

**JANUARY 25, 2010**

**WINCHESTER STAR** — Women in leadership positions in education offered insights Saturday on success and the future of teaching.

James Wood Middle School on Amherst Street was the site for the Women's Leadership Forum, sponsored by the Women Education Leaders in Virginia and the Winchester branch of the American Association of University Women.

Frederick County School Superintendent Patricia Taylor and Teresa Miller, principal of the middle school, joined Dr. Rosa Atkins, superintendent of Charlottesville City Schools and Pamela McInnis, superintendent of Warren County's schools, on the panel.

"These women have broken the glass ceiling" in moving to high levels of responsibility in the state's education system, said Pam Tucker of the University of Virginia Curry School of Education, who served as moderator for the event.

Margaret Blackmon, past president of the WELV, noted that there are currently 38 female school superintendents in the 134 state school districts, and six African-Americans.

"We've never had more than two before," she said.

Tucker said the panelists, "have valuable lessons to share."

For an audience of about 30 people, the four women outlined their paths into school administration, the challenges of their jobs, and the skills they felt were necessary to advance to leadership in education.

Taylor noted that she took advantage of many opportunities for experience in the community while growing up and worked three jobs to help pay for college.

"You have to be willing to make some sacrifices along the way," she said.

Atkins joined the Army reserve one summer while she was a teacher. She and another teacher decided they could "go away for basic training and be back in time for school to start."

Army training gave her, "a new set of skills," Atkins said, adding that, for a shy person, having a drill sergeant scream in your face was good preparation for being a school principal and superintendent.

McInnis, a native Warren County, urged her listeners to "step up to leadership roles yourself" and take on duties outside your job description. "Be a generalist," she advised.

She also warned against "taking thing personally." It's important, she said, to "watch your facial expressions," drawing a laugh when she added, "especially if the meeting is televised."



Frederick County  
Schools superintendent  
**Patricia Taylor**

James Wood Middle  
School principal  
**Teresa Miller**



Taylor suggested that one secret to getting ahead is to “surround yourself with people who are smarter than you. You’ll learn more.”

Atkins said finding a friend on your career level who will give you honest feedback is a great help.

For the most part, said Taylor, “Be fair, be honest, be competent. That’s all you can really do.”

That way, she said, you will be comfortable with the decisions you make.

For challenges, all three superintendents agreed that, next to having to make the call on snow days, budgets are tough and getting tougher.

Taylor noted that Frederick County schools had taken “serious budget cuts” last year. When 85 to 88 percent of the budget is personnel costs, “It is painful,” Taylor noted.

“There is a hue and cry to cut support staff and administrators,” Taylor added. But, she said, custodians and clerical workers are essential to school functioning, too.

Virginia demands that schools meet Standards of Quality but may not offer the funding to achieve them.

“We’re being dealt a very difficult hand to play,” she said.

Atkins agreed, saying support staff make it possible for teachers to “deliver instruction.”

This will be the third consecutive year of state cuts in education funding, Atkins added.

“I don’t know if we’ve hit bottom,” McInnis offered, adding it seems impossible that teaching positions won’t be cut in the next budget. “I don’t see how Virginia is going to allow schools to be as devastated as they are going to be.”

Elaine Fogliani, president of the 11-year-old Women Education Leaders in Virginia, urged the audience to “stand up” for education. Schools cannot sustain the success they have had in meeting Standards of Learning and Average Yearly Progress with continued cuts in funding, she added.

The superintendents also took a look ahead to where education may be headed.

Atkins had the most unusual vision.

Technology, she said, is changing the way education is delivered.

“Kids learn differently,” James Wood’s Miller agreed. “They are wired for technology.”

For that reason, perhaps Atkins’ vision isn’t so far out.

She suggested that, one day, the need for fixed infrastructure, like high school buildings, will be gone.

Warren County  
Schools superintendent  
**Pamela McGinnis**



Charlottesville Schools  
superintendent  
**Rosa Atkins**



Technology, she said, could allow students to learn in a virtual environment, "any time, anywhere. The need for the traditional school building will start to diminish."

"We're not digital natives. We're immigrants," said Miller. So, it's hard for the older generation to fathom where this new digital revolution will lead.

And that poses another problem for the educational system, Taylor added: Finding the money to buy and maintain cutting edge technology.

However, she still sees a need for a school building and human interaction.

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