

Diversity training at CKHS 'All about the kids'

By PAUL BALCERAK
Staff writer

No topic was taboo Thursday afternoon at Central Kitsap High School's most recent diversity training seminar.

While students headed home early as usual on the early release day, parents, faculty and other community members packed into CKHS's library to focus on ways to make the school more racially and culturally accommodating.

"This is our attempt to bring the community onboard," CKHS social studies teacher J.D. Sweet said. "If you get people discussing (race and ethnicity) at lunch

(and during their free time) ... then you create an institutional dialogue about it."

Thursday's seminar was another component in a yearlong program called "Journey on the Road to Cultural Proficiency." The program is headed up by Sweet and his wife and partner Beth Blandin. Blandin also is an English teacher at CKHS. The couple run a diversity training consulting firm outside the school called New Phase, New Ways.

The Central Kitsap School District has been focusing heavily on diversity issues since last school year when a diversity committee met to develop the Cultural Competency Action Plan. The plan is the

district's way of addressing diversity issues and finding new ways to deal with them.

"We are really focusing hard on our diversity and diversity issues," CKSD Spokeswoman Melanie Reeder said.

Thursday's seminar was an independent diversity training program developed by Sweet and Blandin for CKHS.

Several people from within and outside the CKHS community headed up discussion groups, which met in 15-minute intervals. Faculty and staff moved from table to table and discussed various issues surrounding diversity and cultural sensitivity.

"I don't like it when, say, someone looks at me and says, 'I don't see any color,'

because that doesn't make any sense to me," Sandra Phillips said, addressing her first group of the day. "Of course we're different."

Phillips is the mother of two students at CKHS and has had to deal with stereotypes surrounding her Ghanaian background and Mormon faith.

One of her first group members, CKHS leadership teacher Diane Winger, has sometimes had to confront those stereotypes in her classroom. One of the most effective ways for her to deal with race issues has been to just be comfortable acknowledging and asking about them.

"It's not an unknown in my classroom

because I'm not awkward with my students," she said.

For example, Winger said she wouldn't be uncomfortable asking a student if a particular label — "black," "African American," etc. — is offensive.

Those kinds of one-on-one exchanges are what Sweet and Blandin hope to cultivate at CKHS.

"You have to start with the individual and find out what their biases are," Sweet said. "With some of the staff members, dealing with culture, dealing with race is hard."

Sweet has developed what he calls

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the "Pyramid Model," a three-tiered system that focuses on different aspects of diversity training. Individuals are trained first, then training is shifted to classroom behavior and institutional standards, like disciplinary measures. Focus areas shift progressively throughout the school year.

The plan has been met with mostly good reviews from faculty and staff, though not everyone was gung-ho from the beginning. Some staffers have had to warm up to the idea of regular diversity training seminars, Sweet said.

"The more that they've seen the progress and the difference it's made in their classrooms ... the more it's been received," CKHS Principal John Cervinsky said, though he added that in his opinion, most diversity issues at the school are purely related to academic performance.

Diversity training like Thursday's seminar will continue throughout the 2007-08 school year. Sweet and Blandin are planning events next school year as well.

The fate of the program will likely rest on the statistical results it generates.

"All the feedback we've got so far is anecdotal," Blandin said. "What the district will be looking for is test scores."

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