U.S. Department of Education Announces Resolution of South Orange-Maplewood, N.J., School District Civil Rights Investigation

Black Students to be Afforded Equal Access to Advanced, Higher-Level Learning Opportunities

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Contact: Press Office, (202) 401-1576, press@ed.gov

The U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) announced today that it has entered into an agreement with the School District of South Orange & Maplewood, New Jersey, to resolve a compliance review that examined whether black students are provided an equal opportunity to access and participate in advanced and higher-level learning opportunities.

OCR's investigation revealed that the school district's nearly 2,500 black students are significantly underrepresented in advanced and higher-level learning opportunities at the district's elementary, middle and high school levels. For example, in the 2012-13 school year, black students had only 148 of the nearly 800 spots (18.7 percent) in the district's Advanced Placement (AP) courses, while they represented more than half (51.5 percent) of the district's high school enrollment. Black students were also underrepresented in elementary and middle school math enrichment programs and advanced courses.

"I applaud the district's efforts to reinvigorate its course and program offerings to ensure that all of its students have an equal opportunity to reach their academic potential and equal access to a high quality education," said Catherine E. Lhamon, assistant secretary for civil rights.

The district has taken significant steps to expand the advanced and higher learning opportunities for all of its students (over 6,600), including reducing tracking for many courses All fourth- and fifth-grade students now benefit from the English Language Arts enrichment program and the district is in the second year of phasing in the rigorous, inquiry-based curriculum in its new International Baccalaureate (IB) Middle Years Program to prepare its students for college preparatory courses at the high school.

The district has also revised the criteria for AP enrollment at the high school level. In addition, the district has taken steps to support effective teachers and leaders through enhanced and targeted professional development. These efforts are part of the district's implementation of a multi-year Transformation Plan to provide enhanced instruction and increased educational opportunities for its students, which OCR will monitor as part of its monitoring of the resolution agreement.

As part of the agreement, which the district agreed to enter prior to any OCR compliance determinations, the district committed to take specific actions to ensure that it is providing an equal opportunity and equal access for black students to participate in its college and career preparatory programs, in particular its advanced courses and enrichment programs, AP program, AP courses, honors courses, and dual enrollment courses.

Specifically, the district will take the following actions:

- Work with an expert consultant; obtain feedback from students, parents and staff; and conduct a comprehensive self-assessment of its current programs and courses to identify any potential barriers;
- Consider expanding criteria to determine eligibility and selection for enrollment;
- Expand student, parent, and community outreach about the available courses and programs;
- Make improvements to the academic counseling services at the middle and high school levels; and
- Provide training for relevant district and school site administrators and personnel.

A copy of the resolution letter is available here and agreement is posted here.