

Back to School extravaganza draws huge crowd

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TRENTON » From kids playing basketball and composing haiku-style poems to children receiving free backpacks and bonding with educators, the Back to School Academic Extravaganza on Friday brought hundreds of families together for a day of fun.

"This is one of the greatest events that occur in Trenton in the whole year," said Alex Bethea, a retired Trenton Public Schools vice principal and former city councilman. "Parents, teachers and administrators come together. It's all about education."

Bethea said Trenton Public Schools must play a central role in revitalizing the capital city through curriculum and instruction. "If we fix education," he said, "we will be fine."

The fourth annual Back to School extravaganza featured free health and vision screenings under a lively atmosphere at the Trenton Board of Education building.

"This is a good pre-day for school," Trenton Mayor Reed Gusciora said, "to get the kids motivated to go back to school."

Trenton Public Schools had 2,300 open spots for the district's preschool program and had 2,000 sign up, Gusciora said at Friday's extravaganza. "It looks like it's a great success."

As Gusciora circled through the event, he took a moment to acknowledge 7-year-old Samuel Francis, calling the local schoolboy a "celebrity."

Samuel, who is entering second grade at Martin Luther King Elementary, said it was his second



Trenton Mayor Reed Gusciora (left) and 7-year-old Samuel Francis enjoy the festivities at the Back to School Academic Extravaganza hosted by Trenton Public Schools Friday.

time meeting the newly elected mayor. He later reflected on the mayor's comments, asking, "Can you be a celebrity without being rich?"

Students collectively received more than 2,000 free backpacks at the Trenton Public Schools event from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Friday. The event also gave city youth the opportunity to play pickleball, a tennis-style paddle sport, among other engaging activities of the mind and body.

"This is a good thing for the community," said William Chenoweth, Samuel's grandfather.

City youth displayed their intellectual prowess Friday when they composed nature-themed haiku poems at the event. "Water preserves life. Water makes the soul rejoice. Life, water, happiness,"



Trenton youth play pickleball, a tennis-style paddle sport, during the Trenton Public Schools Back to School Academic Extravaganza at the city Board of Education's building and grounds Friday.

read one of the compositions.

"That one really struck me," Amanda Buchner, a Tulpehaking Nature Center watershed fellow, said of the poem. "That was my favorite one today."

The Tulpehaking Nature Center is a Mercer County Park Commission facility located in the Abbott Marshlands of Hamilton Township. The center organized Friday's poetry-writing activity, giving kids the tools and encouragement to create haikus.

"We have a ton of people doing haikus here," Buchner said. "This is awesome."

The water-themed poems will be collected and displayed at the Tulpehaking Nature Center next month. The center, located at 157 Westcott Ave. in Hamilton, will feature the haikus in a free exhibit from noon to 3 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 15, as part of its River Days festivities.

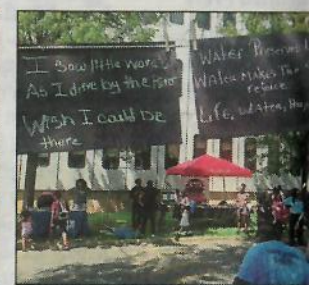
Short by design, haikus are

written in 17 syllables divided over three lines. "It's probably the easiest poem you have," Buchner said. "Since they are so short, you can really capture a moment."

Barbara Flythe of the Trenton Literacy Movement provided information at the Back to School extravaganza highlighting Trenton's literacy crisis. About 75 percent of children in elementary school in the City of Trenton do not read at grade level, according to the Trenton Literacy Movement, which funds afterschool and summer programs that provide computer-aided literacy instruction.

"We are still raising money," Flythe said, noting grade-level literacy in Trenton continues to lag far behind the surrounding suburbs. Trenton Literacy Movement, which is chaired by former Trenton Mayor Doug Palmer, wants to turn the tide on the city's literacy crisis.

Friday's Back to School event



Student-created haiku poems hang outside the Trenton Board of Education building during the Trenton Public Schools Back to School Academic Extravaganza Friday.



PHOTOS BY SULAIMAN ABDUR-RAHMAN

Kids play basketball outside the Trenton Board of Education building during a Back to School Academic Extravaganza Friday.

fostered family fun while allowing hundreds of families the opportunity to interact with educators and key agencies serving the community. "The shared collaboration," Flythe said, "is very important."

With the new school year approaching, Trenton's first school begins Sept. 6.

The Trentonian

The Trentonian,
600 Perry St.,
Trenton, NJ 08618

Home delivery rates: Daily and Sunday: \$9.45 per week. Other frequency rates available.
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Special editions: All home delivery subscriptions will include the Thanksgiving Day

The Trentonian (ISSN10643567) is a newspaper published daily at 600 Perry St., Trenton, NJ 08618.

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