

Educator believes racism at root of RCSD troubles

Eagle

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What is being done to address individual, institutional, and structural racism in the Rochester City School District?

This question, submitted by Howard Eagle, earned the most votes in the first voting round of Time To Educate, the *Democrat and Chronicle's* reporting project committed to helping the community identify solutions to problems in Rochester's schools. It was one of four questions selected from the dozens submitted through Raise Your Hand, our community conversation tool. Eagle's question will underpin a new round of reporting addressing the issue of race, and his response to the findings will also be included in the story. The other questions will also be investigated at a later date.

Eagle, 64, is a longtime educator and local anti-racism advocate, known for his campaigns for a seat on the Rochester school board and prolific political and social commentary. His question for Time to Educate will be familiar to anyone on his prodigious email distribution list.

Eagle calls those three forms of racism a "the tripartite beast" and believes their eradication is the only way to improve student performance in the district.

"Part of the reason we haven't produced more solutions is that we haven't asked the right questions," he said. "I'm acutely aware of the condition of African people, not just in Rochester and the United States but around the world. ... I believe in African people around the world uniting. That may sound pie-in-the-sky, but that's what's needed to get

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Howard Eagle during a weekly meeting of the Movement for Anti-racist Ministry and Action Coalition.
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us back to where we were (before European imperialism).”

When Eagle refers to “the condition of African people,” he includes his own family experience. He was born in Apopka, one of the central Florida communities from which thousands of black migrant workers came to Rochester after World War II.

His father worked as a loader, hauling boxes of Florida oranges and grapefruits from the field to the trucks. After that picking season ended the Eagle family migrated north to the apple fields of Wayne and Ontario counties — they settled here permanently in 1968 when Howard Eagle was 14 years old.

They lived behind a barn on Qualtrough Road in Penfield in a ramshackle house lacking an indoor toilet. Ashamed, Eagle told his classmates he lived in a grand house down the road owned by the prominent Heberle farming family; only later did he realize how transparent a lie it was.

Being a good athlete smoothed his social life somewhat, but Penfield was a stark change from Apopka, where he had hardly ever interacted with white people.

“I was conscious (of race), but to say I was isolated would be an understatement,” he said. Eagle graduated from high school in 1972, had a child and worked to support his family before returning to college in 1979, eventually getting a master’s degree in education from The College at Brockport.

He spent about 30 years in the Rochester City School District, mostly as a social studies teacher at Josh Lofton and John Marshall high schools, before retiring in 2010. Since then he has been an inescapable presence in local education and politics, in particular as a leader of the Movement for Anti-racist Ministry and Action Coalition and the Take It Down Planning Committee, which successfully campaigned for the removal of a racist cartoon panel from the Dentzel Carousel at Ontario Beach Park.

At the heart of his advocacy is the conviction that white supremacy is embedded in major American institutions, with countless visible and invisible consequences.

“Racism is built into the fabric and foundation of this society — economic, political and social — from Day 1,” he said.

In that, he and RCSD Superintendent Barbara Deane-Williams are in agreement, at least conceptually.

Deane-Williams has regularly named racial issues and anti-racism initiatives as top priorities, and the district can point toward some initial steps: the Victorious Minds Academy, its ongoing consultation with Joy DeGruy and the recent hiring of a director of Afro-African American Studies after the position had been vacant for two years.

Eagle and his allies describe those efforts as muddled, incomplete or ineffectual. They are instead urging the district to adopt their nine-point plan, which will be detailed in the next Time to Educate story.

“We’re asking you these questions,” Eagle said. “But we already know the answers.”

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In this 2005 file photo, Howard Eagle talks to reporters before a public forum on school closings at Frederick Douglass Preparatory School Thursday evening. More than 200 people attended the forum to express their view on proposed closing of schools in Rochester. Eagle and others take the position that no schools should be closed. STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER/WILL YURMAN