

March 15, 2008

A special meeting of the Board of Education of the Oak Park and River Forest High School was held on Saturday, March 15, 2008, in the Board Room of the high school.

**Call to Order**

President Conway called the meeting to order at 9:05 a.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 Rigas. Also present were Dr. Attila J. Weninger, Superintendent; Don Vogel, Interim Principal, Philip M. Prale, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction; Jack Lanenga, Assistant Superintendent for Operations; and Gail Kalmerton, Executive Assistant/Clerk of the Board of Education.

**Visitors**

Kay Foran, Communications/Community Relations Coordinator; Dr. Carl Spight, OPRFHS Institutional Researcher; Angelika Kuehn, League of Women Voters, James Paul Hunter, FSEC Chair; Meg Reynolds Kimberly Werner; Wyanetta Johnson of A.P.P.L.E., Donald & Jean Edwards, Paul Carbery, Judy Litt, Helen O. Chukwu, Carolyn Browne, Lee Pulliam, Dr. Barry Greenwald, and George Bailey, and Deacon Willey Samuels, community members, and Terry Dean of the *Wednesday Journal*.

**Visitor Comments**

Dr. Carl Spight, resident and self-professed advocate and activist of Oak Park, addressed the Board of Education.

Dr. Spight stated that he represented a sector alluded to by Dr. Weninger's four corner plan. Dr. Spight aligned himself with Albert Einstein in that it is through theory that one should observe the world. If the constructs are inept or inadequate, it will "de-path" the issues of the moment. Dr. Spight provided a portion of an article written by J. Diamond and printed in *Negro Education 2006*. It read as follows:

“...in the contemporary U.S., students navigate a racialized educational terrain in which structural, institutional, and symbolic advantages and disadvantages are distributed unequally based on race. The concept of the racialized educational terrain draws on Bonilla-Silva's (2001) racialized social system framework...

“The racialized educational terrain focuses on the ways that multiple disadvantages accumulate within the racialized terrain specific to education. African Americans are disadvantaged in three ways:

- 1) Structurally by having limited access to valued resources outside of schools;

- 2) Institutionally by being positioned systematically in the least advantaged locations for learning inside schools, and
- 3) Ideologically by having their intellectual capacity questioned and their cultural styles devalued both within schools and in the broader social discourse.

“These disadvantages are key ingredients that contribute to racial achievement disparities generally, and particularly, within suburban contexts. However, in the post-Civil Rights era, the mechanisms that support these inequalities have increasingly become subtle and require responses that account for the shifting racial terrain that students navigate. Indeed, ‘there is no magic, in either mixed schools or in segregated schools’ (DuBois, 1935, p. 335), because race continues to provide structural, institutional, and symbolic advantages to some groups and disadvantages to others regardless of the racial composition of schools.”

George Bailey, resident of 724 S. Clarence, Oak Park, addressed the Board of Education.

Mr. Bailey reminded the Board of Education members of the critical nature of this topic. He wanted to address the ethical civility in speaking about this and remind the Board of Education what was at stake—real people, real lives, and a significant number of students at the high school who should be looked at with civility, clearly and ethically. The real argument could be for a retreat, if difficult issues were not faced. Who is to say that status quo is a bad thing. For him, one must guard against fear, as there are no “barbarians at the gates.”

### **Discussion about Race and Student Achievement**

Mr. Allen opened his remarks by saying this was the second workshop in this process. The intention was to have the same facilitator at this meeting, but he declined to come back because Oak Park proved to be too difficult. The Board of Education knew this process was going to be difficult and that was proven correct. He felt this was a rewarding experience thus far and progress made. He wanted the process to continue.

While Mr. Allen had suggested holding this meeting in closed session, after discussions with the attorneys, it was unclear as to whether it would be legal to do so. Therefore, the Board of Education decided to continue in open session and without a moderator. Mr. Allen offered an explanation as to why the physical set up of the room had been in a closed square when Board of Education members first entered (the set up was changed to a more open style at the beginning of the meeting at the insistence of some Board of Education members). The workshop was for a discussion of the Board of Education, not the community. He felt the community would understand and he has been greatly impressed with the

audience today. The set up was meant to facilitate discussion; not to be rude to the community.

