

# Northmont school letter angers some

‘Wording was not good’ in attempt to address race-related disparities.

BY JEREMY  
P. KELLEY STAFF WRITER

CLAYTON

Northmont officials’ ongoing efforts to improve race-related disparities in schools got sidetracked Monday by a district mailer that upset some parents of black students, with the superintendent acknowledging it was poorly worded.

The letter, on Northwood Elementary letterhead, said it was a brief survey to get feedback on how well teachers relate to children.

The second of two questions was, “What do you wish your white teachers knew about your black child?”

Via a large grant, Northmont has been working with the Equity Fellowship group to address race-related issues that are prominent in schools nationwide — achievement gaps between races, implicit bias leading to disparities in suspension rates, and training teachers in culturally responsive practices.

But Superintendent Tony Thomas acknowledged none of that explanation was in the letter sent to parents of black students at Northwood.

“We’re owning the fact that there should have been more context,” Thomas said. “Once we talk to parents when they call, they understand what the district is trying to do and why we’re working with the Equity Fellows.

In this situation, the wording was not good, and we’re not trying to hide from

that.”

The issue drew hundreds of Facebook comments on parents’ pages. Some called the letter offensive or racist, others said the district was trying to do a good thing and parents should help educators understand their differences, and still others said schools should just treat every child the same.

Marchelle Hopson, a Northmont parent whose youngest son attends Northwood, said she was completely taken aback when she first stumbled across the white teachers/black children question on Facebook.

“My first reaction was, this is fake,” Hopson said. “I sent a message to my kids’ school, and the superintendent called me back and apologized.”

Hopson said she supports conversation about racial and cultural issues in Northmont schools, including efforts to understand how to best reach each child. But she called this effort “very culturally insensitive.”

“It’s becoming crystal clear to me that Northmont is having some diversity issues,” Hopson said, asking why educators haven’t already had better diversity training. “I do not believe we have room for that in an educational system, where you don’t know how to teach or approach a student.”

Michael Carter, chief diversity officer at Sinclair Community College, has been leading this Equity Fellows program at both Northmont and Dayton Public Schools, and has already done some parent engagement nights.

“We have done focus groups with students, teachers and we will do it with parents — asking them questions about what they see and want from the district,”

Carter said. “We’ve asked students how they want teachers to see them and respond to them and treat them. We’ve talked to teachers about what they want parents to know about their work with their students.

We’re asking the questions, and hopefully the right questions so we can improve these outcomes.”

Thomas said this letter, while poorly worded, has created a lot of community conversation that he hopes to turn into a positive.

“We’re not going to stop doing the proactive work that we’re doing. We know we’re doing the right work,”

Thomas said. “Are we going to make mistakes? Yes. Was this a mistake? Yes, but the intention is good and that’s what we’re going to continue to work on.”

Contact this reporter at 937-225-2278 or email [Jeremy.Kelley@cmg.com](mailto:Jeremy.Kelley@cmg.com).