

Mixed reaction to black-focused school plan

The idea to establish black-focused schools by the Toronto District School Board as early as next fall is getting mixed reactions.

A staff report is expected later this month with details on how the concept would work.

The idea of Black-focused schools was proposed in 1995 by the province's Royal Commission on Learning as a way to address lower graduation rates among black students.

According to the plan, the school would teach the Ontario curriculum, but parents have asked that it emphasize leadership, have a strong mentoring program and prepare students to see university as their first choice, as well as have an Africentric focus.

The school board has been piloting several "Africentric" social studies units in Grades 6, 7 and 8 at a handful of schools in the northwest part of the city and has run an Africentric summer camp near Jane and Finch in recent summers.

Brian Henry is the Executive Director of Hoodline (Helping Others Develop In Neighbouring Communities) Youth organization, a not-for-profit program in Malvern aimed at helping expelled black youths get back into schools.

This program was made possible through a pilot project known as the "Real Opportunity for Success in Education" programme, a transitional culturally-sensitive, culturally-appropriate school model focused on getting mainly Black youth back in to the regular school system.

Henry believes that the idea of black focused school is good but said there are some underlying issues that people in the community face. He says "even in the black community, Caribbean black kids opposed the idea of being called African and then there is the issue of skin colour.... it's impossible to deal with black issues without others in the community."

He also thinks that even though Canada stresses that it's a multicultural society, unlike the other ethnic groups, "black kids do not have a sense of who they are and where they are going because of their historical background."

Community Activist and lawyer, Mark Persaud says: "We are faced with a unique challenge and novel approaches need to be seriously considered. It is no secret that the Toronto District School Board is not meeting the needs of many at-risk black students in the public school system. Consequently, notwithstanding some initial reservations, I support the idea of establishing a black-focused school, on an experimental basis, to address this pressing concern in our community."

Second Vice-President of the Black Business Professional Association (BBPA) Pauline Christian does not believe in the labelling of a black-focused school, adding that it could lead to segregation.

"Instead of having Afro-kids part of the greater national community, we're focusing them on calling it a black, just the label of black, it's a stigma.... I think the issues need to be addressed and can be integrated within the school system, but it has to be delivered in the strategies that we come up with and we need to have a support system."

She believes that a system should be created which "will harness the skills set of our young people ..." and there is dire need for black role models to be a part of the school system.

Christian says the community, black professionals and corporations must be engaged in the school system. "As far as the BBPA is concerned, when we put on the Harry Jerome Awards over the last few years, we are assured of significant representation of at-risk youths. We find sponsors to sponsor them so they can be a part of the crowd and they can see African Canadians achieving excellence at different levels."

Executive Director of the Black Action Defence Committee, Dudley Laws welcomes the move saying the community has been advocating the need for black focused-school for a long time.

He feels that the black community must be an integral part of the entire process and that teachers who are hired must be culturally sensitive adding that it is a progressive move.

Two community meetings to discuss the idea will be held Thursday at 7 p.m. at North Albion Collegiate on Kipling Ave. and Monday at 7 p.m. at Northview Heights Secondary School on Finch Ave. W.

Source: [The Caribbean Camera, Friday, 09 November 2007](#)