

Daniel Boone forum airs grievances on racial slurs

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Posted: 03/29/12 11:51 am
Updated: 03/29/12 11:33 pm

BIRDSBORO — Members of the Daniel Boone Area School District community met together in an Open Community Forum Wednesday to air grievances, seek answers and continue to move forward from the Feb. 29 incident of racial slurs written on a mirror in a boys bathroom at the high school.



The forum's panel included district Superintendent Gary L. Otto, high school Principal William McIlmoyle, assistant principals G. Dane Miller and Phil Repko, two state police troopers, and representatives from the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights, Office for Safe & Drug Free Schools, and the state Human Relations Commission.

State Trooper Daniel Bane declined to provide details of the ongoing investigation into the Feb. 29 incident but said police are fully investigating everything to "get it right."

"We didn't just walk away from this," said Bane. "It's not a list of isolated events but an ongoing process and it will take time. We need to engage the community so this happens less and less in this area."

Otto said three students were given out-of-school suspensions on Feb. 29 and referred to alternative education placements.

Panel members said they are committed to helping the district's community move forward and said the community needs to continue to work together toward a better future.

The audience of 75 to 100 residents spoke for two hours of wanting to move forward but also of their recent frustrations with the district, including the prevention of some people speaking at the March 26 school board meeting.

Union Township resident Perry Templin said the abrupt adjournment of the March 26 school board meeting increased frustrations instead of helping to resolve the recent emotional issues.

One person who wanted to speak Monday night was Marian Worthington of Douglassville.

"We didn't get that respect at the school board meeting Monday night," said Worthington, adding, "My child was one of those implicated in this issue."

Martin Kearney, from the state's Human Relations Commission, said education is key to everyone's best future and that includes feeling safe and respected in school.

"Bullying can stop someone from feeling safe and secure and respected," said Kearney, adding that diversity should not be a force of division but of strength.

He presented Otto with a stack of posters that say, "It's okay to be different."

Michelle Nutter, program manager of Safe and Supportive Schools, said county and state demographics have changed dramatically the last 10 years, which has resulted in different cultures moving into Berks County and the Daniel Boone School District.

She said if education and acceptance of people of different cultures doesn't occur at home and in the schools, misconceptions will lead to bigotry and division.

“There are icebergs in schools all across the nation,” said Nutter. “Kids don’t want to tell teachers that something is going on until it boils over. We have incidents that popped above the water and we can now bring resources to create a safe and respectful climate for all students and then we need to maintain that.”

“The true mark of an educated person is the ability to get along with others,” said Nutter. “This is the number one reason for job firings. We need to help young people gain these skills -- to treat everyone with respect and dignity.”

Otto said he and Miller had created that day an ad-hoc committee on diversity, “to create an open conversation to help the community -- with representatives of the different groups that need to be on that.”

The committee will be a kindergarten through twelfth grade initiative on what the district needs to “infuse in students,” said Otto, adding that one of its first tasks will be long-term communication with parents.

He has designated the district’s May 25 in-service day as a day of cultural diversity and sensitivity training for all staff.

A complaint form has also been added to the district’s website for reporting any incident of racism or bullying.

Otto said the district’s anti-discrimination policy will be posted in every classroom and in prominent locations throughout the school district.

He said security checks that include backpack searches, the use of wand metal detectors, and students’ use of clear and mesh backpacks will likely continue for the rest of the school year.

“We will not trump safety for convenience,” said Otto. “This event happened two days after three students were killed in Ohio. We will not tolerate any nonsense with threats and hopefully being educated will help students to change the way they behave. Permanent metal detectors may be installed. I know it isn’t fun, but it isn’t changing because Algebra 2 doesn’t matter if you don’t feel safe or if you’re afraid someone is going to call you a name.”

“Know what your kids are doing on Facebook,” said Otto to parents. “There is so much bullying, hate, criticism and to some degree it’s deplorable. If we’re going to address (this entire issue), we need to include what’s happening on Facebook. We can’t suspend because of what’s on Facebook. That’s First Amendment rights. We read it but we can’t discipline it.”

Newstell Marable, of Douglass (Berks) Township, who is president of the Pottstown NAACP, said he started Boyertown’s Diversity Committee of “No Place for Hate.”

He said the NAACP is also willing to work with the district to “make a difference.”

Tenth grader Taylor DiLanzo was one of the last to speak to the panel but thanked the district for helping her to feel safe at school.

“It’s disgusting and it’s sad that students haven’t had much to say,” said Taylor, who said she is friends with one of the students referred for alternative education placement. “Bullying and harassment and racism are serious. For myself and others it’s hard to do well with your education, and hard to focus on other things.”