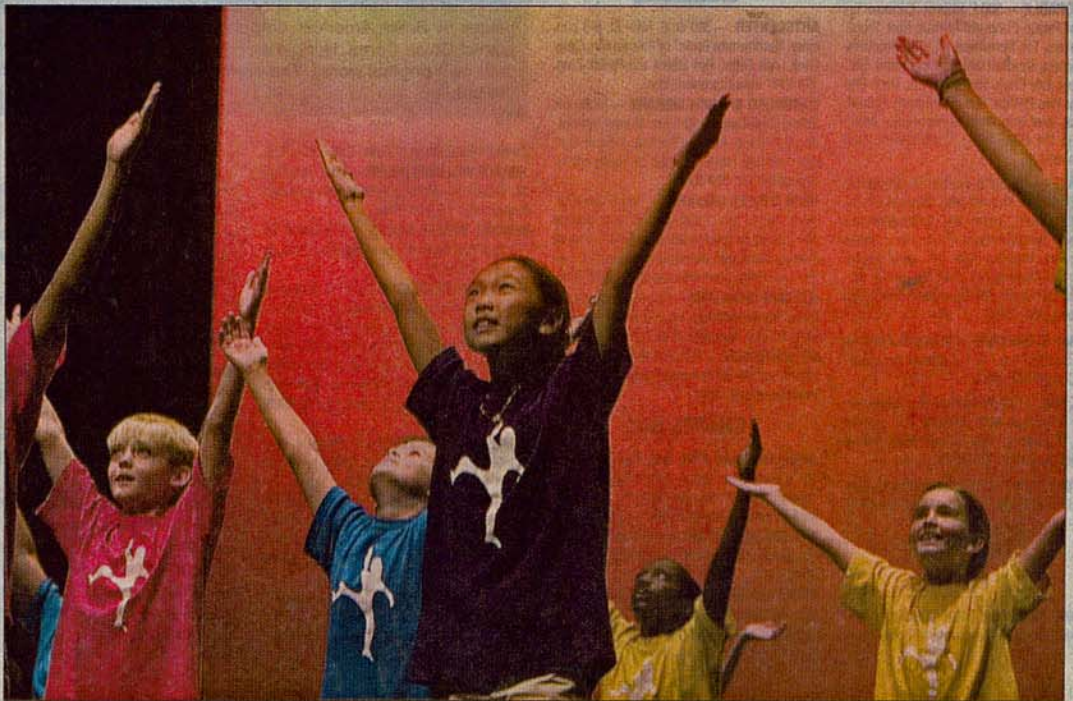


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'ALL MEANS ALL'



STAFF PHOTOS BY LESLIE BARBOUR

Rashkis Elementary School students, from left, Brian Daaleman, David Wilke, Christine Park, Miles Addison and Sarah McMahon perform a West African dance at the Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools teachers convocation. NC Arts in Action organized the performance, 'An African Village.'

Schools focus on preparing a diverse student body

BY JESSE JAMES DECONTO
STAFF WRITER

CHAPEL HILL — The variety of skin tones on the children's faces couldn't quite match the bright yellow, orange, purple and blue-green t-shirts on their backs.

But the subtle tans, yellows and browns perfectly illustrated the theme of Tuesday's back-to-school convocation for 1,400 teachers in the Chapel Hill-Carrboro City School system: "The Changing Face of Our Community."

Overall, the district has a higher ratio of white students — 60 percent — than the state of North Carolina as a whole. But its 12 percent Asian population gives it three sizeable minority groups, a feature few other communities can claim.

The district has struggled to close the "achievement gap" for its black and Hispanic students. Tuesday's convocation — less than a week before the 2007-2008 school year begins — was a sort of pep rally for teachers trying to prepare every last one of those children to contribute to society.

"All Means All," Superintendent Neil Pedersen titled his keynote address, calling it



Amelia Verkerk, left, Danielle Liu, Jecori Owens-Shuler and Meena Surapaneni perform at Memorial Hall.

"a realistic goal."

The colorful group on stage was the Rashkis Elementary School Arts in Action Dancers, brought together by a non-profit organization that aims to empower children all over the state through the arts.

They moved their feet, shook their hips, raised their hands and leaped across the Memorial Hall stage. Their energy and nearly flawless choreography sparked a standing ovation from the crowd.

"We rehearsed for two hours on Sunday, and two hours yesterday, and that's it," said Arts in Action artistic director Kay Gayner. "This is what children are capable of. ... We believe that the arts have the power to change children's lives."

The Arts in Action program launched at Rashkis in January 2006, where it began teaching the school's fourth-grade classes the art of dance and movement.

"As the North Carolina Arts in Action program has evolved, we've seen children become more and more eager to participate," said Lisa Kang, executive director of Arts

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