



contact us: 507.452.1262 fax: 507.454.6409 email: winpost@winonapost.com

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WAPS discusses funding for equity work

by ALEXANDRA RETTER

Following Winona Area Public Schools' (WAPS) two settlements with the Minnesota Department of Human Rights (DHR) — one related to disparities in discipline of students of color and one tied to allegations of discrimination — the WAPS Diversity and Equity Committee (DEC) is continuing its efforts to make the district more equitable and inclusive. DEC's work is also taking place amid discussion in Winona and across the county of equity and inclusion in the wake of George Floyd's death. Questions about funding DEC's efforts and broadening the committee's membership to spur accountability arose at a June 18 DEC meeting. The Post viewed a video of this meeting (see sidebar story).

The DEC voted earlier in the year to pursue an approximately \$41,000 equity plan with the Equity Alliance of Minnesota, which would have included a comprehensive needs assessment, climate survey, and other work to address diversity and equity in the district. It would have been a component of the group's three-year strategic plan to address equity and discrimination in the district. The draft proposal was then sent to the district's leadership team, but, according to discussion among committee members and WAPS Superintendent Annette Freiheit during the June DEC meeting, because it was not budgeted for, no action was taken. Former Director of Learning and Teaching Maurella Cunningham pressed why the

see **EQUITY** page 5a

WAPS admin: Equity committee is private

by CHRIS ROGERS

School leaders pledged this summer to make Winona Area Public Schools (WAPS) more welcoming and inclusive to students of color. They also said, in a break from past practice, that meetings of the district's Diversity and Equity Committee (DEC) and numerous other committees are not open to the public. Several DEC members said external accountability is key to achieving the

change WAPS seeks.

Like the much of America, long-running racial grievances were aired more publicly than ever before this summer at WAPS. That included newly released details about discrimination charges filed against WAPS by the Minnesota Department of Human Rights (DHR) in 2017, alleging — among 14 other incidents — that school representatives suspended a

see **PRIVATE** page 5a

Local jeweler crafts bishop's ring



Contributed photo

During his consecration as Bishop of the Episcopal Church in Minnesota, the Rt. Rev. Craig Loya (right) is presented with the Episcopal Ring by Asa Loya, his son. Holtan's Jewelry of Winona was commissioned to make the ring.

by ALEXANDRA RETTER

The Rt. Rev. Craig Loya, who was recently consecrated as Bishop of the Episcopal Church in Minnesota, knew he wanted his bishop's ring, a symbol of his position, to have connections to Minnesota and high-

light the aspects of ministry that are vital for him. Local family-owned business Holtan's Jewelry was commissioned to make the Episcopal Ring, which includes a seal to be used on official documents and designs such as interlocking rings. The top of the ring features a signet, or

seal. The signet is an adaption of the seal of the Diocese of Minnesota. The signet also alludes to the Diocese of Minnesota's roots in ministry with people who are Native American, Bishop Loya said.

see **RING** page 4a

Absentee voting encouraged in Aug. 11 primary

by CHRIS ROGERS

Vote absentee, request an absentee ballot soon, and don't wait until the last minute to submit it, local election clerks in Minnesota encouraged voters.

In Minnesota and Wisconsin, the August 11 primary election for federal, state, and local offices is less than a month away. While election officials are stocking up on masks, disinfectants, and physical-distancing cues to minimize the risk of COVID-19 exposure at polling places, voters in both states can avoid the risk altogether by voting absentee. In both Minnesota and Wisconsin, voters do not need an excuse to vote absentee, though there are more steps for Wisconsin voters.

see **PRIMARY** page 4a

Weekly infection numbers are growing

by CHRIS ROGERS

The spread of coronavirus locally and throughout the region did not get any better in the last week. Winona County posted 24 new infections in the last seven days — the county's highest one-week total since April. The speed of new infections in Trempealeau County and La Crosse County held steady, with 37 new cases in Trempealeau County in the past seven days and 90 in La Crosse County. Buffalo County saw its first significant uptick in cases with seven new infections in as many days. Infections also climbed in Wabasha County, where there were 11 new cases this week — its highest one-week increase in weeks.

