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First RISE town hall discusses education

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The first installment of the RISE virtual town hall series took place Thursday. Submitted

While discussing examples of inequality witnessed in the local education system, panelists at a virtual town hall meeting said more black teachers and administrators are a pressing need.

“We have a high number of African Americans who are getting suspended and written up, yet we don’t have a representation of them in the school system,” said Neal Gibbs, assistant principal of College View Campus.

ECTC Associate Professor Kae Cooper said this lack of representation can be partially blamed on lack of educational funding.

“We’re trying our best to dig out of holes that we were born in and to be honest, the salary of education is not going to get you there,” she said.

The conversation Thursday evening via the Zoom video conferencing service also revolved around standardized testing and how to better gauge student improvement.

“It doesn’t measure the whole child, it just measures what they can do with a piece of paper and a pencil,” said Dr. Jeannie Lett, an assistant principal in the Jefferson County Public Schools.

The meeting was the first installment of a seven-week series called RISE, sponsored by Elizabethtown Community and Technical College, Western Kentucky University and Limestone Bank. Through the series, a new topic is discussed between panelists, moderators and community members.

During Thursday's event, panelists fielded questions posed by community members. The first question addressed how racial disparity discourages success among minority students.

John Hardin High School teacher Jacinta Pleasant said it is imperative to implement inclusive curriculum for students. As an English teacher, she said she tries to include a diverse array of authors for students to study in her classes.

"You have to know your classroom, so you have to know what you need to expose those kids to and build upon that relationship," she said. "If they feel like you are trying to connect with them, there's going to be more success in the classroom."

Hyper-localized topics also were addressed, such as how schools in Hardin County can expand resources for students, how student discipline can be more appropriately addressed regarding black students locally, how local school libraries can expand the diversity of books and materials available and how local school administrators can emphasize diversity when recruiting teachers.

Each panelist was asked to provide one suggestion on how community members can address educational inequality locally. Some responses included more parent-teacher partnerships, more activism from parents and more mentorship and tutoring.

About 100 people took part in the session, organizers said. Thursday's panel also included Elizabethtown Independent Schools Board member Kim Iman, Memphis, Tennessee-based school social worker Dr. Ashley Johnson and Jerren Morning, coordinator for Bluegrass Middle School's Youth Service Center.

The next town hall is 7 p.m. Thursday and will address criminal justice reform. Other topics addressed through the series will include workforce development and employment, health and wellness, Black business in Hardin County, women of color running for office and how to be a better ally.

RISE meetings are moderated by Jerisia Lamons, director of cultural diversity at ECTC, WKU associate professor Dr. Donielle Lovell and Tanya Seabrooks, who serves as banking center manager at Limestone Bank and is a member of the Radcliff City Council.

“There will be opportunities to answer questions as well as engage in a positive dialogue to affect some really good change in our community,” Seabrooks said at the outset of Thursday’s discussion.

Each event is free and open to the public. To register, go to eventbrite.com and search for the RISE event.

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