

November 13, 2008

A special meeting of the Board of Education of the Oak Park and River Forest High School was held on Thursday, November 13, 2008, in the Board Room of the high school.

Call to Order

President Conway called the meeting to order at 7:32 p.m. A roll call indicated the following members were present: John C. Allen, IV; Jacques A. Conway, Valerie J. Fisher, Dr. Ralph H. Lee, Dr. Dietra D. Millard, Sharon Patchak-Layman, and John P. Rigas. Also present were Dr. Attila J. Weninger, Superintendent; Amy Hill, Director of Assessment and Research, Philip M. Prale, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction; Cheryl Witham, Chief Financial Officer; and Gail Kalmerton, Executive Assistant/ Clerk of the Board of Education.

Visitors

The Board of Education welcomed the following visitors: Bill Gregory, Executive Director of the Indiana University Northwest, and facilitator of the meeting; Kay Foran OPRFHS Coordinator of Community Relations and Communications; Michael Byers and Joe Kostal, OPRFHS Faculty Members; Winona Weindling from the OPRFHS Trapeze, Mancel Caro, Wyanetta Johnson, Kimberly Werner, Burcy Hines, Judy Litt, Eaves Hughes, community members; Chris LaFortune of the *Oak Leaves* and Terry Dean of the *Wednesday Journal*.

Race and Student Achievement

Mr. Allen reminded the Board of Education members that it embarked on this “workshop” over a year ago. While the Board of Education attempted this with facilitators and then by itself, it subsequently agreed to engage another facilitator. Some facilitators would only do this type of workshop if were held in a closed session setting. The first facilitator, Bill Gregory, however, agreed to facilitate these next meetings in open session. He comes with high recommendations and prior experience.

Mr. Gregory reintroduced himself to the Board of Education members noting that he was once a resident of Oak Park. Last February, he worked with the Board of Education to identify four or five outcomes that would be achieved at a public, all day retreat at which the Board of Education would explore issues related to achievement gaps of African-American students at the high school.

Those outcomes were:

- I. Outcomes
 - A. How do the Board’s Resolutions impact the student achievement plan?
 - B. Prioritize the plan for student achievement.
 - C. Decide which initiatives of the student achievement plan will be implemented in 2008-2009.

- II. Outcome
Agree to reach a consensus as we identify the factors that affect student achievement, that we will make all necessary changes in policy, curriculum, and administrator/teacher/staff behaviors that impact the identified factors.

- III. Outcomes
 - A. Agree that racism has an everyday impact on activity and education at the high school.
 - B. Agree that racism can be reflected in everyday/ordinary decisions and actions.
 - C. Will develop a strategy to review those everyday actions/decisions that the Board of Education has responsibility for.

- IV. Outcome
Start a personal process of a better understanding of specific factors that impair/limit achievement of African American students at the high school.

He then set the stage for the continued discussion by reading from several resources, e.g., *Everyday Antiracism: Getting Real About Race in School*, edited by Mica Pollock and *Colormute: Race Talk Dilemmas in an American School* written by author Mica Pollock.

After reading these passages, he stated 1) conversation is necessary and 2) everyone is a player in situations that create racial inequalities. In Glen Singletery's book, *Courageous Conversations about Race*, he lists four agreements that people should agree on in having the conversation: 1) stay engaged; 2) expect to experience discomfort; 3) speak your truth; and 4) expect and accept a lack of closure.

Mr. Gregory's personal view was that all people were educators of one another and so the Board of Education members were teachers too in terms of the policies they set. The term educator has a broad definition.

Mr. Gregory then distributed to the Board of Education members the question "Can you think of anything you did recently that may have contributed to an unequal racial order, rather than challenge it?" Mr. Gregory asked them to respond to the question as if they were anthropologists; they would not know the names, the genders, etc., although they might know general things such as a setting, e.g., outside of a school, a lab, a gym, what the office of a teacher or administrator might look like, etc. What did they notice? The question elicited the following responses:

- A meeting of colleagues in the school at a square table. All participants at the table were White; those who were not at the table were African-American. An African-American might have been more sensitive to this. Any student and staff member observing this setting might have wondered if the “important” people were at the table.
- On a list serve message, a reference was made to a white child being raised by a black man on an army base and not getting as good parenting as a white woman in a rural area would give the child. How does a child bring this information into school with him/her?
- There is a significant number of bi-racial children at OPRFHS. How do they identify racially? Are they not perceived as black enough or White enough? Are they caught in a vacuum?
- Certain positions in this school are colored African American. Counselors, more than the majority of them are colored white. Deans Discipline, more than the majority of them are colored black. This may send a message of unequal value by race or of African-Americans needing more discipline because they are more likely to be discipline problems. This may not be the intent, but it is the history. OPRFHS actively searched for African-American Deans of Discipline.
- Multi-ethnic label does not really identify social reality for some students.
- At the end of school day, African-Americans walk east together in groups of 12-20. Whites walk west in ones and twos. Observers may draw different conclusions about likely behavior.
- In an honors class with 24 White and 1 or 2 African-Americans or Latinos students, the focus falls often on the African-American or Latino student and the atmosphere is racialized.
- The graduation line up of valedictorians is usually all White, with a disproportionate number from the west of Harlem Avenue. African-American students read this as they will not have a chance to be on that stage.
- African-American students hanging out in front of school during the hours when they should be in inside is a perception problem.

- Regarding late arrivals and early dismissals, are these racially different? Has the school looked into that?
- African-American students congregating right outside in front of the building may be a perception problem.
- There is a huge difference in participation by race in sports teams. The baseball team is almost all White. The girls' softball, swim, and field hockey teams are White. The system is not welcoming; it is more deeply segregated. The message to students of color is "You won't make it."
- Extracurricular activities & clubs are heavily White. An African-American club was formed to provide opportunity that might not be available because there are no or few students of color in other clubs.

Eaves Hughes, a former graduate, joined the discussion and noted that when he came to the school, it was because of his father's love and respect for the school. He felt that if his son wanted to go to a good college, he should graduate from a good high school, e.g. OPRFHS, etc. Mr. Hughes felt what was missing today was the sense of pride, which then is reflected as bad behavior in front of the school and poor attendance. He was successful as a transfer student because teachers "invited" him to join activities within the school. Mr. Hughes has been very successful in his life after graduation in those things in which the teachers had invited him to participate.

After the responses to the exercise, Mr. Gregory noted that this was a good start and the responses would serve as the basis for developing some understanding of the reasons. He thanked them for the work.

It was the consensus of the Board of Education members to schedule the next meeting for December 11, 2008, at 7:30 p.m.

Adjournment

At 9:32 p.m. on Thursday, November 13, 2008, Mr. Allen moved to adjourn; seconded by Ms. Fisher. A roll call vote resulted in all ayes. Motion carried.

Dr. Ralph H. Lee
Secretary

Gail Kalmerton
Clerk of the Board