"We've been getting kind of a slow trickle of cases in the last month, and then we've had more of a consistent uptick in the last week or

see **INFECTION** page 9a

Winona mostly follows mask rule



Photo by Chris Rogers

The vast majority of Winonans seemed to be complying with the city's new mask rule. The rule came into effect last Friday, requiring face masks in indoor, public settings citywide.

by CHRIS ROGERS

It was a weekend of double takes across Winona, as customers started heading toward the doors of local businesses, remembered that they forgot their mask, and doubled back to grab it.

On Friday, Mayor Mark Peterson's face-mask rule came in effect. A decree from the mayor issued under a City Council-

approved emergency declaration, the rule ordered that "all individuals shall wear a face covering in indoor areas accessible to the public and while riding in any public bus or for-hire transportation" to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The rule applied to virtually all businesses in the city; there were some exceptions for children under age two and people with medical conditions or disabilities that

prevent them from wearing masks. The way it was structured put the burden of enforcing the rule on businesses, and the rule provided relatively few consequences for businesses or people who did not comply.

Nevertheless, across Winona, most people and businesses followed the rule.

see **MASK** page 9a

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Equity

continued from page 1a

funding hadn't been considered and asked about its inclusion in the coming year's budget. The '20-'21 budget was approved by the WAPS Board later that day, without the funds, though Freiheit told the group she thought there might be a way to work the proposal into the budget.

"And if we're not committed to it, that's one thing, but if we are saying we're committed to doing something and it gets approved, voted on by DEC, and moved forward to the district leadership team and gets approved there, and then gets stopped because of a funding issue, my question is, 'What is the funding issue? And if it couldn't happen for 2019 to 2020, why can't it be built into whatever funds or taken from whatever funds or built into whatever budget for the upcoming year?'" Cunningham asked during the meeting.

"Going into '20-'21, that could be looked at and figured out, a way to put it in there and get it done, if that is what DEC committee feels needs to be done first in order to really be able to build your three-year strategic plan," Freiheit noted. "Then we'd have to move in that direction."

Diversity and external accountability

In addition to funding, DEC members spoke about diversifying the committee's members to include both more adults and students of color, as well as external members who could help provide accountability to the group's work. The committee plans

to continue the conversation moving forward, and suggested a subcommittee could be formed to help develop plans to diversify the committee's makeup.

"I believe 100-percent that there has to be external accountability, it's great if we have internal accountability, hold ourselves accountable, but from what I know, it's been a struggle prior to the last two years. It's also been a struggle these two years," Cunningham shared. "So, it's great that, I mean we have to have the district representation, but I think our members from the community may also help to hold us accountable. And perhaps that's not seen as an issue or a challenge, but I think that it is. There's a lot that DEC could've done this year, could've done last year and could've done prior to my arrival. And it wasn't because of the people on the committee, that anybody is slacking or anything to that effect. But there are challenges and roadblocks that come up. So I just think external accountability, if to this point, there hasn't been a lot of internal accountability to moving forward, then we need to have some sort of external accountability."

One committee member agreed, and stated she'd worked for the county for years during a time when there were problems with its child protection program. "One thing we had to do that was extremely painful is start a Citizen Review Panel," she stated. "A lot of counties like to implement those using internal reviewers, and that doesn't make any sense. If you're doing internal review of your work, then obviously people just tend to get on the bandwagon and support that. The thing

that really created some change was bringing in citizens to perform an actual external review of what we did. That's where you bring in those voices. It's very tempting to just bring in the folks that already agree with what you're doing ... That's a beautiful example that Maurella just gave of having to have those community members to create that external accountability."

DEC's mission, funding

The DEC is working on identifying ways to foster healthy school environments and help staff members assist students, Freiheit shared in an interview.

"Right now, I see that group [DEC] really shifting through, 'What is research saying are best practices for how to improve school climate?'" she stated. "It's also, 'What kind of professional development is best to meet the needs of our students?' It's really that research and advice."

The DEC is working on an equity plan and a three-year strategic plan, as well as guiding staff training that is required as part of the two separate DHR discrimination settlements.

WAPS School Board member Allison Quam said in an interview that the board has not asked the DEC to spearhead the district's work to become a more inclusive and equitable place; rather, committee members wished to be part of those efforts.

