

Race relations

Forum participants say strong partnerships help defuse potential problems

By **LOUISE WREGE**
HP Staff Writer

BENTON TOWNSHIP — Talking about racial issues may be tough, but it has to be done, said Danny Sledge, a diversity consultant with Lake Michigan College in Benton Township.

He spoke Tuesday during a Race Relations Council Forum at the college on Promoting Racial Equality in Education.

“There is a hesitancy for teachers and administrators to talk about some of these issues,” Sledge said. “If they aren’t willing to, or don’t have the skills to talk about those issues themselves, then I think it’s an unrealistic expectation that the students will be able to do that by osmosis.”

He said administrators and teachers having the difficult conversations is just the beginning. He said research shows that successful diversity and inclusion programs often create more conflict and chaos initially.

“Where organizations and institutions fail is, when it begins to be uncomfortable, then they step back from it instead of leaning into that discomfort, managing it and then moving forward,” he said.

He said school officials need to teach students how to have these tough conversations and then, how to restore civility.

“Because that’s what we’re talking about in some of these school situations, just basic civility,” he said. “And civility is a lot more than just being nice to people. It’s being understanding that you can disagree agreeably.”

Lakeshore Public Schools Superintendent Philip Freeman said his school district has worked systematically on better race relations.

“I think that’s key – you have to be intentional,” he said. “It doesn’t happen as happenstance because there’s an event. ... It has to be ongoing.”

But sometimes, events do happen, he said. He referred to a recent incident where a Lakeshore student posted a photo of herself on social media wearing brown facial cream and teeth whitening with a racial slur under the photo.

“It was on (Christmas) break, out in the community, but it affects our staff and our school,” he said. “We have to continue to use that as a reminder that our work isn’t done.”

Freeman released a statement Friday, stating that the picture and caption were “disturbing



Photos by Don Campbell / HP staff

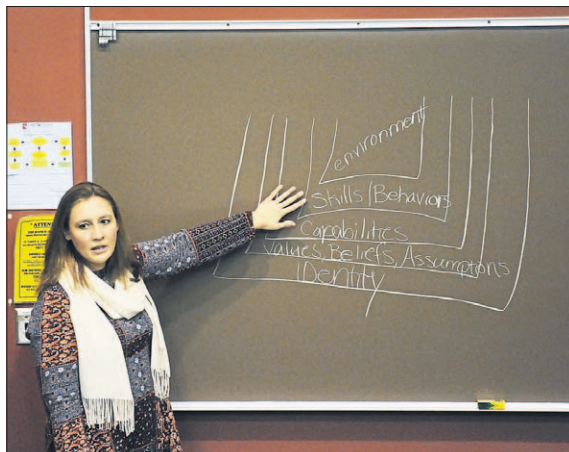
From left, Jeffrey Booker, Rebecca Fudge, Gladys Peoples-Burks, and Larry Feldman, take part in a Race Relations Forum Tuesday at Lake Michigan College.

and offensive.”

“It does not reflect the value that Lakeshore Public Schools place on honoring and respecting the diversity in our schools and community that makes us strong,” he stated.

He said the school district investigated the incident and took swift action with the student and her parents.

Freeman said cooperation and having strong partnerships is key. He said school officials contacted administrators at the Benton Harbor Boys & Girls Club and asked them to attend the basketball game Friday between Lakeshore and Benton Harbor high schools to diffuse any potentially charged situations because of the photo.



Rebecca Fudge, an educator and diversity consultant, talks about levels of intervention Tuesday during a Race Relations Forum.

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Jeffrey Booker, director of the Benton Harbor Boys & Girls Club Teen Center, said club officials were happy to attend.

“Having the conversation and working together is critical,” he said. “We went to the game in support just in case. We were there in total support because we’re partners.”

Freeman said his school district has done several things to keep the conversation going. For example, he said the principals of Lakeshore High School and Benton Harbor High School meet every month to mentor each other.

The four panelists at the forum were Booker; Larry Feldman, educator and chair of the Race Relations Council; Rebecca Fudge, educator and diversity con-



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Jeffrey Booker, director of the Benton Harbor Boys and Girls Club Teen Center, speaks Tuesday during a Race Relations Forum at Lake Michigan College.

sultant; and Gladys Peoples-Burks, educator and chair of the Race Relations Council Education Committee.

Feldman said the public is also welcome to attend the Race Relations Council meetings, which are at 5:45

p.m. the fourth Wednesday of each month at the St. Joseph Library, 500 Market St., St. Joseph. The next meeting is Jan. 25.

For more information, call Feldman at 921-0531.

Contact: lwrege@TheHP.com, 932-0361, Twitter: @HPWrege