

Small steps mark progress to ease ICSD racial tensions

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Journal Staff

ITHACA — After tensions rose between black and white students last fall at Ithaca High School, parents spoke universally about the need to build bridges between the rural and downtown portions of the Ithaca City School District.

Since October, more than four months after two turbulent weeks at Ithaca High School, parents acknowledge that not much has happened to create lines of dialogue between the two communities outside of their students' interactions in school.

Parents will have another opportunity to move the effort forward on Monday, when the second forum hosted by the U.S. Department of Justice to discuss racial and cultural issues in Ithaca's schools and community takes place at 7 p.m. at the Holiday Inn at 222 S. Cayuga St.

Parents say the creation of dialogue and bridges is still needed between the downtown Ithaca area, which has a significant black population, and the rural communities, which are largely white.

"I have to agree that there probably hasn't been a huge amount of follow through," said Duane Scott, a member of the Concerned Parents of Caroline, an organization of rural parents that formed in October 2007. "We can't afford to drop the ball."

Historically, racial tensions between black and white students erupt in Ithaca City School District about every four to five years. Building continual and open lines of dialogue between the rural and downtown communities, lines that extend beyond the walls of the school buildings, is an important step to mitigating those eruptions.

"It's cyclical," said Judy Saul, co-founder and executive director of the Community Dispute Resolution Center. "And when things die down, a lot of people turn their attention away, but it's just going to continue to be crisis management until something's put in place."

The two communities rarely interact with each other outside of school, Saul said.

"We tend to live somewhat segregated lives," she said. "And I think one of the reasons a lot of these incidents bubble up at the school district is because it's one of the few places in our culture that's really integrated. Acting alone, the school district can't solve this problem; it's got to involve the parents and community institutions."

Kevin Brew, a district parent and former president of the Parent Teacher Association for Caroline Elementary School, agrees with Saul.

"I think it's important in order to avoid the situation from happening in the schools again," Brew said. "On the rural family side, there's not a connection to the downtown community except for school. I think it's difficult when you rely completely on the schools to build a community. So it's gotta be something on a high level outside of the district that brings the families together so that they understand the differences and the similarities in the two."

The Ithaca community can not afford to leave the bridge-building between the two communities completely up to the school district, said Cal Walker, executive director of the Village at Ithaca, a group committed to equity in the Ithaca City School District.

"I think it's critically important to do," Walker said. "In my view there needs to be a clearly articulated game plan and strategy and timetable for moving forward that identifies who the players are who are accepting coordinating responsibilities for making this real. So that we recognize that it is a process and not an event. This is a marathon, it's not a sprint."

Efforts being made

Parents praised efforts taking place within the school district, including monthly meetings between 25 and 30 students from different areas of the Ithaca community to get to know each other and discuss concerns.

Victor Younger, who is black, said his son, a student at Ithaca High School, is learning a great deal from attending the meetings.

"He is learning firsthand and talking with constituents from the rural community that he is now building a relationship with," said Younger. "So I think the good news is now at least you are having different aspects of the community that are sitting at the table with the administration from the student perspective and the community perspective."

Younger attended meetings in Caroline in October, because he felt it was important to get the rural parents' perspective, he said.

Part of the problem in getting the bridge-building effort moving has been determining who will take charge.

"All of us have a role to play," Walker said of the entire school district community. "It's a community challenge and a community opportunity, and the windows of opportunity do not stay open forever, and if people simply wait around for somebody else to do it, usually it doesn't get done."

Not everybody in each community is going to be willing to build the bridges, said Board of Education member Robert Ainslie, who grew up in Enfield.

"There are some folks that don't want to have anything really to deal with the other group, so you're going to have to deal with that," he said. "But there are those folks, out in Caroline, that came together that would like to get a relationship going with the downtown group."

Ainslie said it will take just the right kind of event and setting to bring the communities together. Organizers may want to look to athletics as a way to start building the bridges between the communities, he said.

About 300 people attended the first U.S. Justice Department forum, held Jan. 17. Reinaldo Rivera, who facilitated the forum, took recommendations from the public and said he was going to help a committee create an action plan. It's unknown if he is going to reveal the action plan on Monday.

Even when the Department of Justice is no longer involved in Ithaca's efforts to create dialogue, conversations must take place, parents said. It will be unfortunate if lines of communication are not created between the rural and downtown communities.

"It would be a lost opportunity of epic proportions if this never goes anywhere," Walker said.

Scott said he plans to give Walker and Brew a call to discuss how the communities can continue the bridge-building process.