Mr. Allen provided a recap of the first of these sessions, noting the outcomes below:

#### Outcome

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

#### Outcomes

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

#### 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.

Ms. Patchak-Layman expressed her dismay at not knowing that the facilitator would be not present, as she would have prepared differently, she would have brought materials that might be helpful, and she would have thought through the questions that would have facilitated more questions. Dr. Weninger apologized for not informing the whole Board of Education, but he learned of the facilitator's decision late Wednesday and he and Mr. Allen had spoken about how to best proceed. Since that time, Dr. Weninger had been involved from 7:00 a.m. to 12:00 a.m. on both days.

Dr. Lee asked Mr. Allen to provide direction for the meeting. Mr. Allen suggested using the outline on the agenda and start with the first topic of starting a personal process of better understanding the specific factors on how race affects achievement/grades. Are there systems that protect or prevent wrong attitudes that affect that factor? Dr. Lee asked for a common understanding as to whether the Board of Education takes the entire meeting to discuss #1 or outline what it intends to do in the context of what it does today.

Ms. Fisher thanked Mr. Allen for arranging this meeting. She had just participated in a diversity workshop, in connection with her involvement with legal education. It had been a closed session and more people, who did not know each other, were present. It had been a wonderful experience; it was very open, honest, and there was no issue of confidentiality.

Ms. Fisher was not bothered by the fact that they had no facilitator for this meeting. She suggested talking about the idea of expectations. The speaker at the session she attended used the example of an experiment done by a teacher in a classroom where the students were divided by the color of their eyes. One eye color was randomly selected and those students who had that eye color were told they were the smarter students. That premise was played out for one week with frightening results. The students took on the role of whatever group they had been put in. This plays a powerful role in the expectations of student achievement.

Mr. Allen stated that while students mirror what they think is expected of them, it may not be the reality. In law school, he was one of four African-American students in his class of one-hundred sixty (160). The class before him had three and the class before that had two. Out of six hundred forty (640) students, there were less than ten (10) African-American students in the school. These students' expectations were that they had to make it through the first year and graduate because if they did not, they would confirm the school's expectations. By the end of the year, one student had failed and not invited back, one student was always the favorite, one worked very hard, and he was at the end of the pack. He was made to feel that he was lucky to be there because he was failing and living up to what the expectations of the African American race. When he was in Ohio, the ratio was similar. The only reason he was able to take honors history was that he was allowed to select his own courses. He was able to get through the class. No one thought he could get through high school, college or law school. During his third year of high school, he spoke with the father of his best friend who told him that he was worried about him because he did not know what was going to happen to him. The expectations are the black students cannot make it. Mr. Allen felt he could have done better if there had been higher expectations of him. He just kept applying and once he got in, he did not drop out.

Dr. Millard asked Mr. Allen how, if he always had the sense that the expectations were different, he overcame that. What was his determination? Mr. Allen stated that he was determined to finish the process. He was not trying to prove anyone wrong; he just wanted to get out of college. His parents were the motivating factor. He remembered asking his mom when he was in the fifth grade if he had to go to college. She laughed for five straight minutes and then asked him why he thought

he had a choice. He did not have a warm and fuzzy teacher story that motivated him; the motivating factor was his parents. Mr. Allen does not know what would work for someone else.

Dr. Lee talked about racialized terrain. There was a time when he was about to flunk out of graduate school; flunking out of anything was unheard of in his family. Both of his parents had Masters' Degrees in English and he recognized that while he was sitting at the University of Kansas, even though he had made A's and B's in college, he was flunking out. He considered telling his finance that they were not getting married, that he was leaving and he was not telling anyone where he was going. It was serious because of the expectations of his family.

Dr. Lee was taught to believe in racial integration as being the solution to all problems; become a color-blind society and no one would be affected by the color of one's skin. A first-year graduate student in the graduate school of chemistry was a black man, the only black man in the next entering class. It was Marian Barry, the present mayor of Washington, D.C. He knew that Mr. Barry was having a rough time just as he. He wanted to help Mr. Barry, but he did not because of his own belief in racial integration. Mr. Barry dropped out of school because of the civil rights movement, went into politics and later became mayor of D.C. Dr. Lee had been affected by his belief in integration, what he thought of himself, as well as "good" Black people. The term "Black" was not used then; it was insulting for a Negro to be called a black. It was much later that Dr. Lee became comfortable with the word "Black." These are the expectations of me that affected Marion Barry. He often wonders what would have happened to Mr. Barry had Dr. Lee helped him in chemistry. This is what he means by racialized terrain.