"I believe we need to have leaders in shifting the culture, and it has to be from within the staff ... Anytime it comes from the top, it's not going to be sustainable and it's not going to be healthy," Quam stated.

The group discussed alternate ways it could fund its work, such as through a

grant that could fund a climate study of district schools, and some components of long-term efforts that involve training that could use district funds earmarked for staff development.

Cunningham said she appreciated the concept behind the grant, but thought the district should set aside funds for the work to ensure it was completed. "I love the idea of that grant. I just know grant funding also is limited in whatever respects, whatever the limitations are," Cunningham stated. "And I really would advocate that we build in funds from Winona Area Public Schools for this type of work. If we additionally get funding through grants, that's great. But if we are actually committed, we will have this built in."

Discussion with the Staff Development Committee about a set amount of money being allocated to the DEC for staff development purposes could take place, Freiheit explained. Funding for other DEC work would have to be found from other district sources, she added.

The DEC's three-year plan will likely include elements that are not tied to just staff development, including curriculum audits, Cunningham stated. A clear plan would help WAPS assign funding to the DEC appropriately, Freiheit said.

"And so I would really encourage this group to try to get a much more solid plan so we can do that," Freiheit noted. "If part of your plan is needing to do the comprehensive needs assessment, then that should be the first action ... and that budget could be adjusted what we know what we need to do for the comprehensive needs assessment."

Private

continued from page 1a

Black student for a dress code violation and, when the student tried to ride the bus home at the end of the day, the student was arrested, charged with trespassing, and "threatened with physical injury." At a rally in June, over a dozen former students of color, parents, and staff spoke out against what they claimed was ongoing bias at the schools. LaShara Morgan, the parent-organizer of a group for students of color, told a crowd of over 200 that some things haven't changed since she was a student in the 90s. "We have people calling us n*****s on a daily basis. We keep telling the teachers, and they keep doing nothing," she said.

The outcry spurred the School Board to eliminate an armed police officer stationed in schools and led Superintendent Annette Freiheit to promise a long-haul effort for deeper change. "No matter how uncomfortable the conversations with our staff are, we are going to move forward," Freiheit said. "And I want to put in place things that ensure these things don't happen for other students."

WAPS' Diversity and Equity Committee (DEC) plays an important role in those efforts. All-staff trainings on cultural competency and implicit bias are major components of WAPS' efforts to be more inclusive, and the DEC is helping plan the details of those trainings. Another example: While the rate at which WAPS' suspended students of color nearly quadrupled from 2011 to 2018 and led to a separate DHR charge of discrimination,

DEC members spent years exploring less punitive approaches to student discipline. From proposing an equity officer to advocate for minority students to developing an action plan to respond to the alleged racism brought to light at the June rally, DEC is playing a significant role in WAPS' work toward equity. At the same time, some committee members have expressed frustration with how DEC's discussions have not always translated into concrete action by WAPS.

For years, Winona Post reporters have attended and reported on meetings of DEC and other WAPS committees, including DEC meetings this winter. For years, WAPS provided public notice of DEC and other committees in its calendar of open meetings, including DEC meetings this spring. In June, WAPS held a DEC meeting not at its regularly scheduled time or location and without public notice. District administrators said the meeting was closed to the public.

Now, Freiheit says that DEC meetings are not open to the public. WAPS has two kinds of committees: "School Board committees" made up largely of School Board members and "district-wide committees" made up largely of district staff or citizens with one School Board member each. Freiheit maintained that only "School Board committees" are open to the public. "District-wide committees," including DEC, are not, the superintendent stated. Freiheit said WAPS would not necessarily allow the public or the press to attend future DEC meetings or other committee meetings. "Should the committees chose to be open to the public, then fine," she added. The

chair of the DEC, a WAPS staff member subordinate to Freiheit, was not available for comment.

