

## Not a Gray Issue

Opening lines of communication with the black community helped one school district better serve *all* its students.

On the surface, everything was running very well at Lake Forest School District in Harrington, Delaware. That is, until you began to look at racial patterns. In a district with 17 percent black enrollment and a high school of 870 students, not one black was a member of the National Honor Society. Several were eligible but had chosen not to apply. Most of the academic classes had few, if any, black students enrolled. The entire administrative team and the entire counseling staff were white. To whom would a black youth with a problem go? There were a few black members on the teaching staff but none anywhere else.

To address this situation, we arranged a meeting for the superintendent, the supervisor of curriculum (the major recruiters for the district), and two officers of the NAACP. During that first conference, we discussed teacher recruitment. Then we explored expectations for black students' performance.

Later we held a meeting with members of the black community to discuss their perceptions of the school district's effectiveness in meeting their needs. Representatives from Delaware State College (a predominantly black institution), black mem-

bers of the teaching staff, and several black students from the high school were also invited to attend. Over 65 black community members attended. The two white participants were the superintendent and the supervisor of curriculum.

At this meeting, dialogue was frank and sincere. We discussed the need to increase the number of minority staff members, including aides, counselors, secretaries, administrators, bus drivers, and teachers. We also discussed our expectations for black students and how they were presently perform-

ing. Agenda topics included the National Honor Society, black enrollment in academic classes, elementary school grouping patterns, black students' self-esteem, curriculum and textbooks, and field trips. Participants also raised concerns about black involvement in PTAs, black parents' visits to the schools, black family support for education, teachers' salaries, and Black History Month.

Some staff members criticized this meeting with members of the black community only. But as a black teacher who had attended the meeting pointed out, "If an open meeting had been called, it would have been useless. No one would have said anything." In truth, the meeting was planned to elicit the black community's concerns about the school system, and we believed this would be possible only in such an environment.

We scheduled another meeting to which anyone could come. This meeting was well attended by both black and white participants and was carried on in an atmosphere of interest and support. We discussed solutions, then formed a committee charged to develop concrete plans. These plans were designed to raise expectations for the system's black students and to support their performances. We de-

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# Conference

n. 1. a meeting for instruction and discussion of matters of common interest.

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ecided to form an Ebony Club, to celebrate Black History Month, to begin a tutorial program for students having difficulty in school, to promote black visibility in the high school office, and to encourage black students to participate in the National Honor Society.

Our efforts have already produced results. The black community has shown increased support for the school system through increased participation in PTAs and other support groups, through volunteering in the tutorial program, through increased attendance at Open House and parent conference programs, through active participation in board-appointed committees, and through a marked increase in black voter turnout for board elections and referendum votes. Two blacks also ran for the school board.

We have also developed an awareness of the need to serve *all* students: students of different skin colors, students from different socioeconomic backgrounds, and students with varying abilities. Now the district not only looks good, it is truly helping all students to achieve their potential. □

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