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Hillside needs solutions, not more blame

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DeWarren Langley Columnist

Hillside High School has gone through six principals since its construction in 1995 with Eunice Sanders the latest, replacing Henry Pankey after one year, who replaced Richard Hicks a year earlier, all of which has angered school parents, students and faculty.

Hillside has been a "heated topic" as many, like The Durham Committee on the Affairs of Black People and the school board, fight for the good of Hillside without tackling real school issues.

Low performance and high-transfer rates go unaddressed while people bicker over personalities and race relations.

None of the current approaches - criticizing Superintendent Ann Denlinger and school board Chairwoman Kathryn Meyers, discussing Hillside's new principal and the transfer of administrators without community input - is helping Hillside.

The Hillside community, including parents, students, the school board and even the Durham Committee, must understand their roles in making Hillside the "model school" it can be.

First, the school board must set aside egos and politics and work for the students. Since the 1992 city and county schools merger, the board hasn't focused on community needs, but committed to what it felt the community needed without asking for community input.

The board needs to foster an atmosphere where residents feel comfortable expressing concerns without fear of board members leaving or not listening.

Also, while school board policy allows the superintendent to reassign administrators, the process would have been smoother and less controversial if the Hillside community was included in the principal selection process.

In order to gain the respect and trust of those in the Hillside community, the superintendent and Durham Committee must collaboratively work with the community to transform Hillside. The superintendent cannot

continue to change leadership annually at Hillside, and if leadership must change, parents, students and the faculty of Hillside should be included in the selection process.

The Durham Committee cannot continue to attack the superintendent and school board members when it disagrees and expect the board to work with it.

Next, Hillside's student transfer rate is appalling.

Many question why schools such as Jordan High continue enrolling students when at capacity. Under-enrollment at Hillside is due to negative publicity and this lenient transfer policy, which allows transfers on the basis of programmatic, financial, or personal hardship and childcare problems.

The superintendent has allowed this problem to continue letting students transfer to schools upon request.

Crowded classrooms are a disservice. Students cannot continue to transfer into schools that have reached capacity when Hillside suffers poor enrollment. The transfer policy needs re-evaluation.

Next, parents and students have a responsibility to ensure that Hillside test scores are at or above grade level. Parents and the Durham Committee should work with the school board to find ways to get tutors or the resources Hillside students need to achieve high performance. The school board and the Durham Committee cannot continue to point fingers and blame. Hillside, as well as every other Durham school, is part of the community and should be the concern of all - despite socioeconomic status, race and other boundaries that separate Durham.

John Lucas, interim school board member and a longtime Hillside principal once said, "Hillside has an unquenchable spirit, an unusual sense of pride, and dedication and commitment to education."

Those working so hard to make Hillside better should understand that until the performance of students reaches at or above grade level, Hillside will not regain its unquenchable spirit.

Until the school board lets Hillside reach capacity, Hillside will not have that unusual sense of pride, Lucas spoke about. Until the school board, the Durham Committee, parents and students begin working together, Hillside will not symbolize dedication and commitment to education.

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