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North High alumni call on Black parents to take action

by Charles Hallman
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More accountability needed to close achievement gap

If Black children are to be better educated, the responsibility must lie primarily with the Black community. In that spirit, an estimated 125 persons attended a "call to action" community meeting Monday night, September 22, at the Minneapolis Urban League's Minneapolis office, for improving the city's public schools.

"Our children are really struggling," Ralph Crowder told the gathering. He decried how current standards aren't helping to close the persistent achievement gap between Black and White students.

Crowder, who organized the two-and-a-half-hour meeting that was co-sponsored by the Urban League, said that he was especially disturbed after "shadowing" his two children at their respective schools for an entire school year.

"I spent at least four hours a day in their schools," he said, and during this time he was distressed to see that the educational needs of his then-grade-school-age children were not being met.

"I was concerned about my son's reading level, and come to find out when I started asking questions, my son was reading a couple of grades below [his fifth-grade] level," continued Crowder. "Then I asked more questions, and found out that 70 percent of the children at that school were not reading at grade level.

"I wanted to be there every day for my kids," he said, adding that he also started attending Minneapolis School Board meetings and also expressed his belief that federal and state educational funding under the No Child Left Behind law is not being properly allocated to serve all children, especially Black children.

"How long are we going to allow this to happen?" Crowder asked the crowd.

North High has been much maligned in recent years because of its poor achievement rates among Black students. Most of the audience members were either North High graduates or parents of present or past North students.

A 1989 North graduate, Crowder invited several fellow alumni to share their experiences during a panel discussion. "North High has produced many successful graduates," he noted.

"I loved North High," said Raechelle Drakeford, a 1993 North graduate.

Damien Petrow, a 1988 grad, said the skills he learned at North help him today as a video producer. "North High today is a very different North High than it used to be," he pointed out.

A current North staff member said the problems at the school didn't originate there. "I think we need to start at North, but we need to start in elementary school," she suggested.

Parents must take some of the blame, said Titilayo Bediako. "The majority of African American children are at least two years behind in reading and math. How can one get into middle school and can't read? All of us have to be held accountable."

A mother of a North graduate who's now attending college challenged parents. "When is the last time you read to your child, and when [have] they read to you?" she asked, adding that parents should always know where their child is educationally. "We can't keep waiting for somebody else to do it."

"Our children are already counted out [when] a parent is identified as high risk," one participant added. "If she is high risk, the child is high risk, too. They already are being labeled before they come out of the womb."

More Black men are needed in the schools, whether they have children there or not, stated another participant. "More African American men need to be involved, to step into the room and be with our children," he said.

"I appreciate the efforts from Ralph to bring the community together and try to get a call to action," said Drakeford, who owns and operates Butterfly Springs, a Minneapolis-based personal and professional development company. "I would like to see personal and professional more involvement from our community. Talking is good, but now we need to put some plans together [and] take this to the next level forward."

Joy Lumbly of Brooklyn Park said that all Black children should be educated outside of the classroom. She taught her only child in her junior year at a college in California, for all but two of her school years. "

All African-descent people [should] take some time to home-school your child, even if it's [just for] one hour," Lumbly urged. "I don't see any real final solutions in the public school system or any school system that is not African-centered."

Afterwards, Crowder said he was encouraged with what took place Monday night. "I think the school board, the Minneapolis Public Schools, St. Paul Public Schools, and all those who provide educational services to Black children need to be on notice," he surmised.

The meeting "was a great start," said Monica Mayberry of North Minneapolis. "I think dialogue is important, but without a solution and a time line, then it does more harm than good."

"People tonight brought truth to the table," added Billie Mae Imhoede, a 1972 North graduate and mother of three children who graduated from Minneapolis schools. "Things are out of whack, and people are not being accountable," she added. "So, we have to figure out where certain accountability needs to go and hold those people to that accountability."

Crowder said he would like to plan future forums in a manner similar to Monday's forum, calling a particular school's alumni together and discuss issues. "The issues aren't just with North High, but are district-wide issues," he pointed out. "The more we engage the community, the more we will be able to effect real change."

The community can no longer afford to have school officials and others "set our agenda," Crowder concluded. "We as North High graduates are going to come up with solutions ourselves."

Charles Hallman welcomes reader responses to challman@spokesman-recorder.com, or read his blog: www.wwnwcchallman.blogspot.com.

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