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YOUR NEW MAC

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Chatham Park Brings New School Without the Choice

by Tommy Johnson

Thales Academy, a chain private school promising “a high quality, affordable education,” is planned to open in Chatham Park next fall. It offers a surprisingly low tuition but to do so it avoids accreditation and has no cafeteria, auditorium, or bus system. Most notably, it lacks the resources necessary to accommodate students with behavioral conditions or learning disabilities.

Thales currently enrolls 2,200 students across the state at six locations. Robert Luddy, prominent political donor and CEO of CaptiveAire Systems, a commercial ventilation company, started the school in 2007. He founded the schools to give parents and students “exit,” or a way to “bypass the existing industry,” as he told Reason.com.

Thales aims to be a viable financial alternative to public schools by offering markedly lower tuition prices. A Thales education costs \$4,800 for Pre-K, \$5,300 for Kindergarten through fifth grade, and \$6,000 for sixth through twelfth grade. For comparison, Durham Academy’s grades 9-12 tuition is \$25,170 and in 2015-16, North Carolina spent over \$8,000 per pupil. According to Thales’ mission statement, its goal is to maintain excellence while streamlining efficiencies. To complete this balancing act Thales has to make some sacrifices.

First, Thales Academy lacks accreditation. The purpose of accreditation is to assure a school’s quality to parents and students and to assist the school in improvement. In North Carolina, accreditation comes from one or more of six independent agencies, ranging from regional and religiously affiliated to national organizations. Being accredited means a school

consistently meets the agency’s standards. Accreditation, however, is not for Thales Academy.

“The accreditation process does not align with Thales Academy’s mission and prevent Thales from maintaining our standard of the highest quality of education,” reads Thales’ website. Thales maintains that the “bureaucratic requirements” place an unnecessary strain on staff and teachers.

This concern for overburdening teachers is carried over to Advanced Placement classes, which give students a chance to earn college credit and/or place out of college classes in high school. Thales offers just four of these “because they require time consuming and expensive teacher training and often lead to teaching for the test.” Thales offers AP Calculus, AP Spanish Literature, AP Latin, and AP Physics. If students want to be proactive in biology, economics, or any of the other AP course offerings, they can take a third-party course in addition to their Thales workload. Third party courses usually cost several hundred dollars.

For both accreditation and Advanced Placement, Thales argues that it can maintain high academic standards despite skimping the costs of AP teacher training and accreditation. Similarly, it boasts that through “direct instruction” it can handle larger class sizes and, consequentially, fewer teachers. Direct instruction is a form of teaching where students are divided into classes based upon student performance on placement tests. The logic with direct instruction is that when students are in classes with peers of relatively similar abilities, they require less individual attention. According to Reason.com, “Luddy is proud of having large classes because it demonstrates efficiency.” It has a 26:1 student-teacher ratio compared

to the 15:1 ratio in traditional public schools.

This push for efficiency results in Thales lacking several key accommodations. Thales does not have buses or bus drivers: they rely solely on parents to provide students with rides to school. It has few staff members, no cafeteria (students eat their lunches in classrooms), and no auditorium. To keep costs and staff low, Thales also discriminates on the basis of emotional issues, behavioral issues, and learning disabilities.

On its Admissions page, Thales has the following nondiscrimination statement: “Thales is open to any student regardless of race, creed, gender, or economic status. Thales Academy makes reasonable accommodations for children with physical disabilities.” The full statement, which can be found in the student and parent handbook, is more telling: “Thales does not have the personnel or the facilities to effectively address the needs of children who have emotional or behavioral problems or who have learning disabilities that require special programs.” If your student requires a more individualized education as a result of dyslexia, cerebral palsy, or any other condition that falls under this blanket term, they will be unable to go to Thales Academy.

Thales Academy is coming to Chatham as a result of Chatham Park. Unfortunately, Chatham Park’s motto of “Many Choices. One Place.” does not apply to everyone in the case of Thales. The school excludes the most marginalized students to offer a cheaper education to others.

