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**DISTRICT TACKLES RACIAL GAP IN SCHOOLS A PANEL OF
 CHERRY HILL RESIDENTS AND EDUCATORS WILL SEEK
 WAYS TO ACHIEVE PARITY BETWEEN WHITE AND
 MINORITY STUDENTS.**

Mike Madden, INQUIRER SUBURBAN STAFF

Why don't black students, on average, score as well as their white peers on standardized tests? Why are there so few faces of color in the most advanced classes? And what can educators and parents do about it?

Hoping to tackle what is being recognized as one of the most pressing issues in American education, the Cherry Hill School District is putting together a committee of administrators, teachers, leaders of the township's minority community organizations, and other residents to study ways to close the gap between white students and minority students.

For years, educators around the country have struggled with how to improve the way American schools teach black, Latino and American Indian students, whose scores on standardized tests and graduation rates from high school and college have lagged behind those of whites and Asian Americans.

And while the racial performance gap has closed slightly since the 1960s, study after

study from think tanks and educational organizations have indicated that something still is not working right for minority students.

"This is one of the most compelling issues that I've ever faced," Cherry Hill Superintendent Morton Sherman said of the local effort to examine minority achievement. "I'm quite embarrassed that we would have in America - not just in Cherry Hill, in America - an ongoing difference in achievement levels."

About 6 percent of Cherry Hill's 11,000 students are black, and about 4 percent are Latino, Sherman said. Between 15 percent and 18 percent are Asian American.

He said that district staff members were still analyzing the most recent set of standardized exams and do not have statistics on test scores broken down by race. But he called the district a "typical suburban" one, which would mean white students, on average, score 15 to 20 percentage points higher than minority students.

The new committee's first meeting will be held at 7 p.m. tomorrow at the district's Malberg Administration Building. Officials are hoping to draw a wide range of residents into their effort.

"We know that the process could be potentially problematic," said Danny Elmore, president of the Cherry Hill Minority Civic Association, a group of about 400 mostly African American families. "Parents have to be brought in."

An assistant principal at Cherry Hill High School West, George Munyan, and another Minority Civic Association executive board member, Pat McCargo, will lead the committee.

During its first few months, the group will try to find explanations for why it seems the schools are not serving minority students as well as they should. Both the school system and the parents of its students will be under the microscope, Elmore said.

"What type of things are we doing as minority parents to make sure we're doing our part?" he asked. "It's always easy to put the blame on someone else. Usually when you have a problem, there's more than one reason for it."

Likewise, the committee will ask why teachers and guidance counselors sometimes seem not to prod minority students to take the toughest possible courses, steering them away from Advanced Placement tests and rigorous college-prep classes, McCargo said.

"Perhaps students weren't being given the same opportunities to participate in certain levels of achievement," McCargo said.

After detailing possible causes of the performance gap, the committee will consider potential solutions for inclusion in the academic budget for the next year.

In the end, Sherman said, success will be measured not only by rising test scores and graduation rates but also by the extent to which minority students feel they are part of the fabric of the school system.

Having a committee address such a comprehensive problem as "race and education" could backfire if it is seen as a way for the district to sweep the issue under the rug while pretending to deal with it. But Elmore and McCargo said they and other Minority Civic Association members believed that the district wanted to change things.

As an explanation, they cited the latest controversy involving race in the Cherry Hill school system. Two years ago, the district brought together black families and white teachers and administrators to rewrite the lesson plans for English classes that taught Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Some black parents and students had complained that the author's use of derogatory words and racist portrayals of black characters undermined whatever educational value the book might have.

After a year of collaboration, this effort produced a curriculum that sought to raise students' awareness of the issues raised by the book and to place Twain's work in its proper context. So successful was the effort that PBS made a documentary about the work and aired it last fall.

The experience built significant trust between the district and the local black community, Elmore said. Now, according to administrators, the school system hopes to capitalize on that relationship to benefit all its students.

"I truly believe that we have a moral obligation to leave no one behind, to write no one off," Munyan said.

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