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Student activists hold panel on racism in public schools

Thu, 05/05/2022 - 3:04pm Mike Eldred



Former Readsboro School Principal Wilmer Chavarria

By Tyler Lederer

VERMONT - On Thursday, the Vermont Student Anti-Racism Network held an Equity in Education conference over Zoom. Student and teacher panelists answered questions on advancing racial equity in the public education system.

Within Vermont, acts and accusations of racism in public schools have become more frequent. In September 2021, VTDigger reported that Enosburg Falls High School soccer players and fans were accused of using racial slurs against Winooski players during a game. In February 2022, Enosburg Falls' principal was put on leave for repeating racist and homophobic language over the loudspeakers that fans were accused of using in a basketball game.

Locally, in December 2021, the Deerfield Valley News reported that Twin Valley Middle High School was the subject of an ACLU complaint alleging racist bullying against a Black student. The complaint alleged that the student faced Nazi salutes and racial slurs, among other things, and that administrators failed to respond effectively to the abuse. In April, the Brattleboro Reformer reported that the West River Education District was being urged to act in response to the use of slurs at Leland & Gray.

Asked about engaging students and teachers, Jonathan Phillips, equity director at Mount Anthony Union High School, spoke about "sticking out like a sore thumb" due to his appearance, outlooks and perspectives, and actions, in the nondiverse middle school he went to. He said schools need to work to make marginalized students feel protected or they won't be engaged.

"You have to make them feel like they're valued and protected," he said. "If they are not, they will do exactly what I did and basically be like OK, I just got to survive this until I can get to the next point of my prison sentence, essentially."

Mei Elander, a student at Enosburg Falls High School, said she related to Phillips being one of the few BIPOC students in a nondiverse school and recommended classes on race and racism. "It would be nice to have classes that talked about race and inequalities and having those harder conversations and being able to respect different opinions," she said.

Former Readsboro School Principal and current equity director at Milton High Wilmer Chavarria said that unlike senators, people who work for schools don't have a license to speak up on such issues without being "attacked viciously" since they are supposed to be "neutral." He recommended teachers get to know their students first before having conversations.

"Racism is not just this big concept and umbrella that we can just apply to anything and everything," he said. "The conversation is impactful only if it reflects who your students are, where they're at, where the community's located, and the context of today."

He noted that the conversations he had with undocumented and Mexican-immigrant communities in New Mexico, where he was working when Donald Trump was elected president, were different than those he had with white students in southern Vermont. "Those are two entirely different communities with entirely different needs and entirely different lived experiences," he said.

Ailsa O'Neil-Dunne, a student at Burlington High School, said she hasn't learned enough about racism but noted that the situation was improving. She said she began to see more diverse books in her English classes at BHS. In her history classes there were discussions about how some states' restrictions on what can be taught impact the use of some textbooks.

She also noted racism tends to be taught as history, even though it's still an ongoing issue. "That's an important part to bring into it, as not only what happened in the past but also like what's going on right now and how do we move forward," she said.

Porchea Tipton, equity director at Essex High School, said that since she was Black, she experiences and has conversations about racism all the time, which leads her to burnout. Nonetheless she said the conversations need to happen. "My goal is to create a safe space for students where they can talk about these things if they need to," she said. "If that means creating affinity spaces for people to do that, creating affinity spaces for teachers who don't know what to say, I'm OK with facilitating that."

Phillips said the United States is at "the toddler phase" of coming to terms with racism, comparing the country to others he's lived in like Australia and New Zealand. He said American society needs to mature to a level where it's capable of having these conversations in a public school system if the macro society and macro system at large fails to acknowledge or even recognize they exist," he said.

Elander said she wished students at Enosburg Falls had learned more about Black history, which she said stops after the civil rights movement ended in the late 1960s and doesn't explain its effects. She wished there were more conversations about current events, such as the George Floyd and Breonna Taylor cases.

As to how schools should handle racist incidents, Tipton said a lot of times "a situation happens and the whole school just explodes because no one knows what to do and everybody's worried." She emphasized care and urgency as well as doing preemptive work and having conversations early.

Though busy with climate change legislation, Senate Pro Temp Becca Balint gave brief remarks, telling VSARN the work young students like them are doing is important. She mentioned a New York Times article that talked about increased depression and suicidality in teens that affected women and BIPOC the most.

"As white people who are on this Zoom right now, it's not enough for us just to say that we know that racism exists in Vermont," she said. "It's not enough to say that we want to be antiracist. We have to do that work in really hard conversations with our colleagues and our peers and our families."

She recalled how when she was elected eight years ago, she, Kiah Morris, and Deonna Gonzales believed it was outrageous that legislators received no bias training. She said it was now part of the work the Legislature did but just a small part.

"You're trying to do that same thing in our public schools and independent schools across the state," she said. "That means by the time folks get to us in the Legislature, they're going to be having that education because what I want is to see more young people running for office." She encouraged the young people on the call to run, saying it's not necessary for them to be leaders but that she wanted them to consider it anyway.

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