Dr. Lee attended a workshop after finishing graduate school in a community college in rural Pennsylvania. The biggest problem they had was that the Blacks sat at the same table in the cafeteria. Someone said if one were to go into the cafeteria, find one table of white students and paint their faces blue, in the month they would be found sitting at the same table. Should that be criticized? They would be sitting together because they had something in common in the first place. Would it be fair to them to disperse them around the cafeteria so that no two tables had any of the same faces? That is what it would be like not to expect black students not to sit together in the cafeteria. Commonalities are not discussed. Dr. Lee was talking about the racialization of the terrain and the school's expectations. There is no way to get away from expectations due to race. It is so ingrained in everything being done that to try to say no would be unproductive. The District needs to look past those things, e.g. who sits with whom and who joins which organizations. It is deeper than that.

Mr. Allen wondered, even though his parents had pushed him, what he would have done if he had that same kind of support from school. The best thing he did do for himself was to attend a Black university. If one did not pass, there were no excuses. It was only because one did not do the work. What if he had had those kinds of teachers in high school? What if the counselors in law school had told him what he was missing? He spent much time yesterday in the Special Education Department and talk about students who have IQ's of one hundred and fifty (150). He wondered why they were in the special education curriculum.

Dr. Millard suspected that some students interact differently in the classroom. It may not be as blatant as telling one they failed, but it may be an unknown or unappreciated reaction of many students that intimidates them. There are practices in the high school, perhaps not as egregious as Mr. Allen's experience, but nevertheless intimidating. Rather than feeling challenged, students choose to opt out of certain classes. Even though she was considered the dumbest of her siblings, the expectations were great that she would succeed. Dr. Millard was one of only seven women in medical school. She came from a power position, as both her parents and her siblings had high expectations of her; she would exceed. She grew up just outside of Champaign, Illinois. Her father brought Black university students to church, which would cause telephone calls to their home questioning why he did that. The more calls that came, the more students he brought to church. She acknowledged her racial advantage.

Mr. Rigas reminded the Board of Education that it needed to get to the point of taking action. He attended O.P.R.F.H.S. in the 1970's and he felt the school had moved forward since that time. One of his high school teachers had threatened to flunk him, but instead passed him, only because the teacher would have had to teach him the same class during summer school. Mr. Rigas did not believe the school was in quicksand. The Board of Education has to talk about what factors affect students today, so that action can be taken to fix those factors.

Mr. Allen felt the "war" stories were helping because he will have a better understanding of why a person says what he/she does. Dr. Millard stated that the Board of Education was dealing with the people and the factors. She ran for the Board of Education because she felt she could work with a diverse community. However, she sometimes felt so far off base because she brings her own background. Who are her friends? If they are black, they are educated. She works with children who are having children and she has objectivity in the way she interacts with them. Even though she has helped several kids individually, it is not been global.

Dr. Lee listed the things that almost caused him to flunk out of graduate school:

- 1) He had learned to believe that he was so smart that he could accomplish anything he wanted to without giving up anything; and
- 2) He believed that he could do at least an adequate job in school without having to give up bowling, poker, watching late night movies on TV, going to movies, and drinking on Saturday nights. It came as a shock to him that he had to give up 75 percent of that to sit down and actually read the information, turn in homework assignments, etc. Before getting to the university, he could do all of that without giving up anything. It is a matter of coming up with a set of realistic expectations, learning about what the real world expected of someone.

Mr. Allen stated that what happened in the 1970's is happening now. The things he experienced are happening at O.P.R.F.H.S. now, but to a lesser degree. What are the expectations of students and what messages are they being given? A statement received by one student may be received entirely different by another student.

Ms. Fisher reflected on the time she went to law school in the 1980's, half of her class was female and that made everyone very comfortable. Today there are no more female partners in law firms than there were in the 1980's, even though times seemed to have changed. Most of the females she worked with left the firm, those that stayed were not made partners. Another example of that is the long-serving congressional representative who said that she encountered more prejudice because she was a woman than she did for being an African American. Women who recognized what that life style was about did not want to remain at the law firm.

