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Equity campaign asks for hand in Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools plan

Katie Jansen Updated Jan 23, 2016

CHAPEL HILL — In a recent presentation to the Chapel Hill-Carrboro Board of Education, the Campaign for Racial Equity in Our Schools asked for a collaborative approach to diminish racial inequities in the school system.

The district is currently forming a five-year plan with equity as one of its areas of focus. But during the presentation, campaign co-chair Stephanie Perry asked for members of the campaign and other community stakeholders to be involved in the plan's creation.

The group also set a May deadline for the equity plan.



"We can't expect perfection by May, but we can expect a lot by May," said Greg McElveen, one of the members of the campaign.

The presentation came after nearly three months of tension between the group and the board after the report was initially released in October.

Although organizers of the campaign said its members always wanted to collaborate with the district and even invited staff to help with its report, the board initially denied requests for a special session to present the report.

Board member Andrew Davidson referenced this tension during comments after the group's presentation.

"If you think we're doing a bad job, show up on our lawn and tell the press," he said, referring to the group's initial press conference held after the release of its report.

The 87-page report examines school district data and themes discovered in community listening sessions. It details problems such as an achievement gap, disparate discipline among races and a lack of minority students in advanced classes.

Although programs have been implemented throughout the years in an attempt to handle some of these problems, the coalition stressed that disjointed programming is not enough to create real change. Presenters emphasized that a complete culture change was necessary.

"Our concerns are about equity, but we want to lift up culture as the underlying and unexamined problem that needs to be addressed," said co-chair Wanda Hunter.

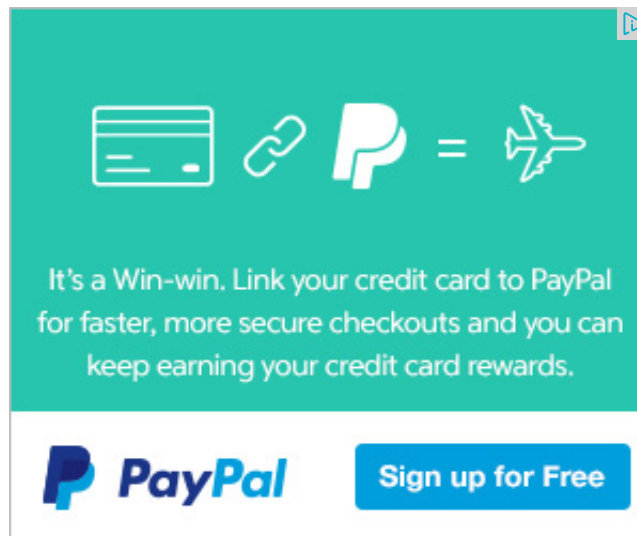
The board members thanked members of the campaign for their passion and commitment but did not respond to the request for collaboration on the equity plan.

Board chairman James Barrett said that topic was on the agenda for the board's retreat, scheduled for Feb. 8-9.

Other recommendations from the campaign included a measurable dashboard that could track qualitative and quantitative data associated with equity.

The presentation also emphasized commitment from the board and dialogue between the board and other stakeholders in the district.

“This moment tonight is a defining moment,” Perry said. “Our school district can become an agent of transformation and a model for education and excellence, or we can continue to be a spectator of the current system and culture we have in place, harboring disappointment for our outcomes and embarrassed by the truth that we are failing our children.”



Davidson asked how the campaign would deal with inevitable missteps along the way and with slow responses from the board.

Perry said that the group will continue to hold the board accountable.

“If we’re having this dialogue now, and in six months we haven’t heard anything, that silence is dialogue,” she said.

The reason the group is setting a timeline, she said, is because the district needs to see progress.

“That sense of urgency is around our children,” she said. “I want my children safe; I want all children safe.”

Although the group received no definitive answer from the board during the meeting, Perry said Sheldon Lanier, director of equity leadership for the district, approached her afterward and said he was happy to collaborate.

Perry said she is encouraged and hopeful both by this invitation and by the board's reaction to the presentation.

"I think that there's a willingness to want to collaborate and work together," she said.

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