

# Georgia Schools Send out SOS to Faith Community

More than 50 years ago, the U.S. Supreme Court banned public **school prayer**. That decision is still stirring debate, but it doesn't mean schools and churches can't work together.

In one Georgia town, this partnership is helping students succeed. Francella Perryman believes in the church's calling to meet the needs of the community.

Perryman is especially passionate about kids and practices what she preaches as outreach director for Mount Pisgah United Methodist Church in the Atlanta suburb of Johns Creek.

"Jesus did not just sit in the pews, He was out in the community. And if we are to seriously be light to the world, you have got to get out into the community and support these children," she told CBN News.

## **Making the Connection**

When the Fulton County public schools asked for help from the faith community, Perryman immediately reached out to Hillside Elementary School, where many minorities and students from low-income families attend.

"I just went to the principal and talked to her, found out what her needs were and our need to be a light," she explained.

It is a part of a plan put in place by Fulton County School Superintendent Robert Avossa after realizing that public schools under his helm could not meet the needs of the students in his district alone.

"With the school system of nearly 100,000 students and almost half of which live at or below the poverty level, it was clear

early on that no matter how many resources we had, we weren't going to be able to reach every one of our children," Avossa said.

## **Faith to the Rescue**

The response from the faith community was overwhelming. More than 100 houses of worship, including churches, synagogues, and others offered services to public school in Fulton County, ranging from feeding programs to after school athletic camp.

Avossa said he was impressed by the help.

"I began to talk with community members. It became very clear that there were a lot of people in the community and our faith community, in particular, that were interested in helping," he said.

But Avossa knew that going from talking about the plan to making it happen would be not be easy.

Local media questioned if he was allowing churches in the schools to change the way people believe.

It's an issue Avossa said Fulton County has been careful about before proceeding.

"We brought in an attorney to share early on with our faith community the importance of working with schools, that this is a place of volunteerism, a place for people to help," he explained.

## **Being a Light**

Meanwhile, Perryman said the goal of Mt. Pisgah's involvement with the school is to demonstrate help for students in tangible ways.

"We're not so much focused on only having them attend our church," she said. "It's again being a partner with them and

allowing them to see the light of Christ and supporting the schools.”

Students at Hillside are reaping tremendous benefits from the partnership.

Volunteers from Mt. Pisgah provide tutoring and mentoring programs during the school’s lunchtime and the church recently hosted a back to school event, providing backpacks and free school supplies.

Hillside Principal Dr. Maisha Ottway said partnering with churches and other groups simply makes sense.

“I think the biggest take away is our schools are supported and don’t always have to be supported by us,” she said. “There are community faith-based organizations that benefit from supporting us so why do we not need to tap into that resource?”

Mt. Pisgah also provides shuttle service to the school for parents interested in attending parent conferences but who have no transportation.

Dr. Ottway said attendance at school events have increased as a result.

Perryman added that parents want to be involved in school events but that if transportation is an obstacle, loaning out church vans is the least the church can do to help.

### **A Simple Thing**

Ottway said the partnership with the church is making her job as principal easier.

“I can’t do everything and I can’t provide everything for my kiddos. It doesn’t have to be grandiose, it just has to be sustainable and that’s what Mount Pisgah has done. And for me it’s just a simple, simple thing,” she added.

Both the school and the church said the partnership is working well and yielding benefits for all involved, especially the students.

“The better prepared kids are to be self-sufficient and to contribute to the community, the healthier the community,” Avossa said.

“And at the end of the day I think it’s a great place to focus,” she said. “It’s a win-win for everybody.”