

Politico: School integration training targets 'root causes'

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ALBANY — It was mid-afternoon, and superintendents and principals from nearly two dozen school districts statewide had abandoned their tables of stress balls and coffee cups provided by the state Education Department. They huddled around posters of trees that were supposed to represent segregation rising to the forefront of New York's education conversations.

The officials, gathered last Thursday and Friday for the second of four sessions in SED's efforts to guide integration in struggling districts, had spent the previous two months refining their problem statements — the trees' trunks — and were now pinning dozens of neon sticky notes scrawled with "root causes" to the lower halves of the posters.

Don't just say poverty, the moderator, CUNY's Asian American/Asian Research Institute's executive director Joyce Moy told them. Think deeper than that. The notes reflected those thoughts: "Myth of what constitutes a good school." "Inequity of funding." "Previous reputations." "Lack of community involvement." "Inequitable distribution of political power." "Number of suspensions." "Type of suspensions." "Too many charter schools." "Too many small schools." "Implicit bias." "Zoning." "Trust." "Trauma."

As the debates about integrating New York's City's public schools take center stage, the state is paying school districts from Rochester to the Upper West Side to send their officials to training for how to effectively use integration funding.

The sessions are the first of their kind for SED, said Angelica Infante, the department's deputy commissioner for P-12 instructional support. But the underlying Socioeconomic Integration Pilot Program grant program was launched in December, 2014, shortly after [one measure](#) affirmed New York schools as perhaps the most racially and socioeconomically segregated school system in the nation.

The department found that with limited accountability and without specific guidelines, the districts that received three-year grants of [up to \\$1.25 million in 2014](#) struggled to craft effective plans, Infante said. And without training teachers and engaging the communities, integration efforts do little more than create hostile environments for children, she added.

This year, [23 districts](#) received grants of between \$50,000 to \$70,000 to send leadership teams — which Infante said must include officials, such as superintendents, who can actually create change — to the training sessions. The districts were eligible because they were identified as Title I Focus districts — with poor progress or graduation rates among specific demographics, at least one Priority or Focus School, a district poverty rate of at least 50 percent and a high ranking in state segregation metrics.

After the sessions are completed in October, participants will be able to apply for additional funds to put their plans into action.

At the first session in April, SED provided the districts with data breakdowns regarding race, ethnicity, special education, ELL students, free and reduced lunch and other factors, and began to teach them how to pinpoint their unique issues. They were then told to go home, engage their communities, collect additional data and revise their problem statements.

"Where does this get perfected? How are you going to do it? Community feedback," Brian Gurski, a special projects consultant with CUNY's Asian American/Asian Research Institute, told the participants. "If we don't do this right, we can build a fantastic rocket ship, but it's not going to make it to the moon."

Local engagement is more than brainstorming ideas and cobbling together a plan, said Halley Potter, a senior fellow at the Century Foundation, which helped to structure the sessions alongside SED, CUNY and other groups such as Columbia University Center for Public Research and Leadership and Center for Education Equity. The districts need to know what members of the community are thinking in order to anticipate animosity.

"When they're pushing people outside of their comfort zone, they need to be making a really clear statement of the visions for why we're making this change," Potter said.

For the Buffalo Public School District, that engagement included input from about 40 students in 11th and 12th grades from every high school — both high and low performing — across the district, said Tonja Williams, an assistant superintendent in Buffalo. Williams said the students engaged because they were concerned for younger students and siblings.

"They shared with me that the reason this work was so important to them that day was because they didn't want others to experience what they had experienced," Williams said. "They went even deeper than we had when we began to talk about segregation."

Williams said the trainings allow a space for what time-strapped school leaders can rarely do: sort through the hows and whys of the consequences of segregation they see playing out every day. Williams also said networking with other districts is a relief, noting a sense of camaraderie after discussions with officials from Nassau County's Westbury Union Free School District.

"We're large, they're small, they're wealthy, we're not," she said. "It was really enlightening for our team to hear that they're struggling with many of the same issues that we're struggling with. So it reinforced something: We often think it's just a big urban school district issue, but it's not, it's everywhere."

The groups returned last week to get feedback from one another, some of which was unfiltered.

"Tension! I want you to write 'tension!'" one participant shouted when her peer hesitated to describe, on a pink Post-It, the climate in his district.

Some district representatives declined to comment on their experiences with the training. They were told the sessions would be a confidential space to hash out dynamics that for some groups — such as East Ramapo Central School District and District 3 in New York City — includes divides that have gained statewide and national attention. More than half of the participating districts are from New York City.

SED is also aiming for cross-agency coordination. A representative from NYS Homes and Community Renewal, Nadya Salcedo, was in attendance throughout the two-day session. Salcedo said the agency encourages school integration by incentivizing housing development in high-opportunity areas. The goal is creating partnerships for implementing the districts' eventual plans.

"The social science is there that says if students are in diverse communities with high-opportunity neighborhoods and schools, they perform better," she said.

SED says each step must be deliberate, Infante said, to avoid unintended consequences, such as a mass departure from the district's schools by a single demographic.

The conversations require strategic protocol and strategy, said James Brown, field support liaison for south Queens. And, Brown added, district leaders need to be aware of the fact that there might not be immediate closure to the conversations. They require follow-up, in some cases for years.

"It's saying listen, this segregation in New York State has been around for decades and it's not going to change unless we actually put together substantial plans — because if it was easy we would have changed it already," he said.

The officials are now tasked with drafting theories of action and planning for community pushback that might arise. They will reconvene in August.

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