

## TIDEWATER HISPANIC NEWS in ENGLISH

### Eben-ezer focused on church and outreach

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neighborhood, off Virginia Beach Boulevard and about a mile west of Virginia Beach Boulevard and Military Highway, the \$2.1 million, 435-member Iglesia de Dios Eben-ezer is the largest "Hispanic church" in Hampton Roads, perhaps the state, said Fonseca.

Because of its size and location - a 10,000 square-foot facility with a kitchen and eight classrooms - resting next to Broad Creek on about three acres of waterfront property, Eben-ezer would make a nice host facility for an Hispanic cultural center, Fonseca said. In addition, the church is also poised to expand, adding 5,000 more square-feet of space, more classrooms and office space. In light of the church's success and its continued growth, it's imperative, Fonseca said, that the church's membership continue growing, without incurring the extra staffing and budgetary pressures of operating the state's first Hispanic cultural center.

Rather than ask a seasoned church to double as a fledgling cultural center, he suggests that Hampton Roads' Hispanic communities identify their most effective leaders; and that they unite to build their own cultural center, to serve as the community's centerpiece for promoting Hispanic cultural heritage.

Operating from what used to be Faith Wesleyan Church, many of Benito's and his wife Ivonne's parishioners have followed them from their beginning ministry in Virginia Beach, to the new church of God. They represent as many as 12 different nationalities, including Cuba, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Honduras, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Bolivia, Puerto Rico, Brazil, Spain and Peru.

They come to worship from cities such as, Virginia Beach, Norfolk, Chesapeake, Portsmouth, Hampton and Richmond.

In addition to conducting religious services in English and Spanish, the church also offers children's bible study classes. Fonseca said that he intends to add several educational classes, including ones teaching the English language; he'd like to create a "Family Center" and offer classes on the 'family structure,' and classes to educate Hispanic about local immigration laws.

"We are more like an 'outreach center,'" said Fonseca, who along with his wife, Ivonne, also a pastor, own and operate Iglesia de Dios Eben-ezer. "Our main goal is to bring people to the church. Our thoughts are to develop and offer services that will not only benefit the church and its members, but will also benefit the whole community."

A new "food bank," a charity "clothes closet," a "wellness center" and a regional Hispanic Heritage parade during National Hispanic Heritage Month (Oct. 15 to Nov. 15) are also part of the Fonseca's vision for the future.

"We need to be thinking about having an Hispanic cultural center," said Fonseca. "There is a need for it; the local Hispanic groups need to get together and think about



Bishop Benito Fonseca during his recent Sunday morning services. Photos by Greg Goldfarb.



The church's congregation consists of people from many countries.

the needs of the people in the Hispanic population."

Standing in the way of building a Hampton Roads cultural center, is the absence of a Hispanic community or political leader to rally and unite the region's various Hispanic communities.

"These groups need to find a good leader; good leadership is what we need," said Fonseca. "We need somebody to speak up for us."

*Iglesia de Dios Eben-ezer Church of God is located at 745 Pecan Point Road in Norfolk. Services are held at 7 p.m., on Wednesdays; 7:30 p.m., on Fridays; and at 9 and 11 a.m., Sundays. Call 757-422-2997 for more information. Contact Benito Fonseca at benitofonseca@gmail.com.*

#### Clarification/correction

In the last issue of Tidewater Hispanic News, it was reported that a new Hispanic cultural center had opened in Iglesia de Dios Eben-ezer Church of God. Although the church's leader and one of the newspaper's editors shared the idea of the church doubling as a cultural center, upon further reflection and in concert with the church's board of trustees' wishes, it was determined that the church must focus on its primary mission, which does not include a cultural center. We apologize for any confusion the article and headline may have caused. - Greg Goldfarb.



Seatack Elementary Students listen as Virginia Beach School Board Member Ashley McLeod reads aloud. The students' teacher, Barbara Fessel, looks on. Students, ages 10 and 11, in attendance at the recent reading were: Alex Brown, Cianna Beavers, Ceasar Jones, Maliah Smith, Kira Tanner, Sydney Williams, Coden Dyson, Marques Jones, Jamijea Paulson, Keshan Thomas and Tierra Jones. Photo by Greg Goldfarb.

