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Farwell school officials learn about dealing with poverty

By Pat Maurer
Review Correspondent

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Farwell Administrators and staff recently had a chance to learn more about dealing with families that spend their lives near the edge of poverty, their strengths, assets and how to help students from those families learn.

Several school officials attended a special conference on "Poverty's Impact on Learners and Learning," featuring Ruby Payne, founder of aha! Process, Inc. and author, speaker, publisher and career educator. She is recognized internationally for her book and workshop, "A Framework for Understanding Poverty."

Payne was featured April 20 in a special morning session at Central Michigan University in an hour-long presentation on the concept. Superintendent Carl Seiter said, "Listening to Dr. Ruby Payne was an outstanding opportunity for me. Dr. Payne's work helps us understand what goes through a child's mind as they struggle to deal with situations outside of their control."

He continued, "We as educators need to fully understand the "whole student" in order to better educate them. Dr. Payne's "Framework for Understanding Poverty" is an unbelievable account of what some of our students deal with on a daily basis. Once we address these needs, the educational process becomes easier."

The schedule explanation for one of the ten sessions in the day-long seminar said, "The session invited participants to examine personal beliefs about poverty and families while challenging them to recognize the resiliency and strengths these families develop for meeting daily challenges and crisis."

The afternoon schedule, with eight sessions, featured ways to combat poverty and its impact on, and the needs of, at-risk students.

The program was also geared toward involving families of students and overcoming the intimidation they sometimes feel in educational settings, and making them more welcome and more interested in what happens in the classroom.

Special needs students and the changes and challenges they face after the public school years was another afternoon session.

Presenters included Payne and many other educators including two from Farwell: Lynette Lentovich, Early College Director and

Mathematics/Science Teacher at Farwell High School and Dee Yarger, Principal of Farwell High School, Farwell Area Early College and Timberland Alternative High School.

Yarger said, "Ruby Payne's presentation was excellent and a must see for everyone involved in education. She is so accurate and specific with examples as to how social classes have different 'hidden rules' that are not taught in education or society. Additionally, she helps educators to understand how to successfully communicate and collaborate with students and their parents when there are challenges."

She continued, "Poverty is an issue that has unfortunately increased in our area and the state. This needs to be a priority in schools because it definitely affects our students and their academic achievements. When students are hungry, cold, and tired from issues that are out of their control, as educators, we must first recognize their immediate needs before expecting learning to occur. We cannot expect a student to perform well on state assessments when they were cold due to no heat, hungry because their last meal was at school the previous school day, and tired because we all know how hard it is to sleep when you are cold and hungry."

Yarger concluded, "The state wants school accountability for assessment scores, teacher evaluations, and school improvement goals, but we need to accurately factor in poverty statistics as well and work together to provide all our students the opportunity for academic achievement. She added, "The opportunity to run a breakout session was amazing and allowed me to reflect on what we do at Farwell daily to help combat poverty. We are very fortunate to have programs put into place to help level the playing field for all our students; such as early college that is tuition free, a free summer and after school program with dinner and transportation, and universal breakfast and lunch for all our students."

Of Payne's presentation in the morning, Lentovich said, "After listening to Ruby Payne speak about the impact poverty has on an individual, value of my role as an educator and the influence that I alone can have on an individual's success has been revived." She continued, "We can only control what we can control. In creating strong, positive relationships with our students, we can begin to shape them into successful individuals. We only know what we have learned, and our actions and personal beliefs are formed by our experiences."

Lynette said, "Payne speaks about the hidden rules that are present in poverty, middle class, and those living in wealth. These 'rules' affect our lives in many ways. As a teacher, I need to make sure that I am guiding my students down a successful pathway. With the large amounts of negativity surrounding those who decide to go into education and the great deal of pressures placed on teachers from countless sources, we as educators must be comforted by what we have learned on the job regarding the impact poverty can have on an individual and continue to be a positive influence in our students' lives."

Lentovich presented a session on Combating Poverty's Impact in an afternoon session.

Following her presentation, Yarger conducted a session on "Addressing the Needs of the Whole Student."

"The number of staff Farwell Area Schools attending the conference," Seiter said, "is a testament to how dedicated our staff is to helping and understanding students. It was a great experience."

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