Black-focused school debate set

As board plans talks, Premier Dalton McGuinty says he's "not personally comfortable" with idea

Toronto Star  
Nov 07, 2007 04:30 AM

Kristin Rushowy  
EDUCATION REPORTER

By 16, more than half of all young black males in Toronto public schools have fallen behind. They don't have the required credits – 16 by age 16 – which means they're more likely to drop out.

That statistic alone had trustee Michael Coteau rethinking his opposition to black-focused schools.

"I was brought up in the public system, a very multicultural system, and I think it's important for young people to interact with other cultures. However, when I see those numbers, there's a failure, a breach in the system. Something's gone wrong," said Coteau, 35, one of two black trustees on the Toronto District School Board.

Later this month, the board is expected to debate opening a black-focused school. But already, Premier Dalton McGuinty has weighed in, saying while the board is free to make its own decision, he doesn't support it.

"I don't think it's a good idea. I'm not personally comfortable with that," McGuinty said yesterday at a Rexdale community centre.
"But I think our shared responsibility ... is to look for ways to bring people together," said McGuinty. "One of those most powerful agents of social cohesion ... is through publicly funded education."

The African-centred school would teach students from junior kindergarten to Grade 8. It would have more black teachers and mentors, a focus on students' heritage and more parent involvement.

Black-focused schools have long been a controversial issue in Ontario. Critics say they segregate students, but supporters say it's a way to keep black students engaged.

"Desperate times call for desperate action," said David Watkins, who just last week won a Governor-General's teaching award for his black history classes at Weston Collegiate Institute.

The Toronto board has been piloting several "Afrocentric" social studies units in Grades 6, 7 and 8 in some schools. For Coteau, however, it's time to do more. "I can count more people who died from violent crime in Flemingdon Park than graduated from university," Coteau said of friends in the Toronto neighbourhood where he grew up.
He said it was only when, as a teen, he transferred to Leaside High School that his future changed. "Expectations were placed on me," he said.

"The difference between a lot of young people is that some have to live down to expectations and some have to live up." In fact, one of the key recommendations parents have made to the board is that an African-centred school emphasize leadership and prepare students to see university as their first choice.

But Zanana Akande, the first black woman elected to the Ontario Legislature and the first in Canada to serve as a cabinet minister, said she understands the sentiment of the idea's supporters who feel the public system's curriculum omits much of their history, contributions to society and learning styles, but it's not something she supports: "The situation in which we live, work and raise our kids is not a segregated one, it's an integrated one."

Harold Brathwaite, former director of education at the Peel public board, said when he worked with the Toronto board 20 years ago, such an idea was rejected.

Instead, the board provided "transition schools" for new immigrants, who would later be transferred into their own local school." That, along with homework clubs and after-school programming, would be "better than schools of one particular racial or ethnic group."

---

**Some key dates in the debate about black-focused schools in Ontario**

1991 – Bob Rae NDP government sets up black secretariat and education ministry implements measures to push race relations and equity training for teachers and board officials.

1992 – Stephen Lewis's public probe in the wake of the Yonge St. riots supports the idea of black-focused schools.

1992 – *Toronto Star* quotes the school board's new equity officer Lloyd McKell as saying he is in favour of black-focused schools. Public outcry follows.

1993 – Royal Commission on Learning, concerned about the high dropout rates among black students, recommends black-focused schools in Toronto.

1997 – Mike Harris Conservatives cut black secretariat.

2003 – Parent Angela Wilson learns of alternative school policy while attending education forum in Etobicoke. It would be a year before she gets a copy. She was surprised to find the school board encouraged parents to set up such schools.

May 2004 – Wilson and another activist, parent Donna Harrow, meet then TDSB director Dave Reed to discuss setting up a special school to address underachieving black kids.

Feb. 2, 2005 – Black parents hold forum on black-focused schools at St. Lawrence Theatre.

Feb 8, 2005 – Harrow and Wilson meet with Gerry Connelly, then TDSB assistant director, along with Trevor Ludski, area superintendent, to present their ideas for an alternative Africentric school.

2005 – Harrow, Wilson meet with other advocates Beunah Livingston and Suad Aimad to draft first stages of school plan. They meet at the Fish Shack on Baldwin St. It would take more than a year to finalize.
June 12, 2007 – Final meeting held with Connelly. The next day, the proposal is presented to the board's programs and services committee. It's accepted, in principle, and sent to the board.

June 27 – TDSB directs staff to prepare a feasibility report on pilot of alternative Africentric school and report in November.

Sept. 20 – Africentric advisory committee of the board endorses proposal.

Nov. 8 and 12 – Board holds public meetings. Opinion at the first is overwhelmingly in favour. Views at the second are split among the 300 attendees.

January 2008 – Staff expected to file feasibility report.

September 2008 – Potential start of the first Africentric alternative school.

[Source: Toronto Star, Nov 18, 2007]