KEEPING PACE

the school's efforts in recent years have met limited success. That's a thing we need to work on. "

It's just different," she said. "I'm off the bus, I'm in the breezeway now, so I have to do kind of a face-switch. Some things stay the same, but you lose a lot of your identity when you step off that bus."

"I wouldn't say that I was surprised, but I was definitely disappointed," senior Bennett Walker, a student facilitator for South's Courageous Conversations on Race, said of the report. "I think that these results sort of show where our racial climate is at at South. If you're a student of color, it's easy to feel sort of isolated in this community, and I think that's a thing we need to work on."

Principal Joel Stembridge agreed, acknowledging that they felt connected to their school. Among black students' responses, guidance counselor Amani Allen said. "It's just different, " she said. "I'm off the bus, I'm in the parking lot, senior Khyla Turner prepares to adjust her body language and word choice. For the next eight hours, she will assume her second identity: the "Newton South Khyla." The stark contrast between her home and school environments, she said, necessitates this change of face.

"Outside of school, in the real world, kids don't feel like their country or nation accepts them," she said. "Then they come to school and they feel like it's more of that."

"The issue of how students of color are connected to our school is not new," he said. "It's one we've been thinking about and working on. And to have these numbers go in the exact opposite direction that we want them to go is concerning."

"We thank the voters in Newton for your trust in me, and I pledge to justify that trust by thinking big within our means, by planning the work and working the plan and by standing up for Newton's core principles of respect, diversity and acceptance," she said. "And I promise I will never stop listening, and regardless of where you live, your voice will count at City Hall."

Fulcher elected Newton's first female mayor

By Sophie Lu & Jennifer Wang
St. News Editor, News Contributor

Ruthanne Fuller was elected Newton's first female mayor on Nov. 7, defeating City Council Chair Scott Lennon by 340 votes.

Upon confirmation of the victory, Fuller addressed a crowd of supporters at her election party, encouraging them to look toward the future.

"We thank the voters in Newton for your trust in me, and I pledge to justify that trust by thinking big within our means, by planning the work and working the plan and by standing up for Newton's core principles of respect, diversity and acceptance," she said. "And I promise I will never stop listening, and regardless of where you live, your voice will count at City Hall."

Out of Newton's 56,000 registered voters, only about 24,500 cast ballots in the mayoral election. Former mayoral candidate Eli Katzoff said this low turnout could have been the difference in a closely-contested race.
Survey indicates alienation of black students

When I do try to associate with white or Asian people, there's really no connection. ... I don't think they're comfortable interacting with me.

Salim Gomez class of 2019

According to Stembridge, increased faculty diversity has been a major goal since he came to South, although a lack of teachers of color seeing work in the suburb has hired very difficult. A task force comprised of administrators and teachers from both North and South, he said, will also continue to investigate implications and reasons behind black students’ falling sense of connectedness to their high schools.

For Gomez, however, reversal of this trend may not be likely.

“It needs to come from the kids,” he said. “They can get all these messages and ideas from the adults and superiors, but it's up to them to take in the message and interpret it into their own experience.”

White students’ tendency to question African American students for spending time together in school presents a unique obstacle for black students, Lassar, a Courageous Conversations on Race student facilitator, said.

“It's a self-perpetuating cycle in a lot of ways,” she said. “Black students feel unwelcome, are not included, not encouraged, and then they seek comfort from people who have similar experiences as them, and then they get called out on it. I just don’t think that you see that same pattern with other minority groups.”

The cycle must start with student action.

This is where we’re going to be for the next four years,” she said. “Try and make it an environment that everybody wants to be in and not just a place that’s good for you. You have to realize that there are other people around you and that you can’t be selfish. ... Bettering yourself, making yourself a more open person — it makes the school community a better place.”

Additional reporting by Michelle Cheng and Carina Ramos

RACE, from 1

According to Stembridge, however, these national issues cannot excuse the district’s poor performance.

“The question doesn’t say ‘do I feel a part of my country’; it says ‘do I feel a part of my school’,” he said. “I would prefer we not explain it away too much, and instead, I really believe that the next step is to invite students who have answered this survey to come and talk to those who are not responding to talk about the experiences and share why they say they’re not feeling part of the school.”

The 2016 election has caused an increase in racially insensitive behavior among white Newton students, METCO counselor and African American literature teacher Katani Sumner said. The survey coincided with an incident in which a group of students drove through a Newton North parking lot with a Confederate flag.

