School Board Places Big Bet on Windsor Schools’ Future

By Julian McKinley
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Three and five. These two numbers rang loud and clear in Windsor town hall council chambers during the board of education's recent meeting.

Three and five represent the number of years separating the school district's best and worst-performing students; which in real terms translate into the achievement gap between white students and students of color.

The board of education, at the urging of Board President to "take a leap," dedicated more than $300,000 over three years to closing the gap, placing the town's hope for an improved education system on the shoulders of one man: Dr. Marlon James of Loyola University — Chicago.

James delivered a presentation for a three-year overhaul of the approach to education in town; a presentation that could be described as nothing less than revolutionary. Using terms such as "funds knowledge," "African-American male pedagogy" and "equity audit," James presented a plan in which adults throughout the Windsor community are called upon to take ownership, and thus bear responsibility, for the academic success of Windsor's youth.

James told school board members and Windsor school administrators that by engaging male students of color, the achievement gap will close, and achievement for all students, regardless of color or gender will improve.

Additionally, James presented a model for educational improvement that requires the utilization of all resources in town. Each year, teachers should take inventory of the professional skills of their students' parents, James said. The school district should also take inventory of professional skills available in the community. Together, James suggested, the skills of local business leaders, organization leaders and parents should be connected to Windsor's schools and utilized to give students an holistic educational experience that speaks to them on a variety of levels: academic, cultural, gender, etc.

James' plan was not well received by all on the board, which voted to hire James and Loyola with a 6-3 vote.

Board member Cristina Santos said much of James' plan has already been implemented in town, namely the involvement of local organizations (Windsor Education Foundation), the implementation of mentoring programs and cultural education that has had a significant impact on achievement at Sage Park Middle School.
Board Minority Leader Paul Panos also expressed his aversion to the idea that James' program could be successful in town, saying the commitment required too much money for something that has not shown concrete evidence of success.

James did, however, receive unwavering support for the highest-ranking education leaders in town. Both Board President Doreen Richardson and Superintendent Jeffrey Villar expressed a dire need for James' services in town, and a dire need for the district to make a drastic change in an attempt to reap the rewards of sustained academic improvement.

"We are number 26. Number 26 from the bottom out of 169 towns," Villar said of Windsor's academic performance in relation to the state's other districts. Despite the programs and initiatives the district has in place, he continued, the conversation about committing to an initiative to address district inequities will eventually come up.

According to Villar, the district's current work will tell administrators and teacher who is doing well under which circumstances and with what teaching techniques. However, some students will still fail to achieve. What James' work accomplishes, Villar said, is explaining why some students are not achieving, and then provides solutions for those causes of disengagement in the classroom.

While acknowledging a great need for the district to address the local achievement gap, board member Leonard Lockhart expressed concern over James' proposal, saying he would not want any parent to think that the district is making efforts to cater to one student over another.

"If we lose one student, that's one too many," he said.

When asked, Villar addressed the sentiment, particularly with respect to the parents of white students who may harbor concern over a new initiative that focuses on the engagement of male students of color.

"One of the key factors, when I talked to Dr. James, is excellence. In fact, that's the target," Villar said. "It's not about (us) making some accommodations just for students in one subgroup, whatever subgroup it might be... Our goal in this district has to be excellence and if we set that goal of excellence, that's going to drive us to this equity conversation anyway... The bench mark is going to be for everybody. We're not giving anybody a break. It's about high expectations so everyone can achieve."

According to Dr. James, the approach will also benefit white students because they are living in a diverse world, and will be heading into increasingly diverse work environments upon graduation.

James' proposal is a three-year plan that would solely focus on Windsor High School.

Villar said funding has not been secured, but grant funding is a possibility. He added that the board would focus on securing funding for the current year because the district deals with budgets on an annual basis. In the future, the board can budget for the costs associated with the Loyola University project.