



Pastor David and Joan Stewart

Is Greece Taking Steps Towards Integration?

A FOLLOW-UP STORY

BY LYDIA AZIZA ALSTON

***"We believe an African American student would have been dealt with using the zero tolerance policy and law enforcement would have been involved."* - PASTOR DAVID AND JOAN STEWART**

Dave and Joan Stewart are pastors of Destiny Preparation Church. They have lived in Greece for over 25 years and have children in the school district. They share their perspective regarding how the district is evolving in the discussion and implementation of policies and programs to accommodate the increasing growth of African Americans and Hispanics in the Greece school system.

(Note: Although separate comments to each question were made by both Dave and Joan Stewart, we do not differentiate which one of the couple made each statement in the article below)

What are the changes you have seen in the Greece School District in the last 20 years?

One of the changes we've noticed is a change in the population (diversity) in the schools. When we enrolled our son in the Greece School District 20 years ago, our son was a minority. Doing the research for our church the numbers indicated that we (African Americans) were very scarce at that time.

There were teachers who 'claimed' they were afraid of our son but those claims were unfounded; my son was a mild mannered child. I think they bought into the stereotypes that he was African American, he must have issues at home that make him angry or a threat. Actually he wasn't the threat; he was at that time being bullied by three Italian boys. We had to give him professional counseling to help him overcome the situation.

Although the situation you spoke of involving your son happened 20 years ago, there are students and their parents facing the same issues today in Greece and other School Districts. How would you address this issue?

The reality of the situation is this is not just a Greece issue it is really a minority issue, growing up as a minority in a non minority area. I can't say things are so much worse in Greece than if we moved to Penfield or Brighton. It really comes down to the way we as people look at one another.

Can you explain what expectations a mostly Caucasian staffed School District has of an increasing number of minority students?

A concern we have at least from what I've seen are presumptions from Caucasian teachers, students and parents regarding what the level of expectation should be for minority students. Some teachers have expectations of minority students that is dramatically lower than they should be. In turn students then have lower expectations of and for themselves and they are not coached to raise their standards.

As a parent and an advocate I have seen some of the stereotypes that have been set up on the parts of both the administrators and parents of minority students. Parents usually assume they (administrators) and teachers have mistreated a student because he is a minority, and quite a few times they are right. Sometimes students who transfer from the Rochester City School District into the Greece School District are labeled. I have witnessed and advocated in

CSE and Superintendents meetings and talked to administrators and teachers who think minority students are the problem. In fact I have talked to security personnel who have been told to be on alert for some of the students that transfer from the Rochester City School District. There is more of a tolerance for non-minority students exhibiting ill-behavior than for minority students exhibiting the same behavior.

I think both sides need to be educated regarding the issues.

I think the current reality of the Greece School District is they are experiencing the natural stages of integration. Having minority teachers and administrators on staff can certainly help with the transition for the staff, parents and students. Having another pair of eyes to paint a different perspective can certainly counter some of the stereotypical approaches that come up. An example of a serious problem resulting from a lack of minority leadership is when the student from Greece Olympia threatened to kill minority students and one student was given counseling as a consequence. We believe an African American student would have been dealt with using the zero tolerance policy and law enforcement would have been involved. There needs to be consistency when dealing with these sort of issues. African American students need to feel that authority is going to be fair.

Parent's responsibility is two-fold they can't over react or under react they shouldn't come into a situation without all of the facts, approach teachers and administrators as if they are the enemy. It does alienate and it self-reinforces the stereo types.

Has it been your experience that the Greece School District has been able to celebrate and educate minority students about their history and plan activities accordingly.

I have found personally that some of the biggest interests in African History have been displayed by people who are not of color. So can the District celebrate the history of minorities, yes they can. Do they? Not all of them do. They do make an attempt, they are unable to address all of the issues of minorities. It is possible but every one is not going to do it. We all want our children to experience that opportunity but it should begin at home. Minority students have joined choirs in the District and have been ignored when requests to sing more "soulful" songs were made. As a result students have chosen not to participate.

One exception is that the elementary schools seem to do well with celebrating Black History Month. My youngest daughter learned about Rosa Parks as a result of what she learned in school during Black History Month. So it is not that they are not doing anything.

How open do you think the Greece District is to taking the steps toward moving towards fair integration of minority students?

I don't know, there was a meeting scheduled to help set the future direction for the District. I am not sure how many parents knew about it. Greece purchased an automated system to notify parents of information but they did not use it to notify parents of the meeting, however.

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