

Board Meeting Erupts Over Black School Plan

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Frustrated supporters of black-focused schools shut down a school board meeting last night after learning the issue was not going to be discussed.

About 100 advocates of a proposal to implement an Africentric alternative school attended last night's meeting of the Toronto District School Board, expecting to hear details of how and where such a school could be implemented.

When it became clear the report was not ready and the issue was not on the agenda, parent Vickie McPhee began yelling and moved into the middle of the boardroom.

"We are not going to let this happen again," she told supporters in the gallery, referring to the years of frustration for those who have been trying to get the board to open an Africentric school.

The issue, she added, "is on the minds and hearts and spirits of all of us in here. It is our children dying in these schools."

As she spoke, board chair Sheila Ward pounded her gavel and shortly after adjourned the meeting as trustees left the room. An hour later, the meeting was reconvened and Lloyd McKell, the board's executive officer of student and community equity, apologized for the breakdown in communications, saying Nov. 28 was only set as a tentative date for the report.

He explained that working out the details of such a school is complex and time-consuming, and that staff would need until the new year. Trustees agreed to hold a special meeting in January on the issue.

Then, after a few interruptions - followed by a young man who began loudly rhyming lyrics from the back of the boardroom that contained a few obscenities - Ward simply adjourned the meeting.

Ward later said she was sorry about the "profound misunderstanding" and that the board is not delaying dealing with the issue, but rather making sure it's done right.

"When you've waited decades for action, you are entitled to be angry and upset," she said, adding she feels those who support such an alternative school "are on the cusp of victory" and that such a school, if approved by trustees, would open next fall as promised.

Parent Angela Wilson, who with Donna Harrow has spearheaded the move for an Africentric school, asked the board, "Why don't you want our children to be educated?" She later broke down in tears.

Black students, particularly males, face challenges within the school system, as more than half have not accumulated the usual 16 credits by age 16, considered key to graduating from high school. Even the board's director of education has acknowledged the board is failing students of colour.

Following the first adjournment last night, trustees convened in a private room to recognize two teachers who recently won Governor General awards for their work. This was initially to be done in front of the entire board.

One of them, David Watkins, teaches black history at Weston Collegiate and is himself a supporter of African-focused schools. Given the commotion outside, trustees reported Watkins was very emotional when accepting the honour and spoke of how his own son is stopped by police simply for being black, young and male.

"I understand that people might be impatient for this process to get going," McKell later said. But he said progress is being made, and if the board votes to open the school next September, it will be done.