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Philadelphia Tribune (1912-2001); Oct 26, 1993;
ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Philadelphia Tribune (1912-2001)
pg. 1A

Parents fight transfer of 'Afrocentric' teacher

By Kathleen Bayne
Special to the Tribune

The proposed transfer of a popular teacher at a Germantown elementary school, who was instrumental in developing a unique Afrocentric curriculum, sparked a parent protest last week that lead to School District officials saying they would reconsider removing the second-grade instructor.

A group of twenty or more parents and children from the Robert Fulton Elementary School blocked traffic at Haines and Baynton Streets last Friday morning during rush hour to protest the reassignment of teacher, Shirlene Adger, a teacher the protester's said is essential for the success of their Afrocentric program, one of the few such programs in the city.

District officials had said Adger's reassignment was simply a matter of policy. But parents say the teacher transfer policy is clashing with the District's community input policy which produced the Afrocentric curriculum at Fulton.

The Fulton School's Afrocentric curriculum is designed to infuse African-based philosophy into all subjects taught in school, and includes rites of passage ceremonies and teaching the children Swahili words.

"She (Adger) was with us from the very beginning, building and developing this program. She loves

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the kids and she loves what she's doing here. We can't stand to lose someone like that," said Kimberly Williams, a vice-president of the Robert Fulton Home and School Association, the group which organized the demonstration.

School authorities at Fulton said if they had their choice neither Adger nor any other teacher would be reassigned, but since the school was experiencing a drop in enrollment from the 1992-1993 school year they are considered overstaffed.

While Fulton and 29 other schools showed a decrease in enrollment, 42 other schools in the District have shown an increase, leaving them understaffed. Each year the School District deals with the problem by "leveling" — moving teachers from over-staffed schools to understaffed schools.

Fulton, which has a 98 percent African-American student population, has ten African-American full-time classroom teachers and only six white full-time classroom teachers — higher than the Black and white teacher ratio District wide. An African-American teacher with more seniority than a white teacher at Fulton, could then be the one reassigned due to a court ruling.

"It's true that Mrs. Adger was here to help spearhead the Afrocentric movement," said Fulton Principal, Deitra Spence. "But it's also true that she's the least senior Black teacher in this school."

Spence said Adger is the one to be transferred under the racial balance requirements because she is the least senior Black teacher. Transfers are usually based on seniority but under the racial balancing policy a white teacher with less seniority would be retained to maintain balance.

Clara Tolbert, an administrative assistant in the School District's Northwest Office, said she sympathizes with the parents but there was nothing the District could do.

"We understand what they're asking for but we are bound by the School Board policy, the union contract and the 3rd Circuit Court ruling," Tolbert said.

Fulton School parents said they understand the need for leveling, and can even accept the concept of racial balancing among teachers, but insist because of the unique Afrocentric curriculum being taught at Fulton, the school should be exempt.

Leveling and balancing, Fulton parents contend, undermine the District's vaulted school based management initiative, a program to increase parental involvement which in Fulton's case produced the Afrocentric program.

"She (Adger) already knows what the curriculum is about and why its needed. She's experienced, and that's our whole point. We don't want to have to start all over from scratch," said Williams of the Home and School Association, whose 7-year-old daughter attends Fulton.

"When the School District accepted the Afrocentric curriculum submitted by the Home and School Association, they knew that we needed a core group of African-American teachers for the program to be successful," said Stacey Cornish, a spokesperson for the Association.

"Maybe we didn't have it in writing that they wouldn't take away any of the teachers needed for the program, but we certainly understood it to be implied," continued Cornish, whose two children attend Fulton. "We had no idea that it would come to this."

Adger, the teacher in question, said she was thrilled the parents were taking action to protest the Afrocentric program.

"This is the first elementary school in Philadelphia to have an Afrocentric curriculum, and that's great, but if you take away a teacher from it you take away from the program," said Adger who has taught at Fulton for four years and has taught in the District for 23 years.

Late Friday afternoon, School District officials said there was a possibility that Adger would be able to remain at Fulton after all. Another teacher may be transferred in her stead. District officials said their reconsideration of Adger's transfer was not prompted by the morning protest.

The parents of the Fulton Home and School Association said they were pleased about the prospect of retaining Adger, but still plan to request a School Board hearing to question the teacher racial balancing policy.

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