



OSSINING UFSD NEWS

For Immediate Release

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Not Just Black and White

(OSSINING, NY) – The students are seated around tables in groups of eight. One of their teachers, Jillian McRae, opens the class: “Are there things that Dave Chappelle gets to do on his TV show because he is black?”

The resulting discussion is typically highly charged among the diverse students in Ossining High School’s team-taught “Racism, Classism, Sexism” class, a new course this year that allows students to earn three college credits through the SUNY system.

The course is one of two team-taught classes at the high school headed by McRae, a black woman, and Sam North, a white man. They also teach a SUNY class on “The Black Experience.”

“The dynamic we have, of a black female teacher and a white male, provides students with a comfort level that their ideas will be taken seriously,” said North. “Both of us are committed to going to the controversial. We are not afraid of saying things that lead to heated discussions.”

The seminar-style college-level course is offered as an alternative to traditional Advanced Placement classes and has proven more popular than AP with diverse students.

The idea for the course was born in the fall of 2005, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The two teachers heard from students that they were discussing similar issues in their classes, which happened to be held during the same period. When the district TV station wanted to film a program with students talking about Katrina, McRae and North agreed to bring their classes together. The result was so positive they decided to join the classes once each week, informally, for discussions. With some work, and the support of Principal Joshua Mandel, they

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have now formally linked their courses with a title and the SUNY designation.

McRae and North see themselves as discussion facilitators. One example, McRae said, is when she asks students during a discussion of the book “Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria,” if only whites can be racist. “This creates pandemonium among the students,” she said. “We try to make a distinction between prejudice, racism and bigotry. We put ideas out there not as our views but as a mechanism to inspire outcries. We constantly say things that are intended to provoke.”

“We’re not trying to just teach them, we are trying to engage them,” said North. “We learn stuff from them all the time. Hopefully, by the end, they discover they know a lot less about each other than they think.”

The Ossining Union Free School District, nationally recognized for its mission to further the success of all children, serves approximately 4,200 pupils in six schools: Roosevelt School for newborn to four-year-olds, Park Early Childhood Center for kindergarten through first grade, Brookside School for grades two and three, Claremont School for grades four and five, Anne M. Dorner Middle School for grades six through eight, and Ossining High School for grades nine through 12.

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