Tommy Johnson is a rising sophomore at Kenyon College in Gambier, OH and a resident of Pittsboro. He is an intern at Chatham County Line this summer.

Love and Heartbreak for Visiting Foreign Teachers

by Luis Melodelgado
translated by Nora Haenn

As readers know, our county schools routinely recruit teachers. What most readers might not know is that some foreign bilingual educators get in the mix. These experts come from Mexico, Colombia, Spain, Venezuela, etc. From the point of view of these guest-teachers, being hired to educate youth in the United States is a welcome challenge. For many, their travels to Siler City — and elsewhere in the U.S. — count as their first trip abroad. Some may be undertaking a journey of self-discovery, many might welcome the relief from places where financial or political instability make it difficult for them to develop their potential. Yet, because their contracts stipulate a stay of no more than five years, these teachers face a significant challenge. A challenge that, for obvious reasons, becomes a dilemma for our school communities.

About ten years ago, partly in response to the county’s growing Latino population, local educational leaders established the Dual Language Program. Also known as “Dual Immersion,” the initiative proved to be a stroke of genius. Currently operating in four public

schools, the Dual Language Program skillfully builds bridges across diverse groups. Our Spanish speaking residents participate, but Caucasian, African-American and other families also partake in the program. (Bilingual education has shown to benefit all children’s learning.) Favoring inclusion over assimilation, the program’s promoters appear to have decided the erasure of family history in the pursuit of raising U.S. citizens isn’t necessary; instead, it is more beneficial to incorporate the positive features of all histories in the creation of a brand-new collective identity.

Maintaining the program’s objectives would be hard without the support of a highly skilled group of teachers. In our county, this includes foreign nationals, some of whom turn out to be exceptional. The dilemma these teachers and the county both face is that their talented contributions are short-term.

Once hired, guest teachers go through a process of acculturation. They must learn to adapt, to become accustomed to this new world-of-worlds. With a Hispanic population hovering around 50 percent, Siler City could at times very well be the home they left behind.

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The flight and the song of birds affirm life on the Haw

by Joe Jacob

Other than rocks, flowing water and trees, what stands out to you when looking at the Haw River? Close your eyes. What do you see and sometimes hear? Of course, everyone loves to hear the sound of water flowing over rocks. The negative ions created when water flows over objects gives us a feeling of freshness. In that case, you are seeing without your eyes. What-else do you see or maybe see by hearing. I’ll give you a hint. They have hollow bones and feathers. They come in different sizes and colors and they make a variety of sounds. To me, birds characterize the Haw River. They tell me there is other life around for if there were no food to eat like fish and macro-invertebrates or the river too toxic, we would not hear or see them, and that would be sad. Imagine a world without the sound of birds.

To me, there are two bird species that most characterize the Haw River. Of the birds, the Great Blue Heron literally stands out. Up to 4.5 ft. tall with a 5.0 ft. wingspan, it can weigh up to 5.5 lbs. Its blue-gray color makes it invisible to most of its aquatic prey.

You will see it standing motionless for long periods of time, and then suddenly, it stretches its long neck straight out to catch a snack. The Great Blue Heron is a survivor. It has been around since the time of the dinosaurs. If you do any paddling on the Haw River, you see many Great Blue Herons, or is it just one? Seems like as you approach a bird, it gently lifts off and flies down river only to repeat the pattern as you come close to it again.

In contrast to the size of the Great Blue Heron, there is the Belted Kingfisher. About the size of your hand, the Belted Kingfisher is usually heard before it is seen. When you do see it, it will be flying near to the water surface and close to the river bank. As it flies, it makes an unmistakable chattering sound. It seems to be fussing at you for disturbing it. Unusual in birds, the female Belted Kingfisher is a little more colorful than the male. It puzzles me to understand how this species has survived since it makes its nest in river banks where snakes and raccoons have easy access to eggs and flood

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