



People and programs impacting our QCSD community

Students' destiny: Fixing racial divide



Quakertown students, from left, Dalton Glova, Christian Holman and Suzie Njunge, each gave their thoughts on issues surrounding diversity during Wednesday's event.

The state attorney general, in a tribute to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., brought together students from Quakertown and Cheltenham for what he called "a moment of opportunity."

By Gary Weckselblatt

Quakertown and Cheltenham students were advised by public officials Wednesday that the future is in their hands, and their generation has the power to make the dream of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. a reality.

"Dr. King spent a mere 13 years fully devoted to achieve one purpose, to bring Americans together," said former Philadelphia Mayor Rev. Dr. W. Wilson Goode. "His basic desire was that everyone would be treated equally. ... I recognize that we did not achieve this in my lifetime. ... I come here this morning with hope that young people will take up that battle, and with the belief that it will happen in your lifetime."

"You are not too young to start leading. You bring a great deal of innocence, but also a great deal of intellect. ... I wish I had the tools that you have when I was your age."

The students from the two high schools shared their thoughts and lunch in the Cheltenham School District administration building during a two-hour event April 11 initiated by the office of Pennsylvania Attorney General Josh Shapiro, paying tribute to the slain civil rights leader on the 50th anniversary of his assassination.

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Quakertown Superintendent Dr. Bill Harner introduced himself to Cheltenham students as they arrived for a meeting with their Quakertown peers.

DIVERSITY

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Cheltenham and Quakertown were chosen because of an October 6 incident following a Cheltenham-Quakertown football game at Alumni Field, when Strayer Middle School students shouted abusive epithets at Cheltenham's cheerleaders.

Shapiro said what happened after the Cheltenham-Quakertown football game has been seen as a "dark moment. I view it as a moment of opportunity."

Quakertown Superintendent Dr. Bill Harner agreed. "Having the courage to have a conversation about our differences is probably the most important thing this nation has to do today. This is vitally important to me."

Harner grew up in Cheltenham. "I'm a proud Cheltenham graduate," he said.

Cheltenham Superintendent Dr. Wagner Marseille said "This conversation has been in the making for quite some time. We're hoping that this conversation is a series of many as we embrace our neighbors."

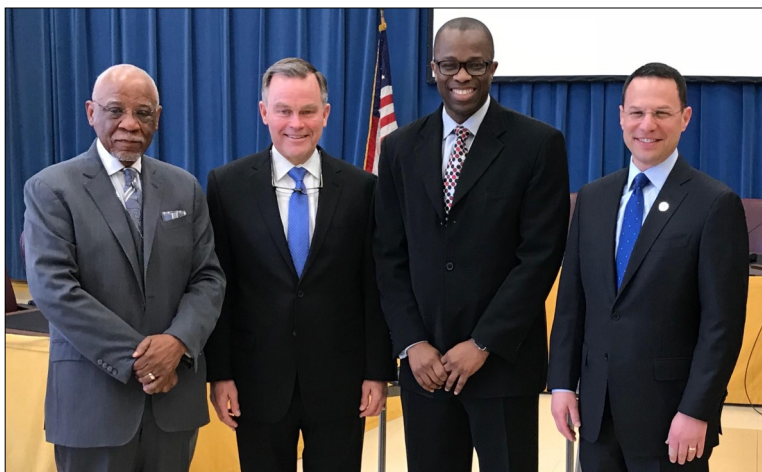
He welcomed QCHS students "to our home. We want to treat you like family. ... This is a safe space for you."

Goode, who will be 80 in August, began his life as a sharecropper on a North Carolina farm, "one step from slavery," he said. "All my ancestors were slaves. I understood what Dr. King was trying to achieve."

He advised students to never use the word "minority" when referring to people. "It means less than," he said. "There are no minorities in terms of humans."

Shapiro described Goode as "a giant in the community" and said the lesson students should take from Goode's biography "is that anything is possible."

Since the racial incident of October 6, the Quakertown Community School Board and Administration have taken steps to turn an ugly situation into a positive.



Speakers and facilitators for the event included, from left, former Philadelphia Mayor Rev. Dr. W. Wilson Goode, QCSD Superintendent Dr. Bill Harner, Cheltenham Superintendent Dr. Wagner Marseille, and state Attorney General Josh Shapiro. At left, students broke into smaller groups to brainstorm ways they can make an impact.



The Pearl S. Buck Foundation was hired to bring its system-wide diversity and inclusion initiative to the district. The foundation will assess 400 employees as part of "The Welcome Workplace" program, in which professional trainers and staff will work with district leadership and stakeholders to build individual and group intercultural competency.

need to be talking to each other, and being honest with each other."

Harner said he was "incredibly proud" of the students from both schools. Juan Soto, a Quakertown World Language teacher and adviser to the high school's Spirit Club, commended "the maturity shown by our young people."

Soto said the Wednesday conversation "opens the door so we can start talking about what we need to empower teachers to have these conversations in our classrooms. This is huge."

Anthony W. Luker, education & outreach specialist for the attorney general, said the gather "is one step, but it's a big step."

QCHS students at the event included Mikayla Burns, Dalton Glova, Christian Holman, Diana Kahindo, Maddie Logenbach, Amy Ngüyun, Suzie Njunge, Zach Somers, and Amanda Tascarella.

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With former Philadelphia Mayor Rev. Dr. Wilson Goode looking on, Attorney General Josh Shapiro and QCSD Superintendent Dr. Bill Harner catch up before event.

The Peace Center has taught its curriculum of diversity and acceptance to all QCSD fourth graders.

In addition, Harner held a dinner for parents of African-American students to hear their concerns and explain district plans moving forward.

"I have apologized for our greater community," Harner said. "Since October, our community has had a ton of courageous conversations. It was a great teachable moment."

Christian Holman, an elite singer at QCHS, said that students in choir are taught that "if you make a loud mistake, keep going. We need more conversations in classrooms. Teachers teach, but there aren't enough conversations. Kids