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Education reformer brings lessons home in Robeson County

By Steve DeVane

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LUMBERTON - Ben Chavis uses a method of education some would call old school. Now, a group of Robeson County residents wants to use it in a new school.

"My model is I'm going to be tough on you when I need to be," Chavis said.

Chavis talks nonstop and does not hesitate to give his opinion. He says his no-nonsense method focuses heavily on math and English with an emphasis on repetitive practice. He does not tolerate what he calls "acting the fool."

When a 13-year-old black student was not answering a reporter's questions, Chavis interrupted.

"He's found when white people come around, if he acts the fool, they'll leave him alone," Chavis said.

Chavis, a Lumbee Indian who grew up in poor Robeson County, implemented his methods in American Indian Model Schools network in Oakland, California, with successful results. He turned the schools around and, in the process, became a national leader in education reform.

Over the past four summers, he has brought his approach to Robeson County at an intensive three-week math camp for students in fourth through 12th grades. The camp is run in a converted barn on his family's farm in the Saddletree community.

Students have shown improvement on tests before and after the camp, Chavis said, mirroring the success seen in the charter schools in California. And if a group of Robeson County residents has its way, his practices could be used in a new charter school, which it sees as a way to help students in a struggling school system.

Chavis' results in Oakland were praised by national media outlets and then-California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, but his brash style also has gotten him into trouble.

In 2012, Chavis was accused of misappropriating \$3.8 million of school funds and breaking California law by directing the school to hire his companies, according to news reports. There was a criminal investigation, reports said, but Chavis has not been charged with any crime.

He says he is innocent of any wrongdoing.

Still, Chavis stepped down in 2012 as head of the American Indian Model Schools network and moved back to North Carolina.

Today, Chavis, who would not reveal his age but said he was born in the 1950s, lives and raises cattle on the farm where his grandmother worked as a sharecropper.

He traces his education philosophy of common sense, accountability and hard work to those days.

"My model came from my childhood of being poor with no excuses," he said.

A success story

When Chavis became director of American Indian Charter School in 2000, the school was struggling with only 38 students. He said it had become a "dumping ground" for troubled students.

The school was started for American Indian students, said Alice Spearman, secretary to the board of directors at what is now known as the American Indian Model Schools network.

When Chavis arrived, the school taught courses such as basket-weaving, Spearman said. He changed the focus to academics.

By the time Chavis left, the three schools in the network were among the best in the state and, by some measures, the best in the nation. The network expanded when he returned for four months in 2012.

In April, The Washington Post rated a school in the network the most challenging high school in the country for the second straight year. The rankings are designed to identify schools that have done the best job persuading average students to take college-level courses and tests.

Spearman said the school now serves a diverse population, including Asians, Ethiopians and black students. One campus is in Chinatown, she said.

Chavis said he takes issue with critics who say the schools improved because of an increase of Asian students. Chavis said the increase happened because those students were seeking a good school. Black, Indian and Latino students scored as well on tests as Asian students, he said. All scored higher than students in public schools, he said.

Chavis says his strategy is similar to that used by successful coaches. Educators should first build strong relationships with students, Chavis said.

"Then you can talk smack to them," he said.

Chavis said he knows the tactics cannot be used with every child. He acts tough with the kids who need it, he said.

When educators are strict with the 5 percent who need it, the other 95 percent get in line, Chavis said.

"Just because people are tough on you doesn't mean they don't like you," he said. "My kids love me."

Andrew J. Coulson, director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom, did a study that compared the success of charter schools in California to the amount of grant funding they received. The study found that schools in the American Indian Charter Network performed "substantially better" than traditional schools, he said.

The schools' scores were higher than average scores on the California Standards Tests by an "incredibly unusual" margin, he said. The schools in the network were "wildly outperforming" two public schools that target the brightest students and get to pick their students, Coulson said.

Coulson said he cannot say whether Chavis has the ability to replicate the model in Robeson County.

"If he can, it would be a great thing for the people of North Carolina," he said.

Financial allegations

Troy Flint, a spokesman for the Oakland Unified School District, said the American Indian Model Schools have high student achievement with test scores and the number of students who go on to college.

