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Saturday, October 06, 2007

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Detroit school board retreat starts healing process

Santiago Esparza / The Detroit News

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DEARBORN -- Detroit School Board member Annie Carter's apology to Board President Dr. Jimmy Womack set the tone for Saturday's retreat at the Dearborn Inn.

Carter had previously called Womack the "b word" and the apology appeared to go along way toward starting the healing process with some board members who were attending a team-building retreat this weekend.

"I didn't get on this board to fight," Carter said. "I went down in the gutter and I prayed I would never do it again. Jimmy, I am so sorry; truly."

Several members lauded the apology. The retreat got off to a rocky start with board member Marie Thornton refusing to sit with her colleagues Friday during some sessions and criticizing the board for not having the audience sit closer to participants.

During one session Saturday, board members shared stories of other members allegedly talking negatively about each other in the press, at public meetings or to members of the community.

It was during that session that Carter apologized. Womack accepted the apology without comment. That acceptance is key to the board moving beyond past slights or perceived slights, said Lyn Lewis, a retired University of Detroit-Mercy sociology professor who led Saturday's early-morning retreat sessions.

"A lot has been said about gossip," Lewis said. "It has always been an ill pill. It can choke you. It can suffocate you."

After the apology, there was a noticeable change in the board members. They opened up more and Lewis joked the board was like people in a bar or church. It takes a few drinks or

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prayers to get them going, she said.

Each board member present had to share an experience or problem and Lewis talked about ways to move beyond them.

But most of the board seemed to know the answer already. Joyce Hayes-Giles said the board needed to act like family. This way, no matter how dysfunctional they may get, they are not airing their problems to the media or community.

"Some of us have feelings that were hurt over various things," she said. "The apology was so sincere, I think it will help get rid of some of the garbage."

Many of the board members talked about building a team that can work together with the district's children at the heart of every initiative.

Board member Marvis Cofield said the board will never be a traditional team because each member brings a different agenda to his or her spot on the board.

He said as long as the members respect each other and don't take votes against their positions or measures personally, the board can function as a team.

"We are on a boat going to the same place," Cofield said. "We have to respect each others' differences. You got to learn how to eat without biting the lip or tongue."

The retreat, which was paid for by the Skillman Foundation, continues Saturday and into Sunday morning.


Those in attendance for the early-morning sessions also included board members Tyrone Winfrey, Jonathan Kinloch, the Rev. David Murray, Carla Scott and Paula Johnson.

Superintendent of Schools Connie Calloway also attended and was scheduled to address the board for about an hour Saturday afternoon.

You can reach Santiago Esparza at (313) 222-2127 or sesparza@detnews.com.

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