

‘Nothing worth having comes easy’

RCSD LEADERSHIP UNDER QUESTION

As RCSD leadership is questioned, this new school tries to chart a path

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Six hands were trying to tie Dorie Lewis’ red and blue head wrap.

■ “If this ain’t a ‘it takes a village moment,’ ” said Tyshauna Clark, the community school coordinator for RISE Community School. ■ Clark had purchased the Africa-inspired fabric for the school’s first Black History Month Assembly, which will actually take place in March. She watched YouTube videos on how to tie head wraps and enlisted two Americorps workers to help her practice during a rehearsal.

■ “It’s a little baggy, but once we cut it, it will be cute,” Clark said.



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RISE Community School opened in September to replace School 41, an elementary school that was closed at the end of last school year due to persistently low test scores. The new school’s name was originally intended to be a stopgap, but it looks increasingly like the name has stuck. As the mostly new staff changed the decor at the West Ridge Road building over the summer, Clark hung the African proverb “It takes a village to raise a child” in more than one place.

Thus far in Rochester, closing and reopening schools has been a failed improvement strategy. Since 2002, the Rochester City School District has closed 26 schools and opened 18. The vast majority of the new schools are not much better than the schools they replaced. In many cases, they proved worse, and were also closed.

As the community wrestles over the governance and leadership of the beleaguered Rochester City School

in our textbooks.”

Lewis said she was thrilled that the school was so supportive of the idea. Her daughter Dorie attended School 41 and Lewis said her offer to do a Black History Month program at that school didn’t get much support. Parent engagement efforts have improved at RISE Community School, according to Lewis. “They welcome you in,” she said. “To not just show support for your child, but other children as well.”

Logistical issues led the school to move the Black History Month program from its original date of Feb. 28. Staff say they decided to host it in a location outside the school and are working on a new date.

Looking in the mirror

It remains to be seen whether RISE’s efforts at parent and community engagement will translate into

District, its newest elementary school is trying to chart a new path.

RISE hopes to break old patterns, in part, by fostering the growth of relationships and bringing many hands to meet the needs of its students. "It takes a village," Clark said. "I firmly believe that."

Role for community organizations

The academic structure of RISE Community School was redesigned to give the elementary school students ways to form strong relationships with more than one adult. Drawing inspiration from "family-unit" models in highly selected city elementary schools, RISE created a pod structure for classes. Each grade has five teachers and 60 students, all of whom move freely between classrooms. The school is also broken up into four "houses," which are named Beneficius, Ubuntu, Heshima and Kuaminika, inspirational names with African or Latin roots. Each house includes students from different grades, allowing children to form relationships across age groups.

During periodic house-wide school spirit activity days, children participate in games and competitions. They also hear from community leaders who are invited to provide encouragement and inspiration. County Legislator Ernest Flagler, who is also a retired firefighter, visited on a recent house day and read a book to a group of children from the Ubuntu house. He told them to never, ever play with lighters and matches. And to work hard at whatever they decide to do in life. "Nothing worth having comes easy," Flagler said.

Students also regularly interact with adults from Center for Youth, Americorps, HealthiKids, Boy Scouts and Generation 2, which brings senior citizens into schools for play therapy.

Following the community school model, many outside organizations have been enlisted to help meet students' non-academic needs. At a school with high poverty, those needs can be large. Some children show up at school weighted down by homelessness and hunger. Others don't have socks, gloves and other clothes needed during a brutal winter.

Center For Youth is the lead organization linked to RISE Community School and has facilitated a clothing closet and food cupboard. The nonprofit also runs a Reconnect Room where students can get social-emotional support.

academic success. Fran Wilson, the independent monitor that the state Education Department has placed over the school, said that things are off to a good start. "I am very encouraged," she said. "It is an exciting place to be."

Clark believes that building relationships will pay off. Children "don't care what you know until they know that you care," she said.

One of the songs in the Black History Month program is called "Mother Africa," and talks about African-Americans trying to regain a connection to their ancestral homeland. "You don't know me. But look in the mirror, I am there," Lewis sings. "It's the color of your skin, it's the shape of your body, It's the texture of your hair."

Dorie said she was looking forward to the performance and hopes to visit Africa one day. "I want to see everything in Africa," she said.

As she danced in the rehearsal, her head wrap came loose at the sides, but didn't fall off. Clark smiled and told her to keep on dancing. Clark had arranged for professional head wrap artists to volunteer to arrange the girls' head wraps for the actual show. For the moment, it was fine to leave the two flaps flying around Dorie's face like wings.

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Music teacher Taylor Johnson holds a cauldron full of colored lanyards as Luis Rivera, a new employee/custodian at the school, gets cheered on by students to see what house he will become a part of. PHOTOS BY TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

Michael Davis smiles after taking a photo of his family, Lee and Kelley Davis, during House Day, when the school invites parents in while they celebrate and continue teaching principles of each house.

Illieana Smart, left, a sixth-grader, and Promysse Hagood, a fourth-grader, give a thumbs-up response to a question.

Building relationships with parents so that they will make use of available services has been a major push at the school, said Glenna Smith, parent liaison for RISE. “We are trying to build a foundation where parents feel comfortable for us to help them.”

Building new traditions

Representatives from all of RISE’s partner organizations meet regularly. At one such meeting, they talked about ways to build Black History Month traditions for the new school. Karen Lewis, who is the mother of Dorie Lewis and a member of the community engagement team, volunteered a script, songs and program she had written to honor African-American Heritage. Students were recruited to fill parts. Cloth for costumes and head wraps was purchased.

Many of RISE’s students are African-American and they need to know that their history didn’t begin with slavery, said Clark.

“(Africans) had a very rich culture and history before they came to the United States,” said Clark. “All of those things aren’t