

## City schools ahead in addressing equity issues

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The exchange of educational advice between Monroe County’s suburban school districts and the Rochester City School District tends to be a one-way street. After all, the latter is considered one of the lowest-performing districts in the country and the former are not.

In the area of examining racial inequity, though, RCSD is ahead of its suburban counterparts. While they are largely in the incipient stages of addressing personal and systemic racism and unfair disciplinary practices, among other things, the city school district has already begun to put some systems in place.

As a result, RCSD has the smallest racial disparity for out-of-school suspensions in the county, though the data still is tilted against black students.

RCSD Deputy Superintendent Cecilia Golden attributed the district’s incremental progress to several steps:

- Providing professional development and support around the idea of restorative practices to ensure teachers and administrators are able to implement the model faithfully.
- Continuing education around antiracism and implicit bias that, she said, “helps the adults to understand how the conscious mind can have you thinking certain ways about what it is you’re seeing.”
- The work of the community Task Force on School Climate, which helped shepherd through a rewrite of the code of conduct, among other things. Other important steps include the input of the Rochester Teacher Center and consultant Joy DeGruy as district staff work on culturally responsive curriculum starting in the lower grades; the recent hiring of a director of Afro-African American Studies, Jason Willis; and the formation of the Racial Equity Action Leadership team, which despite a rocky beginning is supposed to be a way to oversee and prod on the district’s overall work around racism.

### Students are catalysts for change

The great engine of anti-racist change in the suburban districts, meanwhile, is entirely student-led. The Roc2Change summits held a couple of times a year now draw hundreds of students from dozens of local districts for serious discussions on racism in their own schools.

Will Barrett is a black student in 11th grade at Fairport High School. At his home school he often feels socially isolated, but listening to his peers from other schools across Monroe County share their struggles — stories that echoed so many of his own experiences — left him feeling inspired after the most recent summit.

“It was very powerful, because you see so many people who look like you,” Barrett said. “Just seeing a lot of black excellence and a willingness to speak out about topics — it makes me want to do more in Fairport.”

Nhadia Hemphil, an 11th-grader at Penfield High School, said similarly: “People telling their stories made me feel it’s OK to talk about racism and my experiences and how to make school more equal.”

Sally Brothers, an English teacher and adviser of the MOSAICS Club at Greece Arcadia High School, said students are often the driving force behind the changes they want to see in their schools.

In 2016, a dozen students at Greece Arcadia put together an event dedicated to African-American history and heritage. They brought in food, wrote poetry, performed interpretive dances and presented biographies for two hours — and had a blast, Brothers said.

“Afterwards, the kids were so excited about it they were like, ‘This should be a class,’” Brothers recalled. They presented the idea to the school board, which approved the MOSAICS class as an English elective for 12th-grade students. A MOSAICS club formed shortly after for students who weren’t seniors, she added.

Brothers, who is white, said she is constantly in awe of what her students envision for themselves and their communities. Supporting and guiding them through their struggles — and their successes — is a vital part of her role as a teacher.

“To our suburban colleagues, I would say: It requires focused attention and a decision to figure out what may be going on and how to effectively address it,” Golden said.

“Yeah, these kids are AP students, yes they have their challenges, but they’re also great leaders,” Brothers said. “They’re working very hard to change some of the culturally responsive stuff too.”

Certainly, RCSD has more work to do. Its black students still have much lower rates of participation in high-level coursework including AP classes; schools like School of the Arts and Wilson Magnet High School, among others, are notorious for having white students clustered into advanced courses.

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**Golden**

Some advocates inside and outside the district have expressed frustration with the slow rate of change, particularly a perceived reluctance by white staff and faculty to embrace the full implications of anti-racism. The roll-out of restorative practices has been uneven; in his report, distinguished educator Jaime Aquino noted an observation the district had gathered earlier: “Community members nearly unanimously shared that they feel unwelcome and there seems to be prevalent racial bias within our school community.”

At least in the relative terms of its predominantly white surroundings, though, RCSD is in the lead.