Momentum Center

Calvin Terrell headlines town hall on racism and education

By Matthew Ehler/Grand Haven Tribune
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Speaker Calvin Terrell addresses a group of Grand Haven High School students in 2018.

Tribune file photo

The Momentum Center's latest town hall meeting welcomed back a familiar face in speaker Calvin Terrell, along with Rebecca Bush to address and discuss racism and the educational system.
Terrell, founder and director of the Social Centric Institute, has previous experience discussing these topics in the Grand Haven community when he was asked to speak to Grand Haven Area Public School students in 2018. Despite substantial pushback from the community, Terrell remained transparent throughout his tours, offering open discussion and Q&A’s before presentations.

Although he did not speak in front of Grand Haven students this time, the message was still very clear pertaining to the issues at hand.

“Our native population in this country was once 100 percent,” Terrell said. “Now today it’s less than 2 percent. We are indoctrinating children to sustain white wealth. Calling education isn’t education, it’s schooling. Our true education has never been a moral society, it’s been a law and order.”

Terrell spoke of disproportionality, including two legs regarding white supremacy. He said until there’s a change of the anti-indigenous and anti-blackness of schooling, there will be no progress.

“Why was the model for schooling even created?” Terrell asked. “Schooling model was designed as a factory for ways of living to lie about white supremacy.”

He compared the lack of awareness that some people have to thinking like a Nazi.

Terrell finished his segment with instructions to the audience to construct a ladder with six rungs that read “white people, white $tatu$, otherness, dangerous, black status and black people.”

“This is the law and order and the order it’s in,” said Terrell.

The proceeding panelist, Ottawa Area Intermediate School District Curriculum Consultant Bush, provided significant examples in today’s educational society that highlighted historical deficiencies towards specific ethnicities.

The first example displayed a famous photograph by Dorothea Lange of a migrant mother in 1936 during the Great Depression. She stated that even today in history books, the chances to find this photograph are high.
She explained that Franklin D. Roosevelt and his administration launched more relief for farmers and workers due to extensive suffering in rural farming areas. But even though the country was 90 percent white during the depression, no one suffered more than African Americans.

“During the depression, Blacks compromised half of the country’s tenant farmers,” said Bush. “Twenty-five percent of whites were unemployed, but 50 percent of blacks were.”

Bush stressed that authors are taking away legitimacy from minority groups and focus on generalizations, not for students to see the entire picture. That results in students resenting the topics, resulting in a counterintuitive shape of education.

“Fortunately, this past cycle of ineffectiveness can be broken, and Michigan is off to a great start,” Bush said. “With a combination of tools such as the recently revised social studies standards for the state and general education leadership literacy practices to help students question texts and examine multiple perspectives.”

These skills have been lacking for quite some time and Bush urges to combine the ability to analyze complex interacting factors, along with the perspectives of people to enrich immerse diverse text. Instead of focusing on a study of a particular group of people, which might include notes, photo analysis, and use of the textbook, instructors might include a visual written analysis of a plethora of primary and secondary source documents.

“When teachers challenge those students to ask those questions,” said Bush. “Along with multiple perspectives, different ethnic groups will make history more interesting and relevant. Those are skills to exceed in a democratic society.”

The public comment section was filled with various points of view. AJ Westendorp who serves youth at Escape Ministries in Holland, said students in his community are misrepresented when suspended and expelled and wondered how schools and communities can help to change that.

Other discussions were had on the over-emphasizing of memorable results, rather than actual education in the classroom. Bush stressed tremendous amounts of emphasis on assessment data, including national level SAT and ACT tests.
In order to start these specific discussions of race in the school district, Terrell first suggests a view of who’s in charge. There are various identities starting with race, and Terrell said to have examine demographically who the district is designed for.

“We have to be honest about that,” said Terrell. “What ethnicity is predominately in the district. How do we serve those populations?”

Despite previous controversy from Terrell’s presentations, the Momentum Center’s Barbara Lee VanHorssen stressed the importance of values that include pillars of inclusion, division and equity.

“They are vital to a vibrant community,” she said. “We believe that bringing these diverse voices together brings people together. They uphold these pillars as crucial pieces to healthy people in a healthy community.”