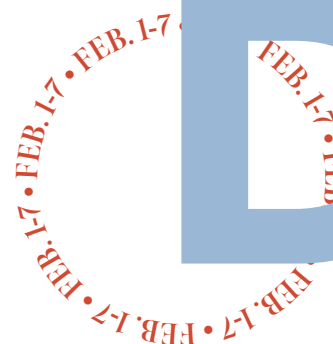




JOSINAY ADAMS, 9

REPORTING BY MERICA GRIFFIN PHOTOS BY AARYAA DONTHU AND MICHAEL BANKSTON
Lack of racial diversity amongst the faculty and staff in the Corning-Painted Post School District has been an area of concern for years. District leaders hired the Equity Collaborative, a racial equity consulting firm, in 2018 to assess diversity in the schools and local community. Now, during Black History Month and with escalating national tensions and calls for increasing diversity and racial awareness, both district leaders and students realize that it's time for

AN OPEN DIALOGUE



Each of the last ten years, freshman Josinay Adams has walked into her classroom on the first day of school.

Ten times, she's felt the same disappointment. The educators in her life, the people who set examples for her, have never once been Black or African-American.

"I have never had a teacher in my entire life who has remotely looked like me. A couple of times there have been substitutes, but never an actual teacher," Adams said.

Adams, who identifies as multiracial, felt like there was a missed opportunity for her and students like her to connect with teachers. "If I had an African-American teacher, I feel that it would have made a big difference growing up in the school district. I think especially as kids are growing up, if they see no one that looks like them, they're bound to feel a disconnect with their school," Adams said.

In 2018, the school district hired the Equity Collaborative, a North Carolina-based racial equality consulting firm, to assess the climate of racial equity and diversity in the school and community. In a report entitled 'A Picture of Racial and Economic Equity Challenges and Opportunities in Corning-Painted Post Area School District,' the group interviewed students of color and reported that many 'feel marginalized within the school district and do not feel that they are supported in developing a sense of cultural identity.'

Freshman Jayden Plante, who identifies as a biracial student, had mixed feelings about the report's findings. Despite a lack of representation of Black or African-American faculty and staff members, he felt his teachers had

his best interests at heart.

"I agree and disagree with what that report says. I feel that even though there are not as many Black teachers as white teachers in the school, I think the teachers try to be really supportive to everyone. That's one of the best things about going to our school," Plante said. "Even though the school needs to definitely work on the representation aspect to help Black kids, I think the environment right now is good, but it still could be better."

On the other hand, the Equity Collaborative's report resonated with Adams and her experience in the district.

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"As a Black student in a school that's not racially diverse, it sometimes feels that staff and teachers, if we do have problems, might not understand us. I think that it also shows that teachers in the school could be more educated on topics of racism and stuff because they don't experience it. The most the school could do is help them be more understanding and educated," Adams said.

For years, the district has struggled to hire African-American and Black teachers, according to Executive Principal Robin Sheehan.

"Even before the Equity Collaborative's work, we recognized that this is an area where we could definitely grow and improve," Sheehan said. "The challenge has also been the applicants we get. Generally, right now, applicant numbers for positions that we have are small. And within that, there haven't been any persons of color. When there have been, they haven't necessarily been deemed to be the most qualified. But it's rare that we do get those candidates."

In an effort to bring more racial diversity to their

classrooms, administrators in Corning and surrounding districts have gone directly to colleges to recruit candidates of color and encourage them to move to the region.

"We've been going to colleges specific to recruitment that have strong educational programs, that hold employment fairs. My husband is in HR for another school district, and he goes there and talks to student teachers and tries to sell the Southern Tier as a place where they would want to come and teach," Sheehan said. "So we've looked at student teachers of color to try to be an important group to recruit, so they'll go with that in mind; this has become an area of interest when doing multiple college recruitment visits and fairs, even virtually, to try to bring in some interested candidates."

Despite slow progress in hiring teachers of color, Sheehan saw reason for optimism. "I would say at this point, we haven't had a great amount of success yet, but I am hopeful. I feel if people would come here, they could recognize how meaningful and important their role would be in our community. I think we just

African-American students. "I would definitely say that the number one thing the school could do is crack down on any hate speech or racist speech against students that is really prevalent in the school population. And I think that there's not enough done about that in the slightest," Harewood said. "I think that the school itself needs to have a more open dialogue about race and that would help students of color to feel more comfortable talking about their experiences in the school."

Like Harewood, African-American senior Savannah Lomax has struggled with sharing racial conflicts she's experienced with her teachers because of their different backgrounds.

"There have definitely been points where I should have told a teacher about something, but I feel like the teachers will think I'm over-exaggerating because they wouldn't understand the circumstances and my feelings," Lomax said. "I guess it's kind of that disconnect that's still there between white teachers and

have to get people here to see it and feel it," Sheehan said.

Plante also saw positives in the district's ongoing efforts to bring racial representation to the school.

"I like that the school is doing work to try to work on getting more Black teachers because not only will it help with diversity, but also having teachers that look like you really inspires young Black kids to be teachers and have professions that educate others, and that's really important for the future of these kids," Plante said. "If the district can help change students' lives, then that's great."

In a school with an 87% white student body, some students of color reported facing difficulty connecting with classmates, dealing with racism in their social circles, or feeling a disconnect from their instructors because of cultural differences.

After years of experience without having teachers of similar cultural and racial identities, African-American student Imanni Harewood has had to adjust to her reality.

"I've learned how to adapt to talk to teachers who don't come from the same cultural background as me," Harewood said. "And it is difficult sometimes; not so much this year, but with past years, teachers who have had a very narrow racial perspective — sometimes that will come across in the teacher."

Harewood, a junior, had ideas about how the school could prioritize its work to address the needs of Black and



IMANNI HAREWOOD, 11; SAVANNAH LOMAX, 12; JAYDEN PLANTE, 9

Black kids."

As a student who has experienced racism in the district, Plante noted how increased allyship between students and faculty could make an important difference.

"I wish the teachers, along with the students would try to stand up and openly acknowledge the racial issues," Plante said. "I haven't dealt with racism as much lately as I have in the past, but I know there are other Black students who face this issue way more than I have and do, and it's a problem that needs to be fixed, or else the school will never improve."

For Sheehan, confronting racial differences head-on is the key to creating a more open-minded and diverse environment.

"I think it's important to tell the real story," Sheehan said. "In my role, sometimes the real story is hard to listen to, but it's important to know because if you know the story, you can work to make it better. And that's what we always want to do."

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Black History Month — Diversity and Representation

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