

Teach the community well

Partnerships with schools keep them safe

By ERIC J. COOPER

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Fifty years ago the doctrine of separate but equal was rejected by the highest court in our land. Why then should the concept of two high schools resurface in Albany five decades after Brown vs. Board of Education?

The answer appears to be safety, not equity in education. The Oct. 4 article "Albany schools get lesson in concern" included comments made at a school board forum that would seem to project that an uptown school is perceived as safer than a downtown school.

We all know that uptown and downtown are code words for different segments of our community. These code words will do little to enhance student safety, but will go a long way toward creating two worlds of learning, and will increase social stratification.

One of my colleagues at the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education is a former police officer and an educator as well. He has extensive experience in dealing with safety and the educational environment. He has shared his thoughts with Albany's highly respected police chief, James Tuffey, hoping to support ongoing planning and to generate additional ideas for student safety.

Schools are the windows of our community. Safe communities breed safe schools. However, as witnessed throughout the nation, even the safest of schools is not safe when outside forces intervene.

Although less than an estimated 1 percent of violence in America happens in our schools, local factors that can influence school safety are the willingness of the community to identify, accept and process the problems that are manifested in the schools. Tensions and crime that happen outside of the school walls can be reflected in a school building. All of the metal detectors and scanners in the world will not stop school violence.

Yet there are measures that the district's safe schools director and the police chief know can help; more than likely, both are working toward support of Superintendent Eva Joseph's implementation of new measures ranging from building perimeter controls to expanding dialogue among students. Improving learning and teaching to engage students in high-intellectual performance skills will empower students to begin to solve problems among themselves.

Smart schools are safe schools. Educators who embrace the students' culture and family circumstances, are best able to establish effective school communities when all youth feel they are respected and valued.

Establishing two high schools may well generate a learning environment that may not be based on safety but rather fear. If we fear our students, and work to separate them based on a perceived uptown-downtown socio-economic-cultural divide, then how do we partner, and create with them, a productive and effective learning environment?

The cure to safety is an aware and involved school community. Teachers are hardworking, respectful and caring for the students they serve. More than not, they are trusted by the students and parents, and as such, have a unique opportunity to engage residents and youth in sustained conversations and activities that mitigate against violence.

On a daily basis, Albany public school educators, led by Superintendent Joseph, engage with parents, students and stakeholders who care about the issues which can lead to safe, secure and exciting places to learn.

As most in the Albany community recognize, it does take the entire community to have safe schools. And as has been suggested in the Times Union coverage, a commitment to community partnerships that improve learning for all students is what is required.

Though the use of some mechanical devices and establishing two separate schools for safety may sound initially like sound ideas, clearly all of Albany's citizens, as well as all Americans must start thinking about the human components that are needed to make every resident a member of a safe community of healing and learning.

Eric J. Cooper is president of the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education. The alliance is collaborating with the Albany City School District to improve learning, teaching and student achievement.

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