

District seeks mentors for boys

Written by Harry Colbert, Jr.
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Numbers do not always tell a complete story, but some numbers tell enough of a story to let it be known that there is a definite cause for alarm – maybe even a cause for panic.

So how about these numbers? Last year the Minneapolis Public Schools graduated just 43 percent of its African-American students on time, meaning within four years from the time a child entered high school to the time of graduation. And that number is actually up from the appallingly putrid on-time graduation rate of 36 percent for African-Americans in the district in 2012. And according to James Burroughs, the district's director of the Office of Equity and Diversity, extrapolate out the girls and that number is sharply lower for African-American boys.

Burroughs said those numbers are a bit too much to stomach and is calling for action.

As a part of his call to action, Burroughs created the 100 Strong Who Care campaign, which brings in male mentors (mostly African-American, but not exclusively) to form what Burroughs hopes will become life-long bonds with the African-American male students at Patrick Henry High School.

The upcoming event takes place in the auditorium at Patrick Henry High, 4320 Newton Ave. N, Minneapolis, on Friday, April 11 and runs from 8 a.m. – 10 a.m. And though the event is called 100 Strong, Burroughs is actually hoping for 150 caring men to volunteer to come and mentor the boys at Henry.

According to Burroughs, who is also an attorney, seeing success brings about success.

"I started 100 Strong Who Care in 2009 because what I saw was a shortage of African-American men in these kids' faces," said Burroughs, who said growing up in Detroit he had tangible African-American mentors to look up to and emulate. "I hope the young men will get to see positive images of themselves. One of the keys for me growing up was getting to see my dentist who was an African-American man, my doctor, the dry cleaner, our mayor, who were all African-American men. This made a great impact upon my life. I want to have our young men

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develop that kind of connectedness."

During the event Andre Dukes of the Northside Achievement Zone will address the 300 or so African-American Henry students and then the teens will interact with the volunteer mentors based upon career interests. According to Burroughs, since the inception of 100 Strong Who Care, more than 1,000 volunteers have impacted the lives of nearly 10,000 Minneapolis Public School students.

In response to the crisis-level graduation numbers, Burroughs said the district is starting a Black Male Initiative office to address – and correct – the problem of poor graduation rates. To Burroughs' knowledge only two other school districts in the nation – Oakland and Pittsburgh – have such offices. The director of the Oakland Black Male Initiative office, Chris Chatmon, will be in Minneapolis this week to discuss strategies of turning around the success rates for male students of color.

Burroughs said the consequences are dire if something is not done to stem the tide of poor graduation rates.

"The best way to create a school to prison pipeline is to not graduate (African-American boys) and to suspend them at an alarming rate," said Burroughs. "We don't want to create men who have limited opportunities. The only way we do that is to increase our graduation rates and reduce the disproportionate number of suspensions and offer avenues of success to these young men."

According to Burroughs, the district hopes to attract more African-American male teachers and is actively recruiting at Historically Black Colleges and Universities that offer education degrees. The student makeup in the district is nearly 70 percent students of color according to Burroughs.

For more information on 100 Strong Who Care or to volunteer, contact the Minneapolis Public Schools office of Equity and Diversity at (612) 668-0518 or email equity.diversity@mpls.k12.mn.us.