

December 11, 2008

A special meeting of the Board of Education of the Oak Park and River Forest High School was held on Thursday, December 11, 2008, in the Board Room of the high school.

**Call to Order**

Vice President Millard called the meeting to order at 7:37 p.m. A roll call indicated the following members were present: John C. Allen, IV; Jacques A. Conway (arrived at 7:57 p.m.), 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; Jason Edgecombe; Assistant Superintendent for Human Resources; and Gail Kalmerton, Executive Assistant/Clerk of the Board of Education.

**Visitors**

Bill Gregory, Executive Director of the Indiana University Northwest and meeting facilitator; Kay Foran OPRFHS, Community Relations and Communications Coordinator; OPRFHS Faculty members Devon Alexander and Michael Byers, Cheryl Witham, Chief Financial Officer; Lance Taylor and Dr. Carl Spight, community members; Terry Dean of the *Wednesday Journal* and Chris LaFortune of the *Oak Leaves*.

Mr. Gregory reminded the Board of Education of four agreements on courageous conversations on race: 1) stay engaged; 2) expect to experience discomfort; 3) speak your truth; and 4) expect and accept a lack of closure. At the last meeting he asked the Board of Education members to be cultural anthropologists or a sort of ET and to look at what things might have been observed, seen or participated in, that contributed to some unequal racial order, some disparity. The list was compiled on the flip charts. That list was distributed to the Board of Education members. He asked the Board of Education members to begin their discussion that night about their observations. The bulleted items are the items listed that night. He asked the Board of Education members to engage one another, as the more they shared their views and their feelings, the better off all would be, even though those conversations may be uncomfortable. The Board of Education embarked on a discussion as to how these things mattered:

- 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.

Board of Education members had received an explanatory email about this meeting from staff about that situation. It had been a Faculty Senate meeting and the African-Americans not at the table were the elected Sergeant-at-Arms and full participating members.

Discussion ensued about how the perception was the reality and some Board of Education members offered examples of how they might respond to that situation in response to his/her observations, e.g., asking the chair why they were not sitting at the table; recognizing only the distinction of being a Board of Education member versus a faculty member; inviting everyone to the table, etc. Most responses were that while they might not address the visual message at that time, they might address it with the person who originally invited them to attend.

Mr. Gregory asked if one loses his/her courage to speak if the subject of race was identified and if he would find his/her courage if it was not race.

- On a list serve message, a reference was made to a white child being raised by a black man on an army base that was not receiving the same quality of parenting that a white woman in a rural area could give the child. How does a child bring this information into school with him/her?

This example did not relate to the school.

- A significant number of bi-racial children are at OPRFHS. How do they identify racially? Are they not perceived as black enough or white enough? Are they caught in a vacuum?

OPRFHS has 154 multi-racial families and these families have 175 students at the school. Mr. Gregory asked them to consider how race mattered in their lives at the high school. Some of the responses included:

They are caught in the middle from that perspective. A generalization is that biracial couples are perceived to be more progressive, more open, and more forward with their children and may talk about it among themselves. They are perhaps in the middle of the vortex. One white Board of Education member's children have had several biracial friends and they tended to migrate to one or the other race and did not stay in the middle. There was uncertainty as to how the faculty would treat them.

- If a child is black and white, he/she is black.

Being biracial is more common now than 30 years ago. When talking about people's reaction, one must consider the age or the generation of the person reacting. Younger people do not react in the same way as older people, e.g., younger people do not hesitate to call older people by their first name because they believe it is a sign of friendliness. A white person who grew up in Alabama did

not dare address an African-American person as Mrs. or Mr. African-Americans were not allowed to address white people by anything but Mr. or Mrs. Thus, an older generation would be more reactive to a younger person calling them by their first name.

- There could be a socializing stigma.

Mr. Gregory asked the Board of Education members to pay attention to their experiences and what they were feeling and how what they were feeling might be translated into actions that might be of a hindrance to students. Some Board of Education members admitted that they did not know what it was like for the children of biracial parents, even in their own families. Was it because society might be closer to getting over these problems? If so, the next generation will be farther from them still.

While adults challenge the relationships between African-American males and white females, students look past the skin tone. Mr. Gregory asked how one would send the right message to those adults challenging those relationships. How could that conversation be structured? Comments included that it was hard to educate adults and that race was an emotional issue for some.

Mr. Gregory asked whether pretending not to see the differences caused damage. Once damage is seen, e.g., people's reactions, etc., people should find the courage to address the race part of it. If one cannot find the courage to have the conversation, people may continue to make the same judgment and affect students; the one making the observation would then be complicit. Some Board of Education members felt that by just telling someone about his/her behavior would not cause that person to make a change. Mr. Gregory said his dilemma was that while one may not be able to impact the behavior of the people in the bubble around him, if one says something enough times, the behavior will either change or one will lose those friends. Some Board of Education members attested to those choices, as they have had to refrain from the conversation sometimes because it elicited a very emotional response. When trying to connect with others, people's words may cause a negative reaction because they do not know the history of racial diversity. The example of calling a black man "boy" in jest does not acknowledge his racial heritage and the struggles in getting over a past situation. A teacher covering the subject of race and asking the only African-American student in the class to be the African-American spokesperson of the day on the issue makes it an uncomfortable position for the student. The teacher should allow that student to speak up only if they wish.