Mr. Conway reflected on his experiences with students in the building over the years. He had a discussion with a past graduate about her years in grammar school through college. They talked about urgency and expectations. Her family had moved from the West Side of Chicago to Oak Park. Her mom and dad stressed to her that now that she was in Oak Park, she had to take advantage of the system to provide a better lifestyle. All of the children in that family went to college, because, in part, of the expectations placed on them and because they were in a program that exposed them to different colleges by staying on campuses, etc.

Mr. Conway reflected on the expectations placed on him. They were:

- 1) A coach, who stressed growing up, was an old fashioned guy who was positive in providing an active African-American role model;

- 2) A high school coach who was negative. Mr. Conway was cut from one of the programs because he said he could not have all blacks on the team.
- 3) A teacher. While the first day of school was always so exciting, it was also the most stressful. On the first day of his last year of grade school he was placed in the lowest math and reading group. He told his teacher that he was not going to go into the lowest math and lowest reading group, and she gave him an opportunity to succeed at a higher level.

There were no motivating factors at his home, his mom got a GED, and he could not depend on his father. He always tells the teachers and staff that teachers have more quality time with the students than their parents. That quality time makes a difference if both parties see the urgency of this time and have expectations that the students can do better. If students are not successful, the District is not successful. From experience, if there are teachers who make that effort to give their best, there is a better possibility that those students would do better because those teachers go beyond just giving material.

Dr. Lee agreed with Mr. Rigas. He believed there were many things that affect student achievement. The Board of Education has to be careful not to overlook those facts that District has the capacity to deal with because it is dealing with things that it does not have the capacity with which to deal. Often, he hears that the problem is the family's income. District 200 will not do much for family incomes; in fact, it will do just the opposite two times per year via the tax bill. The Board of Education cannot spend time dwelling on family income. There is also not much point in dealing with the expectations of parents with their own children. Many Black, single mothers work diligently to move to Oak Park and they are doing all they are capable of doing. They believe it is up to District 200 to educate their students. They do not understand that it takes more than just moving to Oak Park. If the mother is really doing the best she can do, no one will have the expectation that he/she will do well in graduate school. Many people do not have that advantage. District 200 cannot do anything about it. He wanted to focus on what District 200 could do something about, as opposed to trying to deal with the spectrum that affects achievement.

Ms. Patchak-Layman talked about her background. She thinks about this in terms of activity and the legal parts of it because when she was growing up she did not spend time with anyone other than White people. Her view was from the 1960's, e.g., marches in Washington, D.C., etc. When she entered into this conversation as a teenager, there were inconsistencies with the kinds of things with which she grew up, e.g. people should be treated fairly, people should be given a chance that this was not a hierarchy of being able to achieve and move forward. It smacked her in



the face that people of color did not have those opportunities. In fact, laws were in place that prevented people, because of their color, from things that were said to be available to them. She was a member of that time and place and was representative of both white people who set those laws over the foundations of this country and continued with them. As a White person, she felt committed to correcting the wrongs made before her; part of her mission is that both systemic wrongs that were done through laws, those systems, were changed. Ms. Patchak-Layman addresses things from the systems approach. What is in place that continues the past injustice that becomes part of the culture, based on the legal system and laws created throughout the country? Are there things that prevent students from succeeding? Are there laws that prevent them from going forward? A parent may feel his/her child should be in a more challenging class but because of the school's expectations, they do what the school wants them to do. It has been reinforced that the school knows the child in terms of academics and that it is the parents' responsibility to get that override form. If the parent signs it, he/she has committed his/her child to staying in the class for an entire semester and having to take that grade. What are the rules mixed in with the culture of the school that affects parents? She suggested starting with parents, as the students might feel inhibited. It should not be left to one good person to do good things; a structure must be a place. In addition, that it is not hard to reach that point as the person is not an outlier as they provided support. Ms. Patchak-Layman's motivation is to move to a better place because the government has not done such a good job of that in the last 200 years.

While she agreed with having good systems but Dr. Millard felt people make the difference and to put something on paper may not affect change. The teenager pregnancy group with which she works has many things for these young mothers, but unless she personally takes responsibility for the mother advancing to the next step, it does not happen. Dr. Millard believes that it is not just about changing the paper, but using what really works. To Dr. Lee, Dr. Millard said there were some things the school could do with the family. The Collaboration for Early Childhood Care and Education works with all agencies of the community and the high school has shown a commitment to it. She felt that it was the personal angle that was most important and she wanted to understand where she might have gone wrong with a single mother. She felt this task demanded individualized attention.

