

Press Dispatch

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OPINION

Students say racism exists in KC

Does racism and discrimination still exist in Kansas City? We pose this question as part of our ONE Kansas City initiative.

ONE Kansas City, an initiative on race, was an outgrowth of our unique positions in the community and our roles as Councilmen. It is an effort to continue the dialogue on race relations started by many who served before us. Throughout the past two years, we have convened four community wide dialogues, each of which resulted in spirited conversations and revealed personal experiences of racism in Kansas City.

Instinctively we knew that to change perceptions about race, we had to start with our children. To date, we have visited 42 schools throughout the metropolitan area speaking to over 4,000 students about diversity and race relations in Kansas City.

To begin our school discussion, we ask students to identify characteristics that the two of us have in common. "You both are wearing a shirt, you both have shoes, and you are both very tall." We then flip the script and ask the students, "What are some of the things you notice that are different between the two of us?"

"You both have belts that are different colors, you both have different hair." Eventually, some young person will say "Councilman Rowland, you are white and Councilman Nash, you are black."

We then ask whether or not being different races makes any difference, and the answer is always yes. Yes, racism and discrimination still exist today, they tell us.

It is our experience that the younger the child, the less likely they are to see the difference in our skin color. Rather, they see all the things that reflect our sameness as human beings. Children appreciate the subtle differences that make each of us unique and special.

For example, in comparing their class studies to their own life experiences, the older children realize that racism and discrimination are different today from the description of events they read about in their American History books. Today's acts of racism are more sophisticated and subtle.

Children also realize that racism is a learned behavior, not an inherited trait or attribute. Lastly, the answer to the question is always yes. Yes, racism and discrimination still exist today, they tell us.

They also tell us they witness racism in their schools, their neighborhood, learn from them.

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Young people in Kansas City get it.

Jim Rowland and Troy Nash serve on the Kansas City Council. Rowland represents the 4th District, and Nash represents the 3rd District. They have discussed race relations in Northland schools, as well as south of the river.