Mr. Gregory stated that everyone was unique and human; people must acknowledge that there are differences. One Board of Education member disagreed noting that he/she had learned that even the person who comes from a sophisticated background has the same hopes and dreams as those with little or no education. Therefore, even though there are differences, there are more likenesses than not. Mr. Gregory stated that everyone shares pieces of the human experience, but that does not mean that everyone is the same or treated equally. Even if someone has the ability to identify the places where people connect through the human experience, it does not mean he/she has the ability to put himself/herself into a different social group membership, e.g., racial profiling. When a white person is pulled over by the police for a traffic violation, he/she may say to the police officer, what was I doing? A black man may ask to himself, how am I not going to jail today or he may have to be careful in how he moves in the car while speaking to the police officer. While no one likes getting a ticket, a white person would probably not be worried about being arrested or being shot.

Mr. Gregory spoke about an African-American colleague who was in the same consulting group years back and they would go out of town for work. For the trip home, Mr. Gregory would put on very casual clothes in order to be comfortable on the airplane. His African-American colleague, however, would come to the airport with a shirt and tie because he was trying to even the odds so that he would be treated like Mr. Gregory. While they shared many things with him at human level, e.g., family, joys, etc., his colleague carried things as a member of a group that Mr. Gregory would never carry. That was not right. Part of the issue that is being wrestled at this time is that it is dangerous to assume that everyone is operating the same.

- Certain positions in this school are colored African-American. More than the majority of Counselors are colored white. More than the majority of Deans of Discipline are colored black. This may send a message of unequal value by race or that African-Americans students need 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 Whites 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.
- 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.

It is unique to African-American boys, when they get together in a group and are having fun with each other that their voices get higher and louder. The person who is the center of attention is the one who is able to talk louder and faster than the others and there may be some physical jostling. Someone might interpret this as something other than playing and call security. When there are two or three African-American students together, there is the perception that they are in a gang. When there are two or three white students together, the perception is that they are athletes. Security has to know their audience. One Board of Education member's son had to serve an in-school suspension because there was poor supervision in the front of the school and security did not know its audience. For the child, it was a teachable moment. He took his punishment by attending in-school suspension and losing a letter grade on the test. Race was the adults' problem in this case. Students tolerate one another and manage one another. When teachers or security personnel assessing the number of students together or whether the African-American voice is louder, there is a difference in how students are treated.

- 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 were no or few students of color in other clubs.

In considering student discipline cases, the Board of Education members noted that sometimes there was a preponderance of referrals made by only one or two faculty members. Some discussion had occurred about providing professional development for these faculty members on this issue. Mr. Gregory stated that the District needed to work with individual faculty members in the same way. Before looking at the data to see if there are patterns, there should be conversation about this. One Board of Education member had been a girls' basketball coach. While he knew how to teach basketball, he did not know how to coach girls; he had to learn how to coach them in order to have better relationships with them.

Mr. Gregory stated that the conversation had moved to a different level at this meeting and he encouraged them to continue. He asked the Board of Education to share their thoughts about these meetings. The comments were as follows:

- Very constructive meetings, enjoyable, and informative. This is an attempt to notice a goal to identify and modify the systems.
- Continue these meetings because it takes a while to get past a comfort level. If the meetings were to stop, the Board of Education would lose the benefit of getting to the point it had.
- Engage former students who have been successful and not successful as well as some faculty members. While Mr. Gregory felt this would be a good idea, it would be difficult to get them to the same point as the Board of Education.
- Enjoyable. Suggested that the Athletic department have more of an active role, as well as other staff members. Spoken Word is an example of something positive; it has diversity, interaction, and the closeness of all classes, genders, and ethnicity.
- OPRFHS mirrors the community and it tells people that the issues inside the building are because of the issues in the community. The school cannot take away what the students bring with them.
- The intention of these conversations is 1) personal insight, and 2) community insight. Would this be an appropriate forum for how students were being impacted relating to differences, races, etc., and whether it means asking everyone in the community to speak out?
- There is a point of diminishing returns and the assumption was that when they were comfortable they could talk about race; however, a desire for some course of action was noted. Enjoyment is not a major goal.
- It is productive and an opportunity to reflect on one's own race and actions.
- The end game is not yet clear.
- Many questions were raised: What privilege do white people have that they do not realize? Would this be the same school if it were

all white? How much impact do students of color have in addressing the system? Who sets the laws and the behaviors? Why is there an arbitrary delineation as to who is going to be in honors classes? What purpose does tracking serve? A response from another Board of Education member was that when he/she attended OPRFHS, the school was predominately white, and, the same track is in place today as then. It is not race-based, but academically-abilities based, as most schools are. The next question would be how the Board of Education would make the school the best for everyone. Mr. Gregory stated that the idea of white privilege is critical. Are there systems either of academics, athletics, social, and administrative, etc., set up consciously or unconsciously to replicate white privilege. Some of the issues raised last time spoke directly to assumptions of white privilege, but perhaps unconsciously. He asked if one brings this to the consciousness, how that would be played out.

When the question of what will happen if four new Board of Education members are at the table after the elections, Mr. Gregory stated that the culture of the Board of Education is to engage openly about race, even in the presence of tape records and reporters will still exist. The current Board of Education members will demand that of the new Board of Education members.

Dr. Weninger noted two other stands of this discussion 1) an administrative workshop occurred this past summer and will continue next summer, and 2) Mr. Alexander is working on a program for faculty and administrators.

Mr. Gregory noted that the discussion should continue and he will be in contact with Mr. Allen and Dr. Weninger on the next steps.

## **Adjournment**

At 9:37 p.m. on Thursday, December 11, 2008, Mr. Rigas moved to adjourn; seconded by Dr. Lee. A roll call vote resulted in all ayes. Motion carried.

Jacques A. Conway  
President

Dr. Ralph H. Lee  
Secretary