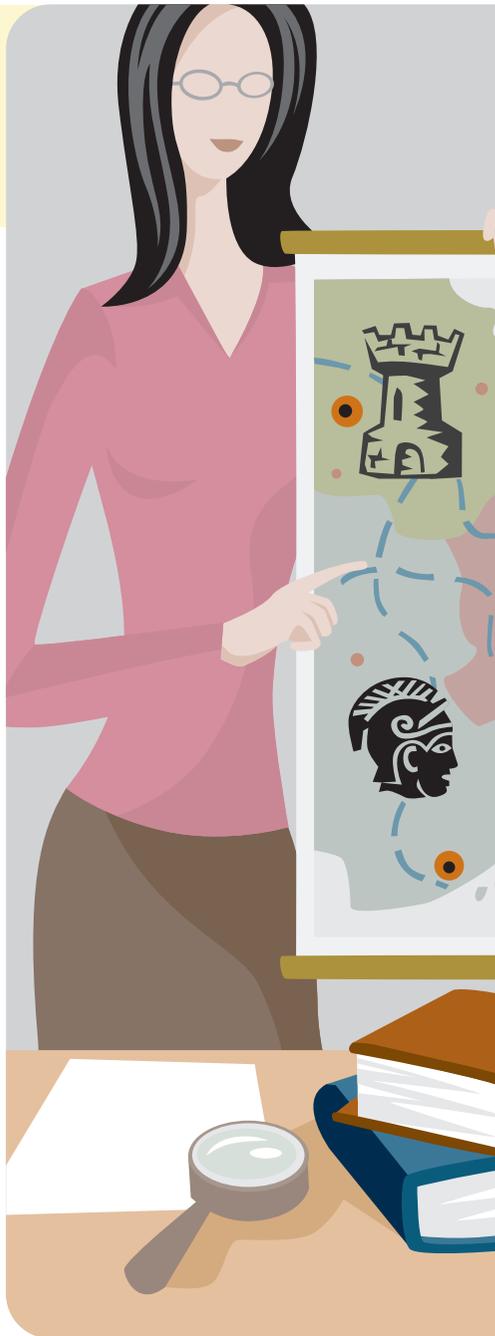
With its diverse student population, Grimsley is known for rigorous coursework exemplified in its many honors courses, AP offerings and the IB diploma. Only three high schools in GCS currently offer the prestigious IB program, with courses that are recognized by top colleges and universities around the world.

Getting feedback is important. Gasparello reports that college freshman return each year to talk to seniors about college. The news is good and Grimsley is getting high marks from colleges and universities for preparing their students.

Targeted education is not reserved for high school students. Aycock Middle School is also working toward preparing students for the global market place. Aycock is a science, technology, and Spanish immersion magnet with 669 students. Visiting international faculty, who are native Spanish speakers, teach half of each day completely in Spanish.

The science arm of the school has a focus on geology/astronomy, physics/robotics and microbiology/environmental studies. Technology is a key element of the school's curriculum and eighth-graders must take an end of year computer test to demonstrate proficiency. The school is wireless and complete with computer labs, online assignments and parent/teacher communication via email.

We are fortunate in the Triad to have an abundance of educational options for our children. In the global economy, it is imperative we prepare and educate students for the work that is ahead. As a nation, and a region, we can no longer compete and sustain ourselves on productivity; to keep our competitive edge and profitability, we must focus on preparing future generations to be outstanding problem solvers using innovation and creativity. Kudos to our local public and private schools, who are working hard to do just that. ■



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