

Suburban struggle

As suburban districts diversify, black students navigate a mix of prejudice and good intentions

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Leah Stewart, a 12th-grader at Greece Olympia High School, is part of an uncomfortable sort of club at school. She calls it “the five smart black girls.” Earning admission was an exhausting ordeal, and yet she doesn’t enjoy being a member very much at all.

It began in eighth grade, when Stewart first had to push back against a counselor who wouldn’t enroll her in an advanced course. She’s had the same experience more recently in the high school, even with a track record of academic success.

“I tried to take AP physics, and my counselor pretty much laughed at me,” Stewart said. “He was pretty much just like, ‘Oh you have a lot on your plate.’ He wouldn’t sign off on it for like a really long time.”

She’s now one of five black students, all girls, taking AP classes at the high school, she said. The club has its perks: they are often asked to present to the school board, for instance, as

if they were representative of a larger group. Teachers of advanced courses refer to “the five black girls” and seem to mean well.

Other times the label is an invitation for trouble. For



Brother and sister Isaac and Bethany Beru on Dec. 10 in the hallways at Rush-Henrietta High School, where they are both students. SHAWN DOWD/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

instance, the time a substitute teacher left a note saying that the black girls had been talking too loudly after they finished their work. Their regular teacher read it out loud in class.

“Sometimes, you feel like a super big outcast,” Stewart said. “Some people say, ‘Oh, I don’t see color.’ Sometimes it’s OK to acknowledge it; it’s just how you do it.”

Some people may think they don’t see color, but the numbers don’t support it. Federal civil rights data shows that minorities in every single suburban district in Monroe County, particularly black students, face serious obstacles in getting an education.

■ In every Monroe County district except Wheatland-Chili, white students are significantly more likely to be enrolled in at least one Advanced Placement course. In

white teaching staffs.

Approached for a response to the particular incident Beru shared, the district’s spokesman Travis Anderson said a teacher used the word during a classroom discussion “about the use of specific words in conversation,” and that “as an example, the use of the N-word was discussed.”

The district has since looked into the incident and is taking Beru’s experience very seriously, Anderson said.

“The district reached out to the student who was quoted, she explained that she was not comfortable with the teacher using the word to illustrate the point,” Anderson said. “We will continue to have these important conversations with our students, and be more

Churchville-Chili only seven of 109 black students took an AP course.

■ In all 10 districts with enough black students to meet reporting requirements, those black students are more than a year behind their white counterparts academically, on average. Webster is the worst offender, with a gap of nearly two years.

■ Every district is significantly more likely to suspend black students out of school compared to their white classmates. In Hilton, Brighton and Brockport, black students are nine times more likely to be suspended.

■ Black students also lose more time to out-of-school suspensions than white students in every district. In Greece, for example, black students miss more than eight times as many days on suspension.

■ Hispanic students also faced disparities in many instances, but not to the same extent as black students. Asian students, meanwhile, tracked more closely with white students in terms of discipline and access to higher level courses.

The only districts without significant reported disparities are those with so few black students that releasing the data would raise privacy concerns. That is the case in high-performing Honeoye Falls-Lima, for instance, which has just 17 black students out of 2,185 and which did not respond to a request for comment.

Suburban diversity on the rise

Because students of color in Monroe County are concentrated in the Rochester City School District, discussion of racial disparity usually contrasts black students in the city with white students in the suburbs. Increasingly, however, that shorthand fails to capture the diversity of the suburban districts surrounding Rochester. More than 18,000 non-white students attend suburban schools, about 40 percent of the countywide total. Of them, black students are the most populous, and the data shows that they face stiffer prejudice than any other minority groups.

Given RCSD's well-documented academic struggles, it is easy to think of black and Latino students in the suburbs as the lucky ones, and indeed their graduation rate and test scores on the whole are higher than their urban counterparts.

