

## African American parents want school board to 'double down' their efforts

Written by Sheila Regan, TC Daily Planet  
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Members of the Parents of African American Students Advisory Council (PAASAC) met in Saint Paul Public Schools (SPPS) district headquarters Thursday, June 12, for a listening session with three school board members about issues they hoped to address with the board. Attended by about 18 people, including board members Keith Hardy, Mary Doran and John Broderick, as well as Chief Executive Officer Michelle Walker, the listening session focused on a need for more African American-focused curriculum, more African American and teachers of color, and stronger steps toward ending the achievement gap.

The listening session included a number of questions that were presented to the three school board members. The first was a question about mandatory inclusion of African American history into classrooms in Saint Paul Schools, and there was some discussion about whether that meant offering elective programs, or schools that have a specific African American focus (in the same vein as schools that currently have a Hmong focus, for example).

For the most part, the parents said they wanted to see more natural tie-ins into the regular curriculum, not just for high school students, but for elementary as well. "Our kid need to see why we are such great contributors," said one woman, who is taking her children out of the district next year.

Michelle Walker, Chief Executive Officer of SPPS, said the district does have goals to make African American history not "relegated to the month of February," and that there are plans to incorporate more African American-specific curriculum into classes, especially social studies classes. In addition, "we need to have elective classes," she said, noting that Obama Elementary is moving toward an African American focus throughout the whole school.

Another issue that was brought forward by parents was the lack of teachers of color in the district. The board was asked what they would do to work with colleges and universities, for instance, to increase the diversity of the teaching pool. They discussed "Urban Ed" teaching programs available at some colleges, but noted that those programs still produce primarily white teachers.

"To call it an Urban Ed program means zero if all the students are white," said one man attending the meeting. "How are you working with educators to move the needle differently?"

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"We need more teachers of color," School board member Mary Doran agreed. "I would like suggestions about how to do that."

School Board member Keith Hardy said he could commit to having conversations with his friends at Hamline, MCTC and St. Paul College, as well as to Superintendent Silva about ways to address the problem.

One parent, Elaine Gillespie, said she thought even for teachers who aren't African American, they still need to have an understanding of African American culture. "If you don't have knowledge about our culture, that's a problem," she said.

Toward the end of the meeting, the parents expressed frustration at the lack of progress that has been made toward supporting African American students and students of color. "Our kids — they are learning," said one grandfather. "They are being taught to become prisoners in the penal system. They are being taught not to achieve."

Among the suggestions that could be used to "double down" on the achievement gap, longer school days, longer school years, and moving the best teachers to the schools that were struggling were discussed, but Chief Academic Officer Michelle Walker said that the district, while doing everything they could, were limited by their contracts with teachers to making such changes.