But the school district discovered financial improprieties with the misuse of public funds, he said.

When district officials notified the schools about the allegations, the schools initially did not cut ties with Chavis, Flint said.

The school board voted to close the schools, but the decision was challenged by American Indian's board. A judge decided in favor of the schools, and they remain open.

Flint said the judge's ruling found that there had been financial wrongdoing but that the school board should have considered academic performance as the most important factor in its decision whether to close the schools.

"Our board hasn't decided how to proceed," Flint said.

Chavis disputes that the judge's ruling found financial irregularities. He said instead of misusing the money, he donated his salary to the school. He said he owned buildings the school was using but charged rent well below the average local rate. He said his companies did work for the school because their bids were below others.

The schools are still renting two of Chavis' buildings, he said. He sold the other to the network for \$7.5 million, seven years after he bought it for \$7.4 million, he said.

Spearman said Chavis sold the building to the schools at below market value. She said Chavis ran the network of schools more like a small business than a school district.

"Maybe he didn't use normal business practices, but as far as theft and pocketing money, no, that didn't happen," she said.

Tough standards

In his 2010 book, "Crazy Like a Fox," Chavis outlines how he has helped young people succeed and the strategies he used in California.

Chavis thinks they will work in Robeson County. He said he has no desire to run the charter school but would offer advice on implementing his model.

He is outspoken in his criticism of Robeson County schools. He said the local school system is failing, but puts the blame on administrators and principals rather than teachers.

Johnny Hunt, superintendent of Robeson County schools, could not be reached for comment.

Students in the county performed poorly on the ACT test, a college admissions test taken by all juniors, Chavis said. He said 95 percent of county students failed to meet the test's science standard, while 89 percent failed the reading and math standards.

Chavis said he is working with the Coalition for a Better Robeson County, which wants to start a charter school and is interested in other local issues.

Chavis said a girl who came to his camp this summer was given an award for being the best math student in fourth grade at her school. When he tested her, she was performing on a second-grade level, he said.

"This is what we're fighting," he said. "Education is the biggest rip-off in the county."

The group is in the beginning stages of opening the charter school, Chavis said, and has not begun the application process with the state. He said it hopes to open the school in the 2016-17 school year.

The new school likely would start in the 7,000-square-foot converted barn on Chavis' farm, which he bought in 1993.

The five-classroom building was renovated with concrete blocks from a building that was being torn down and wood from a chicken house.

Chavis ran this year's camp on the property last month with friends Rick Stoker, a retired teacher who still works as a track coach at Jack Britt High School, and Noah Evans, who retired as custodian at Lumberton Junior High School. Chavis' former students who are now in college also helped.

As Chavis has done in his high schools, he conducts the camp with a stringent approach that he says is comparable to a military unit or sports team.

"In the beginning, you let them know who's boss," he said. "After that, you build them up."

Madeline Rogers, a site coordinator for the Communities in Schools program, recommended several students she knew would benefit from the camp. She said the first few days were rough for the students, but they adapted and their test scores improved.

Some students said they were scared of Chavis when camp started. But interviews show how his methods worked.

"I was scared, but I pulled myself together and got used to it," said Anaiya Holman, 11.

Jacoby Hill, 12, had a similar perspective.

"It was scary at first, and it got more fun," he said, adding that Chavis was the cause of the initial jitters.

Steve Hammonds said he noticed that his 12-year-old nephew had a more positive attitude after the camp.

"After he started coming over here, he wanted to stay," he said. "I know he's only 12 years old, but he's saying, 'I'm going to college.'"

Cherry Beasley, a professor of nursing at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke, worked at the camp, teaching how math applies to health. She said the idea for a charter school came from parents who had children at the summer camps.

"They said, 'We'd like this to happen for more than just three weeks in the summer,'" she said.

Stoker, who worked with Chavis at similar camps in California, said Chavis' model has been proven to work because he emphasizes discipline and hard work. He holds the students accountable and has high expectations of them, Stoker said.

"Expectations get results," he said. "If you don't expect anything from them, you won't get anything from them."