

African Heritage takes aim at opportunity gap

Jen Zettel, USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin 5:34 p.m. CT Feb. 16, 2017

KIMBERLY - Nearly 400 African American high school and college students descended on Liberty Hall Thursday for the third annual African Heritage Emerging Student Leaders Institute.

The day-long event featured workshops with scholars and business professionals from the Fox Cities and around the nation.

But the institute isn't the only way African Heritage Inc. is working to close the opportunity gap for black students in the Fox Cities, said Bola Delano-Oriaran, a co-founder of the organization and an associate professor of education at St. Norbert College.

"When we think about the national and regional issues and local issues as it relates to racism, our area also goes through those issues, and I think it means a lot to African American students to know that our community believes in them," she said.

African Heritage Inc. started by focusing on the factors that contribute to the opportunity gap, such as lack of African American representation in school curriculum and among classroom teachers and school district leadership and on research that shows teachers often have low expectations for African American students.

To overcome those factors, the organization connects students with successful African American professionals in the community and offers training sessions for teachers, Delano-Oriaran said.

"African Heritage has been working with school districts in bringing in practitioners and scholars to support teachers in empowering them to be successful with African American students," she said.



Figure 1: African Heritage Inc. co-founders Bola Delano-Oriaran, left, Tynisha Meidl, center, and Sabrina Robins speak to students Thursday during the third annual African Heritage Emerging Student Leaders Institute at Liberty Hall in Kimberly.

Not only do the workshops focus on areas of need, but they help keep costs low for school districts that would otherwise have to pay for their educators to travel, register and stay overnight at conferences offering similar opportunities elsewhere, Delano-Oriaran said.

African Heritage Inc. hosts a back-to-school celebration in August with free food, music and school supplies. The Appleton

Area School District, United Way Fox Cities and Showing Up For Racial Justice co-sponsor the event.

They advocate for families in the community who come to them for help.

The group also hosts the annual Fox Cities Black History Program and other programs throughout the year "in trying to engage the community in understanding the experiences of people of African descent," Delano-Oriaran said.

The Fox Cities Black History Program is scheduled for 2 to 3:30 p.m. Saturday at the University of Wisconsin-Fox Valley student union. Amy Abugo Ongiri, an associate professor at Lawrence University, will give a lecture titled, "Do Black Lives Matter?" The event is free, and a soul food reception will follow the program.

Through it all, children are the focus.

Ben Vogel, an assistant superintendent in the Appleton Area School District, said the school district has partnered with the organization since planning began for the first African Heritage Emerging Student Leaders Institute. Since then, their ties have only grown, and Vogel said students are flourishing as a result.



Figure 2: Keynote speaker Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings of the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Education listens Thursday to a presentation during the third annual African Heritage Emerging Student Leaders Institute at Liberty Hall in Kimberly.

Any African American student in the district can attend the institute. Many members of the Men of Distinction and the Women of Z clubs at Appleton high schools have gone in the past and brought what they've learned back to their schools.

"Now our students are taking the lead. They're taking an ownership in this, in what their schools look like and how they feel for all students," Vogel said.

When Delano-Oriaran sees students at the African Heritage Emerging Student Leaders Institute, she sees how important the organization's work is to the community.

"It's always very affirming when you have all those students sitting together in workshops and listening to speakers who have Ph.D's in a variety of areas, whether they are focused on getting our students strategies on study skills, strategies on getting access to the STEM fields, strategies on how to be successful in the arts and the humanities," she said.

"It's affirming to see the joy on the faces of our kids, of African American students sitting as professionals and as scholars and being engaged in such an academic setting," she said. "That is very rewarding."

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