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Black history pilot courses on agenda for Pittsfield high schools

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PITTSFIELD — Schools Superintendent Jason McCandless committed in February to bringing history courses back to city schools. On Tuesday, he and staff from the city's two high schools talked to a crowd about what those classes will look like starting this fall.

The community conversation, hosted by Berkshire Interfaith Organizing, filled the Price Memorial AME Zion Church.

"Life is a cycle, and if we don't know where we came from, we don't know where we're going," conversation co-chair Mabel Hamilton said about the importance of teaching African American studies in schools.

This coming semester, both Pittsfield and Taconic high schools will have African American history courses. At Taconic, it will be a full-year course, taught by Jamal Ahamad. The course will talk about African American oppression, but also address contributions black people have made to society, Ahamad said.

Ahamad said that he has enjoyed putting together the curriculum, and identifying books that his students can relate to and enjoy.

When students are only learning about black history by studying slavery or seeing black people being beaten on TV, they aren't seeing the whole picture, Ahamad explained.

"It normalizes the beating and breaking of black bodies," Ahamad said of the limited teaching.

His class also will talk about black culture, television and sports.

About 50 students are registered for the class, according to Taconic High School Principal Matt Bishop.

At Pittsfield High School, which has offered an African American literature class for three years, African American history will be a "more traditional" semester-long course that examines primary sources, McCandless said.

The community conversation comes at a time of racism and hatred on a national level, speakers said.

McCandless said that he is confident that the full house Tuesday meant that so many people care about the subject.

"From the very highest hallways of power in this country, words are being used to divide," he said. "Hate is being preached from the pulpit of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue on a daily basis, which is utterly unacceptable."

The school system is working to improve an educational system that long has overlooked the work and contributions of people of color, "accidentally or purposefully," McCandless said.

That work includes having 20 city teachers recently partake in a program taught by Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts professor Frances Jones-Sneed.

Jones-Sneed, a Ph.D., helped the educators examine how their own implicit bias might interfere with students' learning.

"This was perhaps a life-changing course for some people," McCandless said.

The professional development training also helped teachers work to make sure every subject, not just those specifically about African American history or arts, is emphasizing the work of people of color, he said.

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For the pilot of the history courses, the district reached out for advice from people in the community that it felt were experts in the field. McCandless hopes that students will contribute to the curriculum, too.

Heather McNiece, a teacher who works on curricula design and embedding at the schools, said that Jones-Sneed's institute was eye-opening.

"I learned that I didn't know what I didn't know," she said.

Up until that point, when talking about implicit bias, she had only been told to "check your white privilege," which prompted a defensive response.

But after working with Jones-Sneed, and reading the book "Waking Up White," she has a better understanding of what white privilege means.

McCandless acknowledged that white people have benefited from a systemically corrupt system that oppresses black individuals. To overcome biases, "we have to rewired our brains," he said.

The Rev. Sloan Letman of the Second Congregational Church asked McCandless what it would take to make the African American history courses a graduation requirement.

McCandless said that, generally, courses that are graduation requirements are imposed by the state. The district is reluctant to impose additional requirements because it is more difficult for some students to graduate.

One possible solution could be to offer the African American history or literature courses as an alternative to another requirement, he said.

"It's a conversation I would be open to," he said.

He also is open to exposing how to bring similar courses or lessons to the younger grades, because it's important that students be exposed to this subject matter before they're teenagers, he said.

When asked by an audience member how residents can help the district with their efforts to expand black studies, Ahamad said that he needs people to encourage students to take his class seriously.

While Ahamad plans to show up and teach no matter what, students will get the most of his class when they put in the work, he said.

Tuesday's meeting wasn't the last time Berkshire Interfaith Organizing plans to encourage dialog about racial justice in Pittsfield schools. On Sept. 17, members of the panel will reconvene at BIO's 175 Wendell Ave. office to continue the conversation.

Will Singleton, former president of the NAACP Berkshire County branch, said that it's no accident that the work of black individuals and history are left out of traditional education.

"It was on purpose," Singleton said. "We were left out in ways to diminish our humanity."

He said that he was pleased to hear about the teacher training and hopes that students in Pittsfield will now be exposed to a more well-rounded curriculum that focuses on African American contributions and history.

"And I'm talking about the good, the bad and the ugly," Singleton said.

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