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New Trier discussion to focus on future of public education

Students take lead in focus on state's' education disparities

By Tara Malone

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More than eight months after 1,000 Chicago students skipped classes and tried to enroll instead in North Shore schools, a group of parents, clergy and area residents this week will probe the disparities in Illinois public education that sparked the boycott.

On Thursday, the initiative called United We Learn -- launched last August in the run-up to the influx of city students applying to New Trier Township schools -- will hold a forum to consider what is needed to level the playing field among schools statewide.

The conversation does not assume funding is the silver-bullet answer, said Gail Schechter, a member of the new group and executive director of the Interfaith Housing Center of the Northern Suburbs.

"We are not signing on to any campaign. We just know the outcomes are not equal. And why is that?" Schechter said.

The discussion follows eight months of research by the residents that hastily gathered when news spread of the school boycott planned by state Sen. James Meeks (D-Chicago). The group of parents, clergy and community activists first planned how it might welcome the visiting students. With that done, it quietly continued to work toward understanding why some schools have more resources than others, and how that might impact people living in one of the state's top school districts.

"We highly value education. That's why most of us moved here," said New Trier parent Lisa LeFevre, a member of the United We Learn group.

LeFevre and other group members interviewed experts in education, public finance and legislation. The conversations began with a common reaction: surprise.

"They'd never heard from anyone on the North Shore," Schechter said.

Co-sponsored by local Leagues of Women Voters, a panel of educators, business people and students will consider where public education is headed in Illinois. Former state schools Supt. Glenn "Max" McGee, who also led Wilmette School District 39, will deliver the keynote

remarks.

New Trier High School senior Matt McCambridge also will weigh in. McCambridge and a handful of New Trier students befriended teenagers from some South Side schools who attended the boycott. What began as a Facebook friendship marshaled into a yearlong effort to chip away at the funding predicament that has long stymied Illinois lawmakers. They drafted a students bill of rights and hosted a student convention on the topic.

The student campaign, like the forum itself, is an improbable outcome of a civic action that most thought would end when nearly 1,000 Chicago students climbed back onto yellow school buses and drove home.

That it didn't astounds Schechter.

"We absolutely would not have done this without [the boycott]," Schechter said. "I don't think people would imagine this coming out of the North Shore."

The discussion occurs from 7 to 9 p.m. Thursday at New Trier High School's freshman campus in Northfield at 7 Happ Rd.

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