During the spring of 2017, Allen said, displays of hate took center stage at South as well, however, a racist comment at Multicultural Day and a racial slur directed toward a black student by a white student. In the locker rooms, students of color face premature accusations of theft when an item goes missing, Turner said, and white students regularly use the N word to address black students.

Junior football player Salim Gomez, who identifies as black and Latino, said he has experienced acts of racism on the field, including from his own teammates during practice. In general, he added, making connections with students of majority races has been difficult.

“When I do try to associate with white or Asian people, there’s really no connection because it can either be the things we talk about are different or the way we talk is different because it can either be the things we talk about are different or the way we talk is different because it can either be the things we talk about are different or the way we talk is different,” he said. “I don’t think they’re comfortable interacting with me.”

These issues pose a unique burden for students of color in the classroom, Turner said. Microaggressions and unfair judgments, she said, divert students’ attention from their academic achievement.

“I would like my teachers to recognize that in a classroom we’re not just learning diverse groups that don’t want to invest in the school because they don’t feel the school is investing in them.”

Allen, who attended South as a METCO student from 1991 to 1994, said he occasionally received disparaging remarks about his race. His tendency to spend time only with fellow METCO students, he said, limited his social and academic growth and at times made him feel disconnected from the school.

“Being a METCO student, there was comfort being around other METCO students,” he said. “However, I think maybe stepping out of that comfort zone and joining clubs and participating in activities that may not have involved the social circle that I was involved in might have helped with that.”

A 30 percent increase in bus costs this year forced the school to discontinue its 5:15 METCO bus, leaving only the 6 p.m. bus for METCO students with after-school activities, Sumner said. While this inconvenience did not stop him from participating in football, Gomez said it has prevented others from engaging in extracurriculars altogether, leaving them with fewer opportunities to get involved with the school.

While geographical distance can play a significant role in connectedness with the school, Sumner noted that resident black students are facing comparable challenges to METCO students.

“I am as much concerned, if not more so, about the resident black and Latino kids because I just see this serious stress level because you don’t get to go anywhere, there’s nowhere else they might just be able to breathe; they’re here all the time,” she said. “If you don’t feel like you belong at school and then you don’t feel very comfortable in your neighborhood, how much stress is that?”

While the YRBS indicated a 30 percent gap between black and white student response rates in high school, the disparity among districts was much greater. Sophomore Larissa Williams, who attended Oak Hill, said South’s larger population creates a more separated community, isolating minority students. Leveled high-school classes decreased classroom diversity, senior Simone Lassar said, noticing that in her experience, higher course level can denote greater racial homogeneity. Turner said the tendency to place students of color in lower-level classes limits their potential.

“Don’t set low expectations for black students,” she said. “Assume that they can handle high-level classes and that they can manage, that they can!”

Stembridge said the school has looked to increase class diversity by encouraging teachers to recommend more black and Latino students to ACP and Honors classes. Recent professional development meetings among South faculty have also centered around how teachers can better serve all students, he said.

“The challenge that we present with our teachers is we want them to be able to make individual connections with their students,” he said. “It’s really simply about getting to know the person and finding out what their experiences have been in the past and what works for them.”

As Stembridge mentioned, the student body and administration have been working to tackle issues of race at South for years. The Black Student Union, whose membership has seen an increase in Latino students this year, offers a safe place to discuss race on local and national levels, co-presidents Turner and Williams said. Courageous Conversations on Race, a student-led group that will visit sophomore chemistry classes this spring, gives students the chance to have open conversations about sensitive topics, teacher facilitator Deborah Linder said.

“A lot of kids weren’t sharing their stories. They were kind of keeping them to themselves,” she said. “By sharing them, being able to show other kids that there are things that can come out and share their stories as well. There are things that teachers and students alike do like that they don’t realize are making kids feel alienated. … What we need to do is make students more aware of who else that we have and then maybe that makes those actions or say the wrong things.”

Classes like Leadership and Diversity and African American Literature give students the opportunity to ask these difficult questions during the school day, Sumner, who teaches both, said. The Harambee Gospel Choir, discontinued this year due to insufficient enrollment, will return next year under a new name, she added.

Sumner also co-leads the Legacy Scholars Program with science department head Gerry Gagnon. The program, which began two years ago, focuses on achieving students of color, and Gagnon said it fosters an important sense of community among these students.

“It’s a way that we can build some internal support into the school to build a cohort of kids so that they can see that they’re not the only one who has been successful,” he said. “They might be only one of a handful of kids in their AP class or in their honors class, but there is a large critical mass of students who are African American and Latino who are achieving well here at South, so it’s an effort to address the stereotypes that might be present.”