Ms. Patchak-Layman added that she never met a parent who did not want the best for his/her children or have the expectations that they live good lives. Dr. Millard responded parents sometimes do not know how to help. Ms. Patchak-Layman stated that the parents' expectation who has moved to the community and has heard that the school does a great job and they want the school to continue to do that job. Dr. Millard responded that

when a parent does not come to a parent teacher conference, perhaps the teacher should reach out and explain the importance of participation. Ms. Patchak-Layman responded that the conversation about expectations is not just a one-sided conversation from the institution. The conversation must be equal with the parents, the staff, and the institution as an amorphous group. The rules of the school needing the parents to work with it for the betterment of the children creates an inconsistency with all of its wording.

Board of Education members then recapped the discussion as to the personal factors that they felt inhibited or empowered achievement that they needed to understand. They titled it “Brainstorming Session.”

### Brainstorming Session

Personal factors that inhibit or empower achievement that the Board of Education needed to understand.

- 1) Personal confidence, belief, hope, self-image, self-efficacy
- 2) External expectations, belief, confidence, efficacy  
(teachers, parents, etc.)
  - a. peer standing should be recognized as a valid issue within the school
  - b. Parental expectations belief, confidence
    - i. can we do anything about this?
- 3) Personal experiences that confirm a “racialized terrain” or that do not.
  - a. Recognizing internal racial/cultural issues
- 4) Personal excuses
  - a. Help students understand necessary sacrifices needed to achieve
  - b. Not every issue is race related
- 5) Environmental factors
  - a. Conscious/unconscious
  - b. Explicit/implicit
  - c. Systems, practices, rules, procedures
    - i. Eg. These may be intended to help, structure, etc., but net effect may be detrimental (discipline system, special education unit)
- 6) Identify what the inhibitors and obstacles are on a personal basis and then be motivated and determined and decide to what extent you are willing to take steps
- 7) Urgency and Expectations
  - a. positive and negative role models
  - b. providing appropriate and positive challenges vs. imposing negative ones
  - c. personal

- d. teachers/coaches who make judgments about students personally—squashes hope, belief, confidence, self-image, and self-efficacy.
  - e. high school is a critical time to personally take hold of one’s future; students need to understand this moment in their time, and staff need to accept the challenge to act on it
- 8) Curriculum is enhanced by the interactions and relationships between student and teacher; deep personal interest, care, deep involvement
    - a. Student/teachers
    - b. curriculum
    - c. Ability-Grouping system
    - d. “Follow the money”
  - 9) Socio-economic status – can we do anything about this?
    - a. keep economic status from solely limiting student involvement
    - b. encourage the discouraged
  10. Systems and structures need to be assessed and changed
    - a. remove systems that establish hierarchies
    - b. establish fluid systems that recognize individual needs/wants
    - c. Systems need to be based on the students that come to us

Discussion ensued about future workshops. Ms. Patchak-Layman suggested talking about the school day, bringing in student experiences, etc. She asked about whether to have Board of Education members do homework. There was consensus that it was not necessary to have a facilitator.

Dr. Lee asked if the Board of Education had reached an understanding that they had started the process of understanding and had completed agenda item #1. Ms. Patchak-Layman stated that even though this is a personal and public process, as the students, teachers, staff, community, and parents look at this brainstorming list and find areas overlooked or unrecognized, she asked them to feel free to bring them forward so that the steps are not narrowed. Mr. Allen felt the process was working and that everyone knows the Board of Education is willing to have the community send them their thoughts, as demonstrated by the visitor comments section on the agenda. He encouraged community feedback.

Dr. Lee expressed his appreciation to the audience for allowing the Board of Education to fulfill its intention. Dr. Millard thanked Mr.

Allen for taking the lead on these workshops. She had not felt as uncomfortable as she thought she would have, perhaps, because they had not gotten to understand the deepest aspects.

It was decided that the next meeting date for this discussion would occur April 17, 2008 from 6:30 to 9:30 p.m.

**Adjournment**

At 12:00 p.m. on Saturday, March 15, 2008, Dr. Millard moved to adjourn the Special Board Meeting; seconded by Ms. Fisher. A roll call vote resulted in all ayes.

Jacques A. Conway  
President

John P. Rigas  
Secretary