

Minorities

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EDUCATION UNDER FIRE

BY TIM SMITH, STAFF WRITER

STAFF PHOTOS BY BILL BRISLER

man Olivia Glover, who is black. "I just identify with people who are good people. I don't think color should matter... They should know how to teach. That's what I'm here to do, learn."

Her math teacher is an African American. But when Glover is in that class, she doesn't necessarily look at the learning experience any differently than in classes taught by whites. "I'm still in school. It doesn't change anything."

Glover's principal, John Barrett, said Farmington Public Schools "is a quality district and it wants quality teachers." The district also wants diversity in its ranks.

"We have made a concerted effort to do just that," Barrett said. "As Farmington grows in its diversity, I think that's important. And Farmington is growing in diversity in a lot of different ways. Asians, African Americans, Eastern Europeans..."

Barrett estimated the high school and district student population and faculty makeup is less than 5 percent minority. Will numbers increase in tandem with growing diversity of the community? It depends.

"The difficulty districts like Farmington find is competing for minority candidates with inner city schools, schools with high levels of diversity," Barrett said. "Those districts are vying for the same candidates we're vying for."

Competition fierce

There just aren't many out there to recruit, however.

"One of the greatest challenges for us, keeping in mind that Farmington is a district where 65 languages are spoken (by students), is continuing to diversify our staff," said Larry Lobert, Farmington Public Schools' executive director of personnel. "But the universities are not able to feed the level of diverse applicants and candidates we'd like to see coming into our schools."

There are literally hundreds of minority candidates graduating from university education programs, and so they're highly sought after.

One university Lobert tries to tap into is Eastern Michigan University. But at EMU, only 17 or 18 African Americans are graduating every year out of a class of about 1,900 education graduates, said Theo Hamilton, associate in career development for education placement.

According to Hamilton, those percentages could improve over time as more minority children grow up with stronger back-

grounds at home and in school. The younger kids are encouraged by parents and teachers about learning, the better.

"The parents have to be involved with their education, and it has to start at an early age," he noted. If that foundation is in place, minority children stay in school and go on to colleges and universities.

FHS student Glover also sees socioeconomic and family values as factors affecting the number of African Americans who become teachers.

"It just depends on the way you were brought up and the way your family teaches you," she said. "I myself want to be a doctor. I know a lot of my black friends out here, they have high dreams. But if you come from the inner city, you can't dream big because you don't have a lot of opportunities. Then, you focus small."

Another big problem, said Hamilton, is that many minority college students from inner city backgrounds either lack the skills to become teachers - or think they don't.

"They'll start their sophomore year wanting to be teachers," Hamilton said. "But in their junior year, they have to take a basic skills test."

And, he continued, about 50 percent of the minority students who take the test at EMU fail it on the first try. Others switch career paths before taking the exam.

For the right reason

Another black college educator, who wouldn't name the southeastern Michigan college she is employed at, said there is evidence that more college students are thinking about a career in education. It still isn't a field that minorities flock toward. Helen Ellison concurred with others that fields such as engineering and computer science are more attractive to blacks in particular.

"There is not a high population of minority students going into education," said Ellison, also a parent in the Farmington district. "But I see more now than I have in the past several years."

But Ellison said she hopes African Americans and other minority college students opt to go into the teaching profession for no other reason than wanting to help shape young minds.

"You want people to go into it because that's where they feel they need to be," Ellison said. "That's where you get your really great teachers... You want the person who is standing in front of your child to want to be there."

Meanwhile, Ellison noted that she doesn't think Farmington is doing all it can to recruit minori-

ties into what she called "a wonderful" field. "Are you doing everything you can? Are you going to black colleges to recruit them?"

Lobert insists that the district is having more of a presence at various college career days, for example, sending minority teachers already on staff to hopefully spark interest in the field among students.

Farmington schools Superintendent Bob Macfield said bringing in more of a mix to the faculty is an important mission, because "this community expects us to celebrate diversity. There is an amazing array of languages spoken by our students, and we want our staff to represent the composition of our students."

Bottom line matters

Sometimes, potential earning power of one career versus another keeps minorities from pursuing a degree in education, Lobert said.

"Farmington salaries are good, but it's hard to compete with a lot of the big dollars in industry jobs," he explained. "That's a big challenge for us."

Lisa Drane, an African American who is teaching at East Mid-



STAFF PHOTO BY BILL BRISLER

Recruiting: Lisa Drane, a teacher at East Middle School, says minorities, especially African American males, may not be attracted to teaching because they feel there's not enough money to support a family.

die School, following four years in the Detroit system, said the financial part of the "Where are the minority teachers?" equation probably applies to men more than to women.

"In my own opinion," Drane

said, "a lot of minorities, especially African American males, may not be attracted to teaching, because they feel there's not enough money to take care of a wife and children."

She quickly added, however,

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Teach

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core values I have as a person.

"I looked back on that when I considered becoming a teacher and I still look back on that when I consider the type of teacher I want to be," he continued. "Of course, I'll bring my own personality and my own beliefs to the profession. But I will definitely consider the impact other teachers had on me."

Having an impact equates to being a good teacher and leader, inspiring kids to want to learn and develop as people. And, looking at it from the students' point of view, it shouldn't matter whether a teacher is a minority or not.

But human nature is a consideration. Bruce did acknowledge that minority students might think more seriously about a potential teaching career if they see minority faculty members.

"Minority students going through the system have to have good exposure to minority teachers, minority counselors, minority administrators," Bruce said. "If that is the case, students might give teaching as a career more consideration. Because they might be able to relate and say, 'I can see myself doing the same thing.'"

Personally, that wasn't what Bruce thought. He didn't even decide to go to U-M until he was in the military.

"Some of my teachers growing up, my role models, were minorities," he said, "so they were there. There was that presence. But I never gave it that much thought, to that aspect of teach-

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Chris Bruce
—Teacher

ing.

"After I did make the choice, that's when I encountered many more discussions about the fact more minorities are needed in the teaching profession."

On the money

Bruce would like more minorities to enter the field. But he noted one contributing factor is why it may be difficult for districts to recruit them.

Many African Americans, for example, attend colleges outside of Michigan, such as Hampton University in Virginia or Clark College in Florida, and state teacher certification requirements vary.

Another factor might be color, but the color green.

"Teachers don't historically make the big bucks," Bruce said. "And that's a normal consideration any college student, minority or not, will take into account. They understand this is a career choice they are making."