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## Church steps up to help school system

KAREN SULLIVAN

Children at First Baptist Church-West were busy with math assignments and music lessons on a recent afternoon.

It seemed like most any classroom setting at first glance. But there are important distinctions.

The students gathered here are enrolled in the church's Music & Tutoring Afterschool Program.

First Baptist Church-West, like a growing number of churches in Mecklenburg County, is taking an active role in helping the public school system.

A year after Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools Superintendent Peter Gorman's faith summit with area churches, the number of church-school partnerships has doubled. Next month, CMS will meet with participating churches to discuss ways of making the cooperation grow.

First Baptist Church-West, on Oaklawn Avenue, created its after-school program to support its kindergarten through eighth-graders through homework assistance and tutoring, as well as music and art programs.

The other difference is that the class sizes are much smaller. There are a total of 40 students enrolled.

Some teachers are working with only a few students, helping them get through homework assignments or fine-tuning their piano and violin technique.

"We made a decision not to get into the business of competing with the public school system," said Dr. Ricky Woods. "The greater need is for community collaboration and partnerships where you benefit one another."

Woods' church was helping CMS long before Gorman made his pitch for support. First Baptist Church-West's support of school children started about 20 years ago, Woods said.

Some of the church's retired members volunteered to offer homework assistance and basic tutoring to children at neighboring Oaklawn Elementary, now Oaklawn Language Academy.

In 2002, CMS abolished student assignments designed to create more racially balanced schools.

The district instead tries to assign students to neighborhood schools, but some critics say the new plan has created a greater number of high-poverty schools.

These schools, the church decided, might leave more students at risk of failure in the communities it serves, Woods said.

And there were other concerns.

"The schools did not have the academic support or the cultural enrichment that they once had," Woods said.

The church created the Clara H. Jones Summer Institute five years ago. It's a six-week program of fine arts, reading, math and science for first- through 12th-graders.

Students spend mornings taking two classes in violin, piano, art technology, dance or choir. Afternoons are devoted to academic instruction, and Fridays are for field trips.

The church launched the after-school program with licensed teachers four years ago, at the request of parents whose children had participated in the summer institute.

The classes are from 2 to 6 p.m., with no more than 15 students.

The church also created the First Baptist Church-West Community Services Association, headed by executive director Patsy Burkins, for greater flexibility in developing and managing the after-school program.

The association can apply for and accept grant money, and it provides instruments for music lessons and pays the cost of instruction.

Violin teacher Aram Bryan said the program is beneficial because CMS no longer offers orchestra or band classes in elementary schools.

"This program does a lot," said Bryan, who also teaches at the nonprofit Community School of the Arts. "Most of the kids would not have the chance to even hold a violin before middle school. It goes hand-in-hand with education."

Dana Robinson's 8-year-old daughter already has a complicated school record. She failed first grade and has been diagnosed with attention deficit disorder and hyperactivity. She has changed schools twice.

Robinson enrolled her in First Baptist's program in September.

She said her daughter is making progress in reading and vocabulary, and she is developing social skills.

"If she doesn't have any homework or she finishes it, they give her extra work," Robinson said. "The after-school program gives her spelling words to practice. Her spelling words are like 15-letter words. They always give her a challenge and encourage her to do her best."

The church partners with Swan Learning Center to offer remedial tutoring at no additional cost. Twenty-five percent of the students enrolled in the after-school program pay the weekly \$50 tuition. The remainder attend on a scholarship.

"Our motto is 'Excellence for All,'" Burkins said. "The things you would do for a wealthy kid are the same things you should do for any kid. It's just a matter of finding the resources."