

BELIEFS Values

Religion and schools

Seminar teaches sensitivity

BY RINA FULKA
SPECIAL WRITER

The Bharatiya Temple in Troy housed a unique, hands-on learning experience when presentations and panel discussions opened a door of understanding to a crowd as diverse as the conference itself.

The March 18 symposium entitled, "Religion and Schools: The Opportunities and Challenges of Religious Diversity in Public Schools," drew teams of administrators, educators, parents and students representing 18 of Oakland County's 28 school districts. Together, they explored the cultures, rituals and belief systems of their neighbors.

"People have different roles to play in the school," said David Gad-Harf of West Bloomfield, executive director of Bloomfield Hills-based Jewish Community Council of Metropolitan Detroit. "By bringing them together, we're able to expand the impact of the program. We're reaching

people at all levels of the public school system in Oakland County."

The symposium began with a keynote address by David Adamany, president of the Detroit-based Wayne State University. Morning sessions examined "The Constitution and Religious Diversity in the Schools" through presentations by representatives from the Buddhist, Chaldean, Hindu, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jewish, Mormon and Muslim communities. Topics ranged from dietary restrictions and modesty in dress to prayer rituals and holiday celebrations.

"For some school districts, diversity is a relatively new phenomenon," said Dr. James Geisler, superintendent of Walled Lake Public Schools. "The success in coping with the issue of diversity is in terms of accommodating students whose customs or religious backgrounds need to be dealt with sensitively in the school."

Student panelists brought the teenage perspective to light by discussing the daily challenges that clash with their own religious beliefs. Some students admitted feeling pressured by classmates who are not, watch R-rated movies or engage in casual sex. Others had difficulty making up lost assignments after missing school for religious observances.

This year, Nagla Fetouh, 17, of Troy, struggled with balancing religion and schoolwork when Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting, fell during the week of finals. And sometimes she's asked to explain her style of dress.

"On the aspect of the head cover I wear, a lot of people regard it as oppression," said Fetouh, a senior at Troy High School. "I do it because I feel it's a way of presenting to people who I am... Look at me for who I am and not for my body."

Panelists weren't the only teens who felt a need to share their views. With a Bible clutched in his hand, Aaron Wood of Bloomfield Hills rose from the audience on behalf of a group of his own.

"I noticed that Christians haven't been represented here and I felt a little bit left out," said Wood, a junior at Lahser High. "I want to learn about other religions, but I also would have liked to be represented in even a little segment of the program."

Wood is the leader of "The Rock," a non-denominational Bible session that meets at Lahser High School for 45 minutes before classes begin. Catholic teens from the Chaldean community, who were originally scheduled for the panel, were absent.

After a lunch offering a choice of cultural menus, the symposium continued with models of existing diversity programs facilitated by the Anti-Defamation League, Berkley High School, the Birmingham Public Schools, the Bloomfield Hills School District, the Detroit-based Interfaith Round Table of the National Conference and the West Bloomfield School District. A variety of religious and cultural handouts were free for the taking.

The concept for the daylong conference was developed through a collaborative effort of the Jewish Community Council of Metropolitan Detroit, the Interfaith Round Table of the National Conference and the Oakland County Schools Superintendents' Association.

"The Metro Detroit area is growing increasingly diverse. And if we're interested in the healthy development of our students, we must recognize that diversity as a strength," said Gary Doyle, superintendent of Bloomfield Public Schools. "It's



PHOTO BY TOM HOFFMAN

Packed: Dozens of administrators listen to a student panel.

part of preparing kids to live successfully in the 21st Century, particularly in this global economy."

Evaluations submitted by attendees will help in planning next year's religious diversity symposium.

Rabbi Marla Feldman, assistant director of Jewish Community Council of Metropolitan Detroit, is happy with the success of the conference, which has a waiting list for attendance. But her hopes are for a wider audience.

"The schools are the unique institutions in the community that bring together students from a multitude of backgrounds. They welcome assistance in dealing with issues raised and want to be sensitive to them," said Feldman. "One of the goals is that something like this will take place at the district level in their own school systems."

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Panelist: Troy High senior Nagla Fetouh talked about handling finals during Ramadan.

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