### Virginia Beach School Board Member Ashley McLeod says the school division is doing well with its minority students; parents are the key to keeping students on the right track

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students, parents, faculty and staff, before and after her readings. She's doesn't stop in just to be social and have fun, however, she's also there ensuring that all students receive equal opportunities to learn, regardless of their race, religion or nationality.

"We (school board members) appreciate the diversity that Virginia Beach has in its community," she said. "It's important to me, especially."

With a total student enrollment is 69, 433 (K -

*"I need for students to see a group of teachers reflective of their own diversity." Virginia Beach School Board Member Ashley McLeod*

12), Virginia Beach educates its students at its 11 high schools, 14 middle schools, 56 elementary schools; and at a number of secondary and post-secondary "specialty centers," such as the Renaissance Academy, the Advance Technology Center, the Technical and

Career Education Center and the Adult Learning Center.

In a school system comprised mostly of children whose ethnic and cultural heritage is Caucasian and African American, respectively, the city's Hispanic population is its third largest, with more than 6,000 - maybe as many as 7,000, depending on how the division's statistics are interpreted - Hispanic students taking classes.

McLeod places the number of students of Hispanic heritage at 6,110, with 394 of them speaking Spanish as a first language. There are about 1,123 students of different nationalities enrolled in what used to be called "English as a Second Language" classes.

Overall, McLeod said, the city's schools have done a good job of embracing cultural diversity in the classrooms.

"Every school is different," said McLeod, who has a son and daughter attending Plaza Middle School, where she is vice president for programs for the school's Parent Teacher Association (PTA). "Our administrators

are very good about making the classroom as diversified as possible."

Estimates are that the overall percentage of Hispanic students in the school system ranges between 6.1 and 8.8. The school system spent \$11,020 (2009/10) per pupil to educate each student, totaling some \$672,550 that the school system spends annually educating its students who are of "Hispanic heritage."

The school system's employee base of 16,788 (2009) included 9,222 full-time and 1,387 part-time employees; and 6,175 substitute teachers. Of those, about 75 per cent were Caucasian, 18 per cent African American; three per cent, Asian; and two per cent Hispanic.

#### Diversity in the classroom

Even with a culturally diverse work force and school board members who are sensitive to the problems some minority students have fitting in with other students, there's always more work that could be done, creating the

right learning environment, so that all students stay on the right track to higher education.

But the work is a challenge. "Bite-by-bite," said McLeod, describing how teachers and administrators handle problems that may arise from language, or cultural barriers and differences, interfering with some students' ability to learn. "I need for students to see a group of teachers reflective of their own diversity."

One educational problem facing all Hampton Roads school divisions is the high school drop out rate for minority students, particularly African Americans.

The school division has hired experts in multiculturalism and cultural diversity to elevate public awareness of, and to work with, its culturally diverse student base. Language in some of its public relations materials has also been revised, reflecting the division's commitment to embracing cultural diversity and focusing on graduating

more young African American males.

"One concern I have in the minority student population," said McLeod, an elder at Bayside Presbyterian Church, "is that not enough students are getting their degrees."

There are many reasons why students don't complete their educations, McLeod said, not the least of which is the family structure from

*"The social issues we're dealing with are different now than they've ever been." - Virginia Beach School Board Member Ashley McLeod*

which the child comes, before arriving at school in the morning. Family members are the starting point, she said, in any child's education.

"It's (the pressure) on every parent," said McLeod, who taught in public schools for six years. "I personally believe that a good education starts at home. The greater the participation of the parents; and the more importance parents give to

education, the better."

Twists and turns in the economy distracting parents from effective parenting, juxtaposed with increasing peer and cultural pressure to engage in social activities not conducive to learning, must be addressed, McLeod said.

Parents need to take more responsibility for their children's behaviors, particularly if it adversely affects their path to academic and professional success. Effective parenting, she said, includes keeping minors away from crime, drugs, alcohol and casual sex.

"How do we handle our 'friends' who are underage drinkers; how do we tell them that it's okay to say 'no' to sex," McLeod asks. "The social issues we are dealing with are different now than they've ever been."

Again, McLeod reiterates, it is up to parents to meet and work with teachers and school principals, to guide the country's future leaders and work force, in a safe and healthy direction. "Parents need to be parents to their kids," said McLeod. "They can be friends later on."