The Minnesota Open Meeting Law states, "All meetings, including executive sessions, must be open to the public ..." including meetings of the governing bodies of school districts, counties, cities, townships, and "of any committee, subcommittee, board, department, or commission of a public body." While the law itself clearly includes committees, a 1993 Minnesota Court of Appeals ruling regarding an "ad hoc" — or temporary committee — created some gray areas about what kinds of committees must be public. Since then, numerous advisory opinions from the Minnesota Department of Administration — the state agency charged with ensuring local governments comply with state transparency laws — have stated that standing committees (i.e. permanent committees) are subject to the Open Meeting Law. Freiheit cited the court of appeals ruling as justification for why DEC and other district-wide committees are not subject to the Open Meeting Law. Regardless of the district's legal interpretation, WAPS has the power to open committee meetings to the public.

The other district-wide committees WAPS administrators have maintained are not open to the public include the Curriculum Advisory Committee, the Staff Development Committee, and roughly nine other committees charged with early childhood education, community education, wellness, technology, safety, and more. The Curriculum Advisory Committee is charged with helping decide what WAPS teaches children. It has been a major player in the district's halting efforts to line up what it teaches with what standardized tests require, and it is the lead committee tasked with making sure WAPS follows through on its accountability plan: the World's Best Workforce Plan, including goals for improving graduation rates and reducing racial achievement gaps. The Staff Development Committee has the power to decide how hundreds of thousands of dollars in public funds are spent. Last fall, the elected School Board actually asked the Staff Development Committee for permission to spend less than \$2,000 from a pot of taxpayer dollars dedicated to professional development. In 2015, the committee spent \$50,000 sending staff to a conference in San Diego, Calif. The Winona Post has, for years, been given meeting notices and access to these committees until now.

One School Board member sits on each of the district-wide advisory committees. The district-wide committees are supposed to advise the School Board, but School Board member Allison Quam said the full School Board does not receive reports or meeting minutes from those committees, so School Board members do not necessarily know what is going on on the other committees. "If their purpose is to be advisory to the School Board, then they need to be submitting reports to the School Board. I can't think of a single district-wide committee that has submitted a written report

in my time on the board," she stated. Quam has asked for annual or semi-annual reports, but WAPS officials have not delivered them. Unlike all of Winona's other local governments, WAPS does not publicly post meeting minutes or agendas for most committees to its website.

Quam began serving on DEC this year. Asked if she thought district-wide committee meetings should be open to the public, Quam stated, "What I want to hear from people is, why should they be closed?" She added, "We want the community to understand what our work is. Why not make it available to just come and listen? ... What are the reasons to keep them closed?"

The Post asked Freiheit that question. "You know, at this point, this is the direction our district is going. I know there's been a change," Freiheit responded, referring to the past practice of allowing public attendance at committee meetings. "I guess both of us can agree to disagree that we don't interpret the Open Meeting Law the same way, neither does our legal counsel." Referring to the presence of a few community members who are not WAPS employees on DEC and other district-wide committees, she continued, "That's the intent — that our community is involved in those decisions — or not decisions, the conversations and discussions that occur at those meeting. So their role is advisory and we do have our community participation in there."

At the last DEC meeting, some committee members said external accountability is needed to ensure DEC and WAPS follow through on their goals. Because WAPS recorded the last DEC meeting on June 18, the Winona Post was able to make a public information request for the recording; WAPS has not yet fulfilled a Winona Post information request for a schedule of future committee meetings. "I believe 100 percent there has to be external accountability," DEC member Maurella Cunningham stated, advocating for more community members not employed by WAPS to be members of DEC. Internal accountability is one thing, Cunningham said, but it's another to have "an external force, someone from outside of Winona Area Public Schools who says, 'Hey, you guys said you were going to do that or you were working on that, what's happening with that?'" Other members echoed her sentiment.

Cunningham added, "I think when your accountability stops within one organization, whether it's this district or some organization, in my experience, you're a lot less likely to accomplish the things that need to be accomplished."

The Winona Post requested that WAPS open its district-wide committee meetings to the public. The School Board is slated to discuss that request this Thursday, July 16, at 6 p.m. "If the board makes a different decision as a group on Thursday night at the meeting, we'll reopen that discussion," Freiheit said.

Chris@winonapost.com

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Clarification

The Winona Post reported in its July 1 issue that the Winona ORC was not able

to hold its annual recognition banquet, golf tournament or Starlight Stroll 5K. The Starlight Stroll will now take place virtually August 1-8, and the golf tournament is scheduled for September 10.



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