

Hillsborough School Board reexamines self-esteem programs at poorer schools

By [Marlene Sokol](#), Times Staff Writer

TAMPA — Angelica Norton was fast becoming a statistic, raised by unwed parents in an environment of drugs and violence, and a single mom by 17.

Perhaps it was kind words from teachers and social workers. God had a role too, Norton said. She reinvented herself and now gives self-esteem training. This year, the Hillsborough County School District is paying Norton \$5,130 to work with students in three schools.

At 39, the self-styled "Seed Sowing Sister" is among dozens of authors, trainers and speakers who share in millions of federal dollars that come into the Tampa Bay area's poorest schools. They get as little as \$175 for a presentation about clay or as much as \$75,000 to mentor teenage girls.

But at a time of belt-tightening and widespread teacher layoffs, critics wonder if the money could go to better use.

"This, at a time when teachers are digging in their pockets to pay for their supplies," said Jose Colindres, who runs a charitable foundation. "This, when we have kids hit on the way to school because of the cutback in buses."

Today, the Hillsborough School Board is scheduled to discuss technical service agreements like the one it has with Norton. The discussion results from questions a board member raised about a mentoring program called Black Girl Speaks and its contract.

Principals stand by the programs, which often promote leadership, goal-setting and nonviolence. "It's essential. Yes, yes, yes," said Carolyn Hill at Just Elementary, where Norton worked with children last Wednesday after school.

And administrators say they are all the more important as budgets are thin and teachers race the clock to teach core curriculum.

"As bizarre as it sounds, some children have to be told explicitly how to read body language, that when someone is crying, they are not playing any more," said Mary Conage, who oversees similar programs in Pinellas County.

A variety of programs

Much of the money for the contracts comes from Title 1, a federal program that seeks to close the learning gap between poorer and wealthier children.

Hillsborough is getting \$67 million in Title 1 money this year to serve more than 90,000 children. Pinellas and Pasco officials said they get about \$30 million and \$15 million, respectively.

The greatest share of that money typically goes to hire and train extra staff, including reading coaches, guidance counselors and psychologists. But districts have latitude to spend some of the money on programs that are not purely academic.

Between Title 1 and stimulus money, Hillsborough spent nearly \$900,000 last year on service agreements, according to Jeff Eakins, the district's director of federal programs, who pointed out that the contracts account for a small fraction of federal funding.

Records show the money went not just to student programs, but also to staff workshops led by authors and experts. Some were paid thousands.

Such uses are symptomatic of a flawed system, said Neal McCluskey, education analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute. He says Title 1 should be scrapped. "It doesn't work and the money tends to be wasted," he said.

But school officials say such thinking fails to consider the disadvantages poorer children face when they enter school. "You have to look at the whole child," said Hillsborough assistant superintendent Gwen Luney. "And maybe that child has had limited exposure to certain experiences that have helped children in other areas."

The evidence is clear-cut, said Pasco Title 1 supervisor Elena Garcia. "All you have to do is be a kindergarten teacher on the first day to recognize the gap."

One-woman show

In launching *Black Girl Speaks*, Talitha Anyabwele sought to meet needs both emotional and academic. A graduate of Leto High School who went on to a teaching career in Tallahassee, Anyabwele had produced a one-woman show named "for the little black girl in me who was not heard."

Back in Tampa, she volunteered at Middleton High School and in late 2009 landed her first \$75,000 contract to perform as well as mentor, tutor and counsel girls at three schools.

The experience was eye-opening even for the well-traveled Anyabwele. "As a black woman, all my life every image I had of being a black female in my home was positive," she said. "Unfortunately, that's not the case for many of my students."

A second \$75,000 contract came in early 2011. Anyabwele was up for a third contract for \$35,000 when Hillsborough School Board member Susan Valdes said she had heard complaints and wanted the program audited. Since then, district officials have been reviewing the contracting process in general.

Anyabwele said she'll continue her work even without a contract, "as long as I can legally be on campus and I'm welcome."

Warm and fuzzy

Meeting last week with children at Just Elementary, Norton had the boys write lists of actions that showed a lack of self-control, followed by those that did show self-control. The girls talked about priorities and listed things they would change about their behavior.

"It's work," she said. "You are valued by what you know. I lived it and I breathed it."

The schools Norton visits also host after-school sessions by the Pink Wish Foundation on a variety of academic and social topics, all interwoven with etiquette lessons. "You show me a child who doesn't need to be taught manners," said founder Ardre Orie.

Orie, 33, got the idea when, as assistant principal of Lomax Elementary School, she ran across uncivil behavior from children and parents. She charges \$3,000 for a series of workshops. This year, she's in five Tampa schools.

"It's awesome," said B.T. Washington Elementary principal Toynita Martinez, who calls herself a "Pink Wish principal" when she wants to model dignified behavior.

The programs, she said, are "not silly when you consider the children we work with. We are trying to change where these kids are headed."

Times researcher John Martin contributed to this report. Marlene Sokol can be reached at (813) 226-3356 or sokol@sptimes.com.

[Last modified: Nov 08, 2011 07:36 AM]