In interviews over the last month by the *Democrat and Chronicle*, more than a dozen minority suburban

aware of the feelings these well-intended discussions may elicit.”

Regardless of that incident — and other, more routine experiences with racism — Beru said she still feels proud to be a Rush-Henrietta student. The student population is diverse, and her school community does have a lot to offer her. That said, she knows there's still much work left to be done — and she's happy to lead that effort.

“I'm glad to be in Rush-Henrietta — there's so many opportunities,” Beru said. “But even though we're pretty good, that's still something that we're trying to work on. That's something that affects everybody on a daily basis.”

R. L'Heureux Lewis-McCoy, an associate professor of sociology of education at New York University who studies racial inequality in suburban schools, said the disparities are a result of “racism and how our histories come together in the moment.”

That history includes how black families, in particular, were expressly excluded from the mid-century suburban housing boom — the primary source of those towns' current wealth advantages.

“Racism is often perpetuated by the very nice, very kind people who decided to move out to Hilton and didn't think to ask why there's no black people out there,” he said. “The reason we haven't been paying attention to it is that in general these schools have been performing well, so people don't perceive it as a problem.”

Increasingly schools have indeed been paying attention to it. When asked to review and respond to the data, most Rochester-area suburban districts mentioned a full array of professional development opportunities, curriculum reviews and code of conduct revisions either underway or already completed.

Three local districts — East Rochester, Honeoye Falls-Lima and Victor — did not respond.

Perhaps the most promising harbinger of improvement is Roc2Change, a rotating series of student-driven discussions about racism and its effects. The most recent was hosted by Brighton in November and drew several hundred students.

“It's a larger conversation when we look at racism and civil rights; it's bigger than this moment in time and it's a bigger issue than (any one district),” said Steve

students said they generally appreciate the opportunities their districts afford them. At the same time, they described recurring, insidious patterns of institutional and personal racism.

Several said counselors had actively discouraged them from taking advanced coursework. Others said some white teachers and students use the N-word freely, making them feel uncomfortable and unsafe. Conversations about slavery in history class can be excruciating.

Bethany Beru, a student at Rush-Henrietta Senior High School, said hearing the N-word used in the classroom by a white teacher last year left her feeling shocked. Frustrated, she went to her counselor's office and documented the incident, in which the teacher said it while explaining to students that they should not be saying it. The counselor she normally would have spoken with was unavailable, so she left a message explaining what had happened.

No one followed up with her, she said. Weeks passed. Eventually, she confronted the teacher herself and said his use of the N-word was uncalled for.

"He was just like, 'Oh, um, I didn't mean to hurt you, but you know where I'm coming from, right?,' " Beru said. "At the end of the day he still didn't understand, and I can't argue with somebody who didn't understand. That was the worst situation I've ever had with a teacher."

Experiences like that add to many black students' perception that the odds are stacked against them in schools with overwhelmingly

Lysenko, an assistant principal at Spencerport High School and president of the state chapter of the National Association for Multicultural Education. "As a 45-year-old white male who grew up in Monroe County — we didn't have these conversations in my generation."

Like Leah Stewart, Will Barrett is the only black student in his AP classes at Fairport High School. He said he felt compelled to become an anti-racism advocate after another student said during a classroom discussion that black people are predisposed to theft and dishonesty, and deserve any racial profiling they experience.

Being in AP classes alienates Barrett from his peers of all races, he said: removed from the other black kids in general or remedial classes and "too black" for the white kids. It weighs on his mental health.

"I definitely feel like I'm trapped in two worlds," he said. "I almost have to put on a mask at Fairport because of the systematic issues such as racism, but I have decided to start speaking out."

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Kendal Bruno, a freshman at McQuaid Jesuit, center, leads a discussion on race at his table of McQuaid schoolmates during the Individual School Work Session at the ROC 2 Change student summit on race held Nov. 16 at the Wegmans Conference Center in Gates. SHAWN DOWD/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE