

March 16, 2015

A special meeting of the Board of Education of the Oak Park and River Forest High School was held on March 16, 2015 in the Board Room and the Second Floor Library of the high school.

**Call to Order**

President Phelan called the meeting to order at 7:36 p.m. A roll call indicated the following members were present: Thomas F. Cofsky, Dr. Steve Gevinson, Dr. Ralph H. Lee, Dr. Jackie Moore, Sharon Patchak Layman, John Phelan and Jeff Weissglass. Also in attendance was Steven T. Isoye, Superintendent; Tod Altenburg, Chief Financial Officer; Michael Carioscio, Chief Information Officer; and Gail Kalmerton, Executive Assistant/Clerk of the Board.

**Closed Session**

At 7:38 Mr. Phelan moved to enter closed session for the purpose of discussing the appointment, employment, compensation, discipline, performance, or dismissal of specific employees of the District or legal counsel for the District, including hearing testimony on a complaint lodged against an employee or against legal counsel for the District to determine its validity. Collective negotiating matters between the District and its employees or their representatives or deliberations concerning salary schedules for one or more classes of employees; seconded by Mr. Cofsky. A roll call vote resulted in all ayes. Motion carried.

At 8:59 p.m. p.m., the Board of Education resumed its open session in the second floor library.

**Visitors**

DLT members; Jason Dennis, Katie O’Keefe, Paul Noble, Jason Edgecombe Jr. OPRFHS Faculty and staff members; Mark Fields, Teresa, Jameel Abdur-Rafia, Toyin Adeyemi, Fred Arkin, Noah Asoria, George Bailey, Octavius Bellamy, Jay Benson and DeVaugn Benson, Joseph Biel, Julie and Ryan Blankenmerier, Jasmyn Bolard, Jack and Joan Callahan, Qiana Carswell, Jennifer Cassell, Patrick Chrisp, Aleta Clardy, Erin Collin, Khardajah Collins, Dana Connell, Sheila Conner, Stephne Crain, Marcus Croom, Michelle Darang Coleman, Julian Dargne, Marguette Davies, Kamora Davis, Marquette Davis, Ben DeBerry, Sara Dixon Spivy, Mark Fields, Elizabeth Freeland, K., Zhane, and Zonika Gahiji, Frank Gahn, Connor Gallogly, Deborah Gorman, Sheila Hardin, LaQuilla Hardman, Akiestra Harrell, Tom Hoover, Gerri Humbert, Shiree Jackson, Stephen Jackson, Jabari Jamison, Joseph JJ, Wyanetta Johnson, Sherrie Johnson, Preston Jones, Gary Kaplan, Frances Kraft, Larry Landfair, Ruth Lazarus, Kyla Lombardo, Susan MaCauley, Mariah Macklin, Hoover Marthaler, Justin Marxwell, Leisa Mathaler, Melanie McQueen, Rich Mertz, Jahmari Moore, Molly Muhlr, Victoria Murphy, Brianna Murphy-Litth, Sarita Norm, Garita Norman, Kori Norman, Katie O’Keefe, Kevin Peppard, Otis Percy, Ellen Pimentel, Kevin Radzinski, Norma Rafia, Terri Rayburn, Mary Kay Reckers, Victoria Scaman, Anna Schaidler, Karen Steward-Nolan, Peter Teresahgan, Gloria Thomas, Peter Thomas, Bekeeta Thomas, Annie Tillery, Mark Trinkka, Jabari Ware, Channel Washington, Daniel Weissglass, Xavier Wilburn, and Raven Woods, Community members; Rebecca Bibbs of the *Oak Leaves*, Michael Romain of the *Wednesday Journal*.

## Public Comments

Hoover Marthaler, resident of 137 Francisco Terrace, Oak Park, fully supported Mr. Rouse and he was that his son had attended the assembly. He applauded OPRFHS for hosting the BLMA (BLMA).

Mary Kay Records, resident of 746 N. Lombard, Oak Park, spoke in support of the continuing Mandarin 1 and 2. Having been enrolled in that program for four years, she had been excellently prepared for her freshman year in college. She touted the importance of having Mandarin not only for her, but for the community and society at large, in regard to work and the ability to know other culture and languages. She asked the Board of Education to consider running the classes based on the value they contributed, rather than class size.

Susan McCaulay, resident of 310 Park Avenue, River Forest, spoke in support of continuing Mandarin 1 and 2. She urged the Board of Education not to eliminate these programs next year. If it does, incoming freshman will switch to another language because they will not want to take the risk of that being able to continue. That is the reason for the low enrollment. Every year there is a crisis as to whether it will run. This time the cancellation came after registration, not before. Other top high schools have robust Chinese programs.

Samain Williams, resident of 7204 Oak Avenue, Oak Park, spoke in support of Mr. Rouse for his bravery in making students feel welcome and for being active in their lives. The BLMA allowed students to share their thoughts. If Whites had been in the room, it would not have been as comfortable for Black participants. If this had been a LGTB or women's club, no problem would have existed. Why is it controversial for Black students to express their opinions?

Steven Jackson, resident of 7204 Oak, River Forest, spoke in support of Mr. Rouse. This community is very diverse with different lifestyles. He was glad for his friends who can speak honestly and openly.

Theresa Ingram, resident of 500 N. Oak Park Avenue, Oak Park, graduated from OPRFHS in 1994, is single a parent of 3, and spoke in support of the BLMA. Diversity is more than race, it is a lifestyle. Her goal is to provide for her children. It is hard to be a black male at OPRFHS. She spoke about one of her sons who made a bad choice, taken the consequences, and changed his behavior. However, she remembered that his changed behavior had not altered the way he had been treated by some.

Tuyin Adeymi, resident of 217 N. Grove, Oak Park and parent of 2 daughters who were thriving at OPRFHS, spoke in support of Mr. Rouse, stating that affinity groups exist in all corporations. Affinity groups are pro-minority groups that have a safe space to talk. Her daughters had a great experience. Students and staff were able to share their daily issues with no hostility. Having come from Nigeria 25 years ago, she noted the importance of having a safe environment in which to talk. While OPRFHS is safe and diverse, children will leave OPRFHS with concerns.

Julian Darla, resident of 401 S. Grove, Oak Park, spoke in support of the BLMA. The Code Black Organization is committed to Black solidarity to make sure all Black students have a fair voice at the school and have a safe zone to share their

experiences in order to gain a better understanding inside and outside of school. The community needs to have more conversation about critical race theory, because students of color feel marginalized. He challenged the Board of Education to acknowledge its own privileges to make OPRFHS better for all students of color.

Jahmari Moore, resident of 820 N. Austin, Oak Park, spoke in support of Mr. Rouse, because it is important for people to be able to talk about their experiences. He felt that the BLMA focused on making changes and people were comfortable.

Marquette Davis, resident of 1428 N. Austin, Oak Park, spoke in support of Mr. Rouse as White people would have felt uncomfortable in the room when Blacks were talking about experiences of racism. All students should be able to hear everyone's stories.

Ben Deberry, resident of 322 S. Cuyler, Oak Park, spoke in support of Mr. Rouse and the organizing of the BLMA. Black students are talked about in terms of statistics, not humans. He was happy to see the number of Blacks in the room. He appreciated the students speaking at this meeting, particularly those from Code Black, about empowering themselves and White privilege. These students live in a society where the consequences they face are different from the white students and they need to have a safe environment. It is not anti-white, but a recognition of different needs.

Xavier Wilburn, resident of 740 Belleforte Avenue, Oak Park, spoke in support of Mr. Rouse, who he respected and who had helped him in his own struggles. In his freshman year, he did not think that Black voices mattered and he was scared. He likened Mr. Rouse to Dr. Martin Luther King for bringing everyone together. He respected him.

John Callahan, resident of 934 Clinton, Oak Park, was saddened that many young people did not feel they could speak in front of their peers or other students. He was saddened that a racial divide had to occur in order to speak about feelings. He could not imagine what it may feel like for those of color. His daughter has a good friend who was incredibly disappointed in this. He conferenced with Mr. Rouse who he felt was a great guy and does great things, but that was a bad decision for the organization. It was divisive, it separated the races. He asked for the Board of Education to imagine what the school could do if there were 5 or 10 people of all races if they all agreed to speak in a free and open forum. He reflected that no one had a problem coming to this meeting. Dr. Martin Luther King said, "Judge a man by his character, not the color of his skin."

Sheila Hardin, resident of 8129 Lake Street, River Forest, noted that the OPRFHS Faculty Senate had followed with interest the concerns raised in the wake of the recent affinity group meeting of African-American students and staff, held here on the afternoon of February 27th, the last day of Black History Month. It supports Principal Rouse's decision to hold such a meeting, as it believes affinity groups are an effective means of achieving a number of the district's objectives in the areas of equity and student support. Affinity groups may take many forms, allowing students the option to meet with peers based on

shared interests, gender, disability, sexual orientation, or, in this case, race. Such groups provide students a uniquely safe place to air concerns, address stereotypes, ask questions, admit to fears or failings, support and challenge each other, and, ultimately, discover the source of their affinity: the common threads in their collective, lived experience. While such forums constitute only one step in a long, challenging process, we applaud Mr. Rouse's efforts in this regard. We believe that by facilitating open and honest reflection, racial affinity groups can only further the district's mission, helping to establish a model of equity and support that unifies the school and truly enables all of our students to achieve their full potential.

Paul Noble, English faculty member, read prepared remarks.

“The essence of the controversy that's haunted the high school the past few weeks is this: some students and staff thought it might be a good idea to talk amongst themselves. In response, a group of students, parents, alumni, community members – and yes, a national army of internet trolls – became outraged that those people were even allowed to talk amongst themselves.

“Others have quibbled over how the meeting was handled. I'm sure we can all agree: there were details that might have been managed differently. But, frankly, I've been at OPRFHS a long time. If you can think of a significant initiative that was rolled out flawlessly, I'd like you to name it, because I can't think of one. What's more, I'm here to tell you that no previous logistical snafu has ignited this kind of firestorm.

“So, this isn't really about logistics. And it's not about affinity groups, per se. If the principal had offered female students an opportunity to discuss sexual harassment and date rape without boys present, would there have been any blowback, much less a furor of this scope and intensity? No. Of course not. Let's not kid ourselves: this has been about race. And this is Oak Park and River Forest. While we are quick to pat ourselves on the back for our shared commitment to "diversity," our understanding of equity is limited. We seem to think equity means equality, and we reduce equality to the notion that everybody must be treated exactly the same. That's not equity. I submit that it might ultimately be most fair and equitable to allow female students to talk amongst themselves about feeling unsafe at school, without males present. And by extension, the same is true for our students who identify as black.

“Why some of us are so unnerved, alienated, even threatened by such a gathering, I can't begin to guess. The fact that the meeting met with resistance from both social conservatives and self-proclaimed liberal allies should tell us white folks something. Not everything is about us. Not everything needs to have our stamp of approval, much less our active involvement. Can we not check our privilege for even one hour?

“In an era of heightened racial turmoil that, for many of my students, begins with Trayvon Martin and ends with Ferguson (or, who are we kidding, won't end with Ferguson) the principal decided to host a meeting of interested black kids to talk amongst themselves. They just needed to talk. Amongst themselves. Openly. Without an audience. Without fear of judgment. I'm frankly ashamed that we

think it's our place to tell them they shouldn't have done that, especially given that Mr. Rouse had planned a full complement of racial affinity group meetings. I personally don't understand why a white affinity group is necessary to make a black affinity group palatable, but Mr. Rouse clearly understands the community better than I do.

“Above all, I'm ashamed that no one at OPRFHS has stood up publicly to defend Principal Rouse against the onslaught of withering, racist venom he's suffered: ugly voice- and emails from near and far. Mr. Rouse will be the first to tell you that he and I have butted heads more often than we've seen eye-to-eye, but I believe he's been horribly aggrieved in all this, and our failure to have his back has been a disgrace. We've hung him out to dry. And that is a deliberate, if unfortunate, choice of words.”

Stephne Crane, resident of 338 S. Euclid, Oak Park, spoke in support of Mr. Rouse for holding a Black affinity group. To hold a meeting to talk about Mr. Rouse is nothing more than representation of the power struggle faced every day. The majority is upset that Mr. Rouse got people together and that says much about how the majority feels.

Connor Gallogly, resident of 130 Francisco Terrance, spoke in support of the continuation of the Mandarin program, as it is important to the high school for students to learn about the culture of China and its language. Effort needs to be made to reach out to middle schools to peak their interest in learning about China.

Justin Maxwell, resident of 938 N. Blvd., Oak Park, spoke in support of Mr. Rouse. He attended the BLMA which was to promote youth confidence and he found this meeting upsetting. The students had talked about the problems they face as teens. No disrespect or exclusion of peer members was meant.

Peter Thomas, resident of 728 S. Scoville, Oak Park and parent of OPRFHS students, spoke in support of Mr. Rouse. Mr. Thomas spoke about an issue of racism with one of his children. He did not understand the controversy. He felt this effort should be not undermined an effort should be made to open the conversations. He hoped this attention did not hinder the action.

Julie Blankemeier, resident of 240 S. Euclid, Oak Park, spoke in support of Mr. Rouse. She was disheartened by the response to the attempt to address this issue that the community has not been able to solve. She contacts Mr. Rouse when decisions are made that are not understood and attested to the fact that he has been a consistently, present leader. He connects with many students in the hallways and Huskie Huddles on Wednesday mornings. He is present to students, respond to parents like me, and fulfils his administrative activities. She asked what they could do to support his efforts.

Joe Biel, resident of 1119 Wisconsin Avenue, Oak Park, spoke in support for continuing the Mandarin program because of its importance in the world. China has a strong economic presence and that is increasing. The study of Mandarin should be encouraged and he hoped that middle schools would get involved.

Katie O'Keefe, resident of 1105 Wisconsin, Oak Park, 35-year resident, graduate of OPRFHS and OPRFHS teacher, was saddened by the comments on the Alumni page by former classmates about how it held the BLMA. When she was a student, she felt good about going to diverse high school, and patted herself on the back for not being an "Archie Bunker". She did not recognize discrimination as a student, but as a teacher she has a different window because of the class she taught. OPRFHS is a place for affinity groups as it makes it more comfortable to speak openly. Students who attended the assembly said it was positive and they were willing to speak with other students.

Karen Stewart-Nolan, resident of 739 N. Hayes, Oak Park, spoke in support of Mr. Rouse. She was heartened to hear the audience's comments. She has tried to educate herself on how to make the world a better place. A White ally knows when to be quiet and listen. Students who were turned away have learned that cultural differences are real and the experiences around this varies tremendously on one's background.

Gary Kaplan, resident of 1026 Woodbine, Oak Park, noted that the school should get a legal opinion on the constitutionality of convening single race meetings during the day on school grounds.

Melody McQueen, resident of 425 S. Harvey, Oak Park, spoke in support of Mr. Rouse. She is the co-president of APPLE and chairperson of the African-American history month in District 97. She also worked to promote cultural difference on Strategic Plan. Fenwick is having a "We are Nigeria" campaign. Objections to allow students a safe place to talk about their feelings is indicative of what students to through. Was it a problem because it affected African-American students or because non-African American students wanted to be part of the assembly? Is it wrong to have an opinion and speak about one's feelings?

Wyannetta Johnson, resident of 929 S. Oak Park Avenue, Oak Park, spoke in strong support of Mr. Rouse and the BLMA.

Patrick Crisp, resident of 300 W. North Avenue, Oak Park, spoke in support of Mr. Rouse who gave everyone the opportunity to speak about their feelings. He felt he should be given an award.

Joy Benion, resident of 1009 S. Cuyler, Oak Park, who has a freshman and senior and cousins who graduated in 1995, 1997, and 2003, spoke in support of Mr. Rouse.

Larry Landfair, resident of 126 N. Cuyler Avenue, Oak Park, and parent, spoke in support of Mr. Rouse.

Elizabeth Freeland, resident of 715 N. Cuyler, Oak Park, spoke in support of the BLMA, as it was important for different groups to have safe places to talk about their situations, their commonalities and what needs to be a bigger group discussion. It is not discriminatory to have such groups. The Black community is having a very different experience and it needs places to speak about that fact.

Jameel Abdur-Rafia, resident of 808 N. Lombard, Oak Park, spoke in support of BLMA. It was disheartening to read to comments in the *Wednesday Journal* and the *Oak Leaves*, as Oak Park prides itself as being a place of diversity and a melting pot. Just because one participates in a breast cancer walk does not mean that person does not support lung cancer efforts. It takes a village to raise a child and the village needs to come together on this.

Victoria Scamen, resident of 519 S. Euclid, Oak Park, spoke in support of the BLMA. She felt they needed to continue and she hoped the Board of Education would support them. Even though she runs after-school programs for the primarily African-American population, she cannot pretend to understand what it is to have Black skin. Oak Park does other things that are unconstitutional, i.e., people are not allowed to put up for sale signs on their properties, etc.

Michelle Darang Coleman, resident of 937 N. Taylor, Oak Park, spoke in support of Mr. Rouse. As a parent of 4 OPRFHS graduates, she felt this experience was about allowing students to share their problems.

Burcy Hines, resident of 1221 Fair Oaks, Oak Park, spoke in support of the BLMA. She suggested that Board of Education members offer some guidelines for the general community and for the White community as it relates to the to the African-American community, in order to prevent anything from occurring that was out of the ordinary. Both Whites and African-Americans are angry and disappointed. She suggested they do an investigation and make rules. Solutions are needed for the community so that the problem can be solved.

George Bailey, resident of 724 S. Clarence, Oak Park, spoke in support of Mr. Rouse. He felt the myth of race needed to be faced. His project is to take a deep dive into looking at race, looking at Whiteness. Courts recently have upheld that the District is bound to respect whatever Black people have to say. The legal system is part of this as well. He did not know if a Black philosophy or Black social history exists at OPRFHS. He asked to do a deep dive.

Sarita Norm, resident of 421 S. Elmwood, Oak Park, spoke in support of Mr. Rouse. Bringing her children from Washington, D.C. to Illinois was a culture shock, however, Oak Park was closer to reality. Her brown children's ability to talk with other brown children is beautiful, because they won't talk to her about happens at school.

Marcus Croom, resident of 916 S. Austin, Oak Park, and school board candidate for District 97, spoke in support of BLMA, referencing HB 1402, "Section 27-20.4 Black History Study states "Every public elementary and high school shall include in its curriculum a unit of instruction studying the events of Black history, including the history of the African slave trade, slaves in America, and the effects of slavery in this country... It is important to play by the law and consider if Mr. Rouse was trying to comply with the law.

Aleta Clardy, resident of 317 Harrison Street, Oak Park, spoke in support of Mr. Rouse. She encouraged the Board of Education to listen to the comments that event and welcomed the opportunity for other affinity groups and having a

columniation as the community is in need of that. What could be lost? What could be gained?

Gloria Thomas, parent of an OPRFHS student, spoke in support of Mr. Rouse and the BLMA. She asked for fairness for all students.

Kyla Lombardo, resident of 92 Linden Avenue, Oak Park, spoke in support of BLMA. She hoped for community support of organized meetings and for support from the Board of Education.

**Black Lives Matter  
Assembly**

The subject of the BLMA (BLMA) was put on the agenda so that the Board of Education could discuss the lack of communication about it in advance of the meeting; it was not about Principal Rouse or whether affinity groups were good. An uproar occurred in the community; no Board of Education members commented on the various sites where comments were posted. Mr. Phelan believed the intent to hold the BLMA was good. Nothing bad came of it with the exception of the lack of process that led up to it. It is very important to understand who the friends are in order to be able to discuss issues of education in this community. The members of the Board of Education have been as supportive as they know how to be about issues of equity and race in a diverse community in which they wanted to raise their children. This is an issue of process and it could have been foreseen as controversial. The Board of Education is trying to build trust in the administration and it is trying to stop micromanaging. It is to hear the issues of policy, finance, and to oversee the public trust in the educational institution. If the Board of Education does not know who wants to work with it to make things better and the process is lost, it becomes chaotic and difficult to manage. If this were brought beforehand, discussion could have occurred as to how to do it and follow the law and rules. The 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment provides equal protection. In 1896, it said that separate but equal was OK. In 1954 in Brown vs. the Board of Education, that same amendment was determined to be that separate was not OK. At a given point in time when something is well intended, people would like to look the other way, as this was about well-intentioned adults helping students. From him, it is a dangerous precedent to set. If separation is allowed, the court then cannot judge what is ok or is not ok.

Mr. Phelan continued that Fenwick is not bound by the Constitution. He found it problematic that the Board of Education did not hear in advance about something controversial. If it had, it could have moved forward with the best ideas that would have created the best outcomes in a sustainable way. The Board of Education is responsible for the school. While Oak Park, Illinois is not Ferguson, Missouri, it needs to follow its own policies and law. If there is a desire to debate the policies and laws, then they must be changed. While the intent and outcome was good, the failure of process is a problem and needs to be addressed and talked about as a policy matter.

Dr. Moore, felt that the students' voice has been ignored, hampered, and stifled. Through the controversy of legalities, she wondered what happened to the students who were part of the process and why they were part of it. She did not believe the students should be made to feel that speaking truthfully was wrong. This trumps Oak Park being diverse. This was necessary. Acknowledging the problems with

communications and process, she, as a Board of Education member and a parent, did not believe this should be stopped. Hurts have to be addressed and children need the space for to do that. Equity and equality are different. Equity needs to be attained. Parents, students and community members attended a discipline retreat that was held in December. The next step is to have a student-led discussion. While students will be guided, they will decide on what issues to discuss. The Board of Education is talking about the process. She encouraged people to look at the comments on the OPRFHS parents' Facebook page, which were balanced, civil, and respectful and showed a love for the children. The negative comments received were mostly from outside of the community. This is the beginning of continuing to nurture all of the students as a part of the school.

Dr. Lee felt that few communities in this country would have dared to have this public discussion. While he doesn't like some things about OPRFHS, he likes things less almost everywhere else. He was aware of the assembly a week and a half before it happened, even before the Superintendent did. Having attended black-only groups for the last 8 years, i.e., the Black faculty and staff association that plans the Black Professional Day, which white students occasionally attend, and having no one complained, a red flag was not raised for him. The fact that White students were turned away was an indication that communication was lacking. He did not buy a t-shirt, but he attended and participated in the assembly. He had not known that he would be making speech. He did conclude that something positive had taken place as Black students debated about the kinds of behavior they exhibited in the school. He did not believe that would have occurred if students of any other color had attended. One student having moved from Naperville felt lucky to be here at OPRFHS because he/she had someone with whom to talk. This assembly was not for all Black students because not all had a need for it. If students feel a need, then why should the school not sponsor it? This was described by a number of people as being bad because Blacks and Whites were kept separate and that is by definition racial segregation and that is bad and illegal. Because he may know more intimately about segregation, he looked at the differences between his experiences and those of whom were turned away. This assembly lasted 1 ½ days. His experience was from 1943 to 1953 in Alabama and in Georgia for an additional 4 years. He felt deprivation in some ways. A great deal more was expected of him by those Black teachers than of the average Black student in this high school. He taught at OPRFHS for 16 years and had been on the Board of Education for 8 years. In Alabama, they were told that separation was for the benefit of the Black and the White students. At OPRFHS, it was for the benefit of the students who wanted it. They were told it was for their own good. The Blacks, however, believed that it was to protect the Whites from their presence. Here, it was to benefit students who might find a way to better deal with the kind of isolation and estrangement that they felt or said they felt. It was a worthwhile benefit. Because he is not a lawyer, he could not speak to the legality, but what took place at OPRFHS was not what he had experienced. The damage was much different. To him, it was an example of what happens when one uses a headliner of two words to describe a complex situation. Unfortunately, it seems as though the society is moving forward on the basis of snippets and headlines, rather than trying to understand the complexity of what is involved.

Mr. Cofsky thanked everyone for speaking, especially the students. He believed the intent was just. The voices of all students are needed and the school must find a way to do that. He agreed with Dr. Moore's points. The school needs to continue to make sure communication continues. Having the courage to speak was positive. In terms of process, execution and communication, it is problematic because the Board of Education is responsible for policy. It is a key duty. If policy challenges exist, then the Board of Education's focus should be on executing or modifying the policy. From reading all of the communications and hearing the voices here, he learned of the pain and how much more the nation has to do. He was encouraged that this community is more civil and further along in the nation. He is proud to serve and live in this community.

Dr. Gevinson agreed with all of the comments from Board of Education members and that of many who spoke at the podium. He felt it was encouraging, positive and well intentioned. Affinity groups are a good idea and having a place to speak frankly and safely is important, particularly those conversations relating to race. The assembly was a genuine effort to meet or address that need. He read from the following statement:

“Clearly, many African-American students have a strong felt need to speak frankly and safely about their experiences and to listen to others, particularly relating to race and particularly at OPRF – and this assembly was a genuine effort to address that need. Much heartfelt and thoughtful support for students and Mr. Rouse was received from inside the school and in the community. There were reports of much powerful voicing of concerns by students and communicating with each other at the assembly – that the assembly was successful in accomplishing its central purposes. There were some negative and disappointing things about the responses to the assembly. It was really demoralizing to read the despicable racist comments in some of the letters and comments and disappointing that the reactions have been so polarized and that effective dialog has been difficult. I'm not black and clearly don't know from experience what it feels like to be black, but I think I understand a great deal about the legacy of hundreds of years of slavery and Jim Crow, and I'm very supportive of the concept of affinity group interaction.

“As an English teacher, I have taught many great and near-great African American writers. I made a list of some of them: Toni Morrison, Ralph Ellison, Zora Neale Hurston, James Baldwin, Lorraine Hansberry, Richard Wright, Maya Angelou, August Wilson, Gwendolyn Brooks, Frederick Douglas, Alice Walker, Langston Hughes, Martin Luther King, and Robert Hayden.

“I have been involved in leading, conceiving, and/or participating in many effective programs dealing with diversity issues here: I co-directed with Sandy Price – the late Sandy Price – in about 1990 the first all-staff effort in diversity training, implementing the ADL's “A World of Difference” program; sponsored SOAR (Students Organized Against Racism), a group started by a black student, Lillian Marks, and a white student, Rob Baren, after an ugly incident involving racist notes being placed in black students' lockers; sat on two or three African-American committees, including the one that conceived and did the essential implementation work for the 4 for 100 program; helped conceive and implement the Collaborative Teaching Model, which created cohorts among Transitions

students with common teachers of English, Math, and either History or Science; helped conceive and implement the College Prep Scholar program, which moved freshmen from Transitions to College Prep English by providing an extra period of support with their English teacher (modeled after the Project Scholar program); helped conceive and create, and then participated in the Four-District Network of the Consortium for Educational Change, involving the Evanston elementary and high school districts, District 97, and District 200 in 3 full-day per year sessions through most of the 1990s sharing ideas and experiences on diversity, consisting of the 4 superintendents, 4 faculty association presidents, and a racially mixed group of other teachers and administrators and including a four-district Institute Day, which we hosted – this network was the forerunner of the Minority Student Achievement Network (MSAN), founded by Allan Alson, our strategic plan facilitator; and, last thing I'll mention, was instrumental in bringing Peter Kahn back to OPRF in his newly conceived position, as full-time Spoken Word Poetry Coordinator/Black Literature Facilitator (or whatever his title is), the only full-time position of its kind in the nation and the world.

“What I'm saying is that I have devoted a good deal of energy over the years to a great variety of efforts, most quite successful, to improve equity in our school.

“Despite all of that, I find myself troubled by a number of aspects of the BLMA – from planning, logistical, and communications problems to violation of Board policy to violation of federal and state civil rights law to a serious conception problem, a problem with the idea of the assembly itself or the lack of a clear idea. Less problems included poor planning, logistics, and communications. In my time at OPRF, I really can't remember anything approaching this level of screw-up on something so serious. There are policy and legal problems. This violated Board of Education policy violates Board of Education Policy 7:10, Equal Educational Opportunity, surely one of the fundamental educational policies in the policy book and basic federal and state civil rights law. The larger problem was that it was unnecessary and ill-conceived. For several reasons Dr. Gevinson felt the idea of race-exclusive or segregated assemblies was a bad idea because they are unnecessary. OPRFHS already has affinity groups in the school. The one for black students goes back about 25 years – Blacks Organized for Student Support or BOSS. It also has ASPIRA for Latino students and A Place for All for LGBT students. More than one version of a women's group over the years has existed. There could be more. BOSS could easily have organized such a forum after school, with or without the principal. OPRFHS also has a history of holding forums on race that have been inclusive and successful. He noted that was one held after the Rodney King verdict in 1992. While he did not remember the details that led up to the forum, it involved black students, in particular, who were very upset by the verdict and were planning a march to Village Hall to protest the verdict. The superintendent at the time, organized the forum to give students and staff an opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings, to seize the moment and process it in an educationally effective way. He spoke very effectively, and another staff member who spoke quite movingly was a chemistry teacher, Dr. Lee. He remembered feeling afterward that this was what a school should do on such an occasion. Afterwards, a group of students marched to Village Hall.

Dr. Gevinson continued that the reason it was not only unnecessary but also ill-conceived is the basic concept on which civil rights law is based – the principal of non-discrimination; equal protection in education should not be violated. The best thought experiment he could suggest was to imagine the proposed all-white assembly. He believed the expressions of support for the principal were heartfelt. He saw it as a rally to support students who have a need and expression of support to protect the principle, which is positive. He read the letters to the Board of Education; racist comments are disgusting and he was disappointed that the dialogue tended to be polarized.

Ms. Patchak-Layman was proud of the students and families who wanted to have this conversation. She was surprised that this activity, which fits in with so many of the things the District has been doing with conversations about race, mushroomed as such a controversy. She thought the difference between this was that it was voluntary; students made a choice based on their needs. While discussion occur about social emotional learning and developing student-staff relationships, often there is no follow through with that. While she was sorry that a better job of communication had not occurred, she was happy the assembly had happened. For those who live in Oak Park, it is depressing that more conversations like this have not happened. She hoped this conversation did not stop as there was faculty and student momentum to continue with it. White people sometimes need to listen. Sometimes people need to be together to talk, reflect and have a conversation without having someone different in the room. She hoped the Board of Education can put together a support statement to say how it wants to go forward to make it an importance experience. Having everyone talk about it is a good first step, more talking is needed and the school needs to find a place for everyone.

Mr. Weissglass appreciate the heartfelt sharing of everyone. The Board of Education members had consistent themes and he shared much of what had been said. He supports affinity history. He has a history of participating in affinity groups and knows how beneficial they can be. He agreed with Ms. Patchak-Layman that the assembly was consistent to the District efforts and he appreciates and supports those efforts. Shortcomings occurred in the way it was designed and communicated and the District needs to understand how to do it better in the future. While this is hard and mistakes are made, the goal will be to keep the work going and to do it well. A real legal question exists. While he agreed with Dr. Lee's view that the law was not designed to address this effort, Mr. Phelan's comments about the way in which the 14th amendment is structured, leads to serious questions about having affinity groups in public institutions. This is a community with a 45- to 50-year history of working on diversity issues, beginning in 1968 with the passage of the Fair Housing Act. This community is well-known and well-respected for the work it did on that in the 1970's and 1980's. The community's self-understanding and image is deeply embedded in being a welcoming and diverse community. He has a tremendous respect for people promoting the critical race theory and the 50-year history in this town and he did not believe they were incompatible. He was committed to helping students have conversations about affinity groups in the proper way.

Dr. Isoye made the following statement, "I would like to share a few words. I'd like to thank everybody that's here tonight and certainly our students for getting

up to the microphone and speaking—speaking their voice, speaking what they feel. I'll let you know that over the past couple of weeks there are multiple perspectives on this particular assembly. I received emails, but I also was forwarded a lot of emails as people wanted to make sure that I saw what was being said and what was out there. I'm not a fan of reading comments, but I will tell...so and board members know, I typically stay away from comments because oftentimes you don't know where people are coming from. They're not identified. But I did read the comments as this was going, to get a sense of what was happening.

“It was local for a while, and then it became national. And at that particular point in time I was trying to decipher what's the national voice and what's the local voice. Because after all the important voice for us is our communities of Oak Park and River Forest. So it's been an interesting time for me to be able to see, read the words. Oftentimes shocked by what I was reading. But oftentimes in ways pleased because of the multiple perspectives that were out there. Now, it is true that I may not have been consulted on this, and I wasn't in the deep planning of this. But one thing that was certain is that Mr. Rouse asked me...he said, “I want you to be there.” So an important piece for me was to put it on my calendar and make sure I was there. And probably...I don't know; I didn't examine the room very closely, I sat in the front row where I normally sit, near the front. And I watched the panel and I listened to the voices. I'm going to assume that I may have been the only person in the room that does not identify as Black. And I listened carefully, and I watched how he ran the assembly and where he was going with this. And it was clear to me that he was, that Mr. Rouse was working to build a safe space for our Black students and our adults. I'm not really hearing the word “adults,” but we had faculty and staff there.

“And I watched them on the stage, and I saw their facial expressions, and I saw how they shared. And it was a safe space for them. At the time, not knowing the depth that the conversation would take, I will say I did understand his intent by being there. It was important and positive for all the students that were there. And I'll go back to the students. One of the students at the end asked me, he said, “Well, what did you think? Superintendent, what did you think?” I said, “It was very positive. It was interesting to hear the perspectives of the students and the adults.” We talked a little bit further, and he, the student said to me that he didn't think I would have heard everything, because he felt that some of the students in a mixed group would not have been feeling free to express some of the words that I heard in the room.

“Let's face it. Oak Park and River Forest High School does have a difference in the experience for many of our students based on race. You know, in the district, we generate reports, many of them coming through Mr. Rouse's office, on achievement, on student participation with extra-curriculars, and on discipline. And our story in the district, through all the reports that come to us at least once or sometimes two times a year...and I believe that I can, and maybe we can, easily forget that the students live this on a daily basis and have their own honest story. This story is not always willingly given to us. Yet we need to hear it. And we need to hear their voice. I believe Mr. Rouse sees all this on a daily basis and has now reminded us about the inequities.

“So as we move forward, yes, I do expect that we will, we will have to examine the process of how to form and operationalize affinity groups, forums, and other research-based opportunities for discussions. I do currently fear that affinity groups or groups in general may have received a bad name. And so I do believe that we must examine the implementation and communication that goes behind all this.

“It is true our board and the administration has been working on trust and building relationships. And one of the things we do here at the school is that we focus on a state survey of the five essentials that’s out there. And I’ll tell you, we often look at the relationship from that survey between adults. There’s no doubt we have to get better with the student perspective. And that means providing a space for our student voices to be heard and not have them feel like they need to hold back. Discussions about race can be—and I know, because I’ve been in them in the district—can be very raw. And they’re shown to be raw. We see that. They need to be authentic though. And, understandably, they are difficult for both the speaker and the listener. I also expect because of that, as we move forward, it will not be accepted by all. That. Is. Reality.

“I appreciate the communities of Oak Park and River Forest. One, the residents do share their thoughts, and they’re not necessarily shy. And people have shared their frustration and anger for the forum—OR their excitement and hope about Mr. Rouse as he was opening channels for expression. But overall I’m encouraged because through all of those messages there is a dissatisfaction with the status quo. We’re challenged by that. And this district has some real challenging work ahead of us. So I know that the future conversations, regardless of how we do any type of group, I expect it will be raw and emotional. But maybe that’s what we need in order to continue these discussions.”

At 11:51, the Board of Education recessed its meeting to move back to the Board Room.

**Pool Site Update**

Preliminary, informal and amicable discussions with the Village of Oak Park have occurred regarding relocating a sport off campus to the Village’s parking lot. This location could result in cost savings for the District and the Village, and could attract people to Village Hall for things other than paying tickets. A likely scenario would be to move the tennis program, which could be a decision independent of the pool site. The Village board will discuss putting underground parking under its parking lot and placing up to 10 tennis courts on top. This location is relatively close to the school and it would be a collaborative effort with the Village.

**District Registration Fees**

This item was tabled until the March 26, 2015 meeting.

**Comcast internet**

Mr. Phelan moved to approve the contract with Comcast; seconded by Dr. Lee. A roll call vote resulted in all ayes. Motion carried.

Need to apply for e-rate funding. Internet service provider and contract in place before applying for e-rate and will get \$15,400.

**Closed Session**

At 12:06 p.m., the Board of Education recessed its open session to resume closed session.

At 12:34, the Board of Education resumed open session.

**Student Discipline**

Mr. Phelan moved to expel Student EXP 03-16-15-02, but to hold the expulsion in abeyance pending successful completion at an appropriate alternative educational setting through the end of fall semester of 2015. OPRFHS staff will work with the alternative setting staff to provide necessary and recommended drug counseling and other necessary services. The student will have a review in December 2015 with consideration for a change in placement for the start of the spring semester of the 2015-2016 school year; seconded by Dr. Lee. A roll call vote resulted in six ayes and one nay. Ms. Patchak-Layman voted nay. Motion carried.

John Phelan  
President

Jackie Moore  
Secretary

Submitted by Gail Kalmerton  
Clerk of the Board