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## Dollars for scholars: Couple will help entire Cunningham School class pay for college

By ANDREW WIND, [andrew.wind@wfcourier.com](mailto:andrew.wind@wfcourier.com)

Waterloo -- Jeff Ferguson's all-boys second-grade class is at the center of an effort to close the achievement gap faced by black students.

Now scholarships are being offered to his 17 Dr. Walter Cunningham School for Excellence so their education doesn't end with high school.

Dennis Harbaugh and his wife, Juanita Williams have established a scholarship fund for the students that will pay as much as two years of state university tuition. The couple started the Harbaugh-Williams Education Promise Fund with the \$85,000 mortgage on an apartment building they own and will lead an effort to raise more money.

Last fall, Harbaugh brought the idea to Robert Smith, a Black Hawk County supervisor, former Waterloo school board president and official with the University of Northern Iowa's Center for Urban Education. Smith helped him connect with Waterloo Community Schools officials and choose an appropriate class.

"The bottom line is there's just a serious achievement gap between majority and minority student," said Harbaugh.

"We wanted to come up with an idea that would help strengthen the economic independence of the African-American community in Waterloo," he added. "And when we thought about it, we realized that would include higher education in some way, but that it probably needed to start at a very early age."

The scholarship fund was announced to the students and their families during a ceremony last week at Cunningham. Harbaugh, who grew up on an Orange Township farm, said his parents never went to college. Williams was the first college graduate in her family.

"We both felt that college diploma opened up increased opportunities for us," Harbaugh told the families. The 47-year-old is a former UNI administrator who retired because of a disability. Williams, 49, works for Covenant Health System.

"I think it's just unbelievable for someone to be so interested in their education," said Charlotte Gafeney, whose grandson, Marquas, is in the class. "It's a blessing, that's what it is. It's just a blessing."

"You know what just happened tonight? We just changed some lives tonight, that's what happened," Superintendent Dewitt Jones told the gathering, which also included mentors and district officials. "I don't know how to say thanks. It's just phenomenal."

Harbaugh said the promise of a scholarship is an incentive for the students to keep up attendance and grade during elementary school "and then give them a good reason to tough out those middle and high school years."

### Focus on black males

There is a good reason to focus such an effort on black males, who graduate at a lower rate than other district students.

For example, while 64.4 percent of district students who started high school in 2001-02 graduated last spring, 37.6 percent of black males in that class earned a diploma.

Ferguson's all-boys class, which he will teach through fifth grade, and two other single-gender classrooms at Cunningham are one result of a governor's task force to close the achievement gap for black students across the district. That gap can be seen on this fall's standardized tests, where 14 to 37 percent fewer black than white students were proficient on the reading and math portions among district fourth-, eighth- and 11th-graders.

The idea of the single-gender class, which keeps the same teacher over multiple years, is to tailor instruction to more effectively educate those students, closing the achievement gap and ensuring they eventually graduate.

But financial concerns can still be a barrier to considering college. Norm Granger, a Waterloo insurance agent, told the Cunningham parents a bachelor's degree from a public university will cost \$114,000 by the time their sons graduate from high school in 2016.

That helps explain Laquonedrian Jones' reaction when the scholarship fund was announced.

"It brought tears to my eyes," said Jones, whose son, Anthony Ross, is in the class.

Jones understands the scholarship's value all too well. She is attending Hawkeye Community College to become a licensed practical nurse without the benefits of a scholarship.

"Right now, I owe \$15,000 and I still have two semesters to go," she said.

The announcement changed the plans of Jacquet Wilder, another student's mother.

"I was actually thinking of moving out of town," she said. "This is going to keep me here. This definitely changed my plans, I never expected it."

The students are "already on the road to a big future," she said.

"It's going to be a lot easier knowing that college is there at the end," added Wilder. "We don't have to fight and stress about how we're going to get in."

After the ceremony, each family had their picture taken with Harbaugh and Williams, who plan on taking an active role in the children's education. In addition, a support structure is being developed to mentor the students that will include the Black Alliance, a local group that works with needy children. Harbaugh expects the organization to "play a key role in setting a good example for the students and also helping build academic expectation" for the students.

The children will also be expected to participate in other activities, from college planning to an annual fundraiser. Michelle Temeyer, the district's director of community education, said those details will be further fleshed out as the effort moves forward.

Hard work ahead

The scholarship fund is unique to this area. Mary Ann Burk, president and CEO of the Community Foundation of Waterloo, Cedar Falls, and Northeast Iowa, cited examples of people choosing a single middle school student to mentor and later finance their college education. But providing scholarships for an entire class has been done in other places.

Other examples

One prominent example is Eugene Land, a philanthropist who "adopted" a class of 61 Harlem sixth-graders in 1981. The Web site for his I Have a Dream Foundation says, of the 54 students tracked beyond high school, 90 percent earned a diploma or GED and 60 percent went on to higher education.

Harbaugh and Williams were inspired by a newspaper story they saw more than a decade ago about Oral Lee Brown, a California real estate agent who initiated a similar effort in 1987. She started putting \$10,000 into a trust fund every year to pay the college education for a class of 23 first-graders living in an impoverished area of Oakland. In 1999, 20 of the students graduated from high school and 19 enrolled in college.

Such efforts to help underprivileged children get a college education don't always go so well, though.

"I know of other programs that have done this and the results are mixed," said

Martin A. Davis Jr., a senior writer and editor for the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, who has studied educational philanthropy.

"I think programs that sort of dangle the money out there and say 'Here it is, good luck,' those tend to be less successful."

Martin said starting the Cunningham program in second grade and plans to mentor the students all the way through high school set this scholarship fund apart from that approach.

"That certainly improves the educational benefits," he said. "Again, that's the kind of stuff that's critical."

He noted for children who grow up in poverty, there is often no cultural expectation to get a college degree. "Mentoring becomes a terribly important part of reaching that goal."

Martin said it is "another good sign" that Harbaugh and Williams will take an active role with the students and parents.

"From the recipient's end, it's much harder to be flippant about a gift when you know the giver of the gift," he said.

Martin disagrees with the assessment that the students won't value a college education if they don't earn the money to pay for it themselves.

"I understand that argument, but the thing that kind of gets lost in that mix is there's an assumption there that kids aren't working for it," he said. "Kids who take their academics seriously are working very hard."

Hard work ahead

Hard work is also ahead for Harbaugh, Williams, and district officials as they begin a campaign to further enrich the fund.

"There's not a set goal at this point," said Harbaugh of the amount they want to raise. "We know that we're going to be reaching out and asking friends and family, but we're also going to be asking the community."

He expects to make a strong fundraising push during the next two years. The few people who already know about the scholarships have been enthusiastic.

"Several have told us they want to contribute on an annual basis," he said. "That's wonderful."

Smith, whom Harbaugh initially contacted about his idea, believes Waterloo's black

community should make a significant contribution to the fund.

"One of my goals would be to challenge the African-American community to donate," said Smith, noting he would be the first to give \$500 to \$1,000. "The African-American community has the golden opportunity to step up and support what this gentleman has the vision to do."

He hopes the fund's initial \$85,000 can be doubled with the donations of the black community.

"I think we've got to do more than talk about it," he said. "I think now's the time to invest in our young people. We have to do it, we can't expect other to do it for us."

**Contact Andrew Wind at 291-1507 or [andrew.wind@wfcourier.com](mailto:andrew.wind@wfcourier.com)**