

Black history classes in Staunton, Waynesboro help bust myths of America that many learned

By Patrick Hite

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STAUNTON — On the west end of Staunton, heading out of town on West Beverley Street sits an abandoned house that was built in 1955 for William and Queen Elizabeth Miller. The African-American couple had run an orphanage for nearly 40 years on the site before fire burned it to the ground in 1955. That's when the house standing on the lot now was built.

The orphanage is part of Staunton's Black history, history that Moonyene Jackson-Amis doesn't want to be forgotten. She's even helped organize an archeological dig at the site to see what survived the fire. On a recent Thursday morning, Jackson-Amis talked to a class at Staunton High School about the Millers, the orphanage and the dig.

The African-American history class, taught by Jarrett Hatcher, is brand new to the school this year.

"I think the kids like it," Hatcher said.

In 2020, then Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam announced a new high school-level African American history elective. A year earlier he had put together a committee to develop the course. Staunton's class follows a course map available on the Virginia Department of Education's website.

Delores Phillips is the director of James Madison University's African, African American, and Diaspora Studies Center. She was thrilled to find out Staunton was offering this class.

"It's exciting to see African American history classes welcomed into the curriculum with the same enthusiasm as European history classes because they serve the same purpose for all of us," she said. "They reveal to students the collective roots of who we are and, because those who do not learn history are doomed to repeat it, they guide us toward a better America for everyone."

Jackson-Amis was the first speaker in Hatcher's class. The day after she spoke to the students, she gave them a guided tour of the property where the orphanage once stood, discussing some of the history of the building and the area.

"I believe that you undergird your own life by knowing your foundation," Jackson-Amis told *The News Leader*. "And the foundation for me has been Staunton, Augusta County, what my grandparents did, what my parents did, and what the families that I grew to know did."

She said knowing both her local and global history has been important to her.

"It has given me so much love of my own people, love of myself," she said. "And I can send that graciously and earnestly to love other humans."

Waynesboro High School offers an Africana studies class as an elective, a course that predates the class created under Northam. Currently it's taught by Lorraine Dresch, who said the class was taught for at least three years before they took it over last spring.

According to the school's program of studies, the course explores African culture, history and geography. Some of the topics covered include early African empires, triangle trade and slavery, and African Independence.

The class also focuses on African Americans, including Reconstruction, the Jim Crow Era, the Civil Rights Movement, and the influence and cultural contributions of the African Diaspora.

Cassandra Newby-Alexander, a professor of Virginia Black history and culture at Norfolk State, said classes like this allow teachers to drill down deeply into aspects and perspectives of history that can only be touched upon if taught at all in general American history classes.

"For example, redlining and residential segregation did not simply emerge naturally," Newby-Alexander said. "This was a creation of 20th century America and were put in place with local, state, and national laws that were designed to restrict African Americans."

Dresch said there is a need for the class, and students last spring were extremely engaged in the topics that were discussed.

"They just had a love for the subject as I do," they said. "And just saw how important it was to their lives and their own sense of self."

Some of Dresch's students said that they have higher self-esteem after taking the class, getting a chance to learn about important people in history that they had never heard of before. Dresch said there was also a lot of myth busting that went on in the class.

"We talked a lot about myths that tried to dilute the impact and the horrors of slavery," Dresch said. "Or tried to reduce the culpability of white Europeans and European-Americans from the institution of slavery."

They've spent time discussing the myth of the Lost Cause, an attempt for many in the South to rationalize the Confederacy's Civil War loss. Dresch talks to their students about how the Civil War wasn't fought over states' rights, using primary sources to show that it was fought over slavery.

"Here's what the main players in the Confederacy are writing when they are breaking away from the United States, here's why they say they're breaking away," Dresch said. "And every single document says this is about slavery, Abraham Lincoln is going to take away slavery and this is why we're breaking away from the Union. It's so explicit in the documents."

Dresch can then go from there to explain how history is used as a political tool and what is taught is not always neutral.

"Feeding back on these ideas that education has always been a tool for the Black liberation struggle and will continue to be and still is," they said. "So here's how this history was purposefully disseminated into textbooks in these white schools."

Dresch said a lot of what they teach is new to the students, and it's exciting helping students round out their history.

"I kind of have free rein to follow what my students are interested in and the things that I feel are going to be most impactful for their understanding of American history," Dresch said.

It's important to Jackson-Amis that schools teach history without fear of the truth, so she's happy that classes like this are doing just that.

"Even though some of the truth in this country is horrific, it's still the truth anyway," she said. "And in my opinion, you can't get beyond it until you address it, and when I say beyond it, I mean to heal or to work towards something."

Jackson-Amis is a big believer that we should all learn about different cultures, saying most people have gone through something good and something not so good, and that makes us all human.

"If we get through that, at some point we will realize that we're human beings on the same planet," she said. "And, hey, we have to kind of either live here together or perish together."

The News Leader reached out to Augusta County Public Schools, asking if any of its high schools teach an African American history class. We have yet to receive a response.

Cainan Townsend served on Northam's Commission for African American History Education. A former school board member in Prince Edward County, he is the managing director of Farmville's Robert Russa Moton Museum, which works to preserve and interpret the history of civil rights in education.

The only criticism he has of classes like these is that many, like the ones in Staunton and Waynesboro, are electives.

"I think all students should take these courses," he said. "I don't like the idea that you could go through school at the K-12 level and have little experience learning about different cultural groups and historical perspectives."

Phillips, speaking as a resident of the area and not in her capacity at JMU, said it's sad that there's even a question of whether Black history classes are as important for white students as they are for students of color.

"It suggests that different histories of different Americans are granted different importance for white students when all histories are deemed equally important for students who are not white," she said. "It implies that white students have no use for histories that do not reflect their faces back at them as if history were a mirror in which we should see only our singular, precious selves and no one else, and that perspective diminishes us all."

She said it's not appropriate to ask what white students will gain from such a class. Instead, Phillips said we should ask what we all gain from a comprehensive view of history.

"Our understanding of history is not a zero-sum game in which a deeper dive into African American history somehow costs students something," she said. "Plenty of history

classes offer deeper dives into lots of subjects. This class is additive to the curriculum, complementing every other history course beside which it will sit and contributing to the expansion of our intellectual wealth."

Offering classes on Black history, of which African American history is only a subset, is long overdue, she said.

Townsend also feels Black history classes are crucial in recognizing the broad story of American history.

"It is important to show students representation of all people who have contributed to the American story," he said. "The country is a very diverse place and demonstrating diverse people is important."

Is Staunton City Council financially committed to education? School board, citizens not so sure

By Patrick Hite

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STAUNTON — Nate Lawrence has been teaching for 15 years. The Staunton High School science teacher stood in front of the city's school board Monday and told them that the past two years have been the hardest of his career, but he feels the school staff has risen to the challenge, doing what needs to be done.

Now, he's asking Staunton City Council to do the same — do what is needed to help the school division when it comes to funding. He referenced the school division's current initiative, Kindness Matters.

"I think it's time for the city budget to show us some kindness," Lawrence said.

The school board and council could be headed for a clash over how much the city will provide in local revenues. The school division is asking for \$15.3 million from the city as part of a \$37.89 million budget. Council's preliminary offer, per Budget Director Brad Wegner, is \$14.7 million, \$600,000 less than the school's request.

"It's what we need," Wegner said. "It's not what we want, what we wish. It's what we need."

The school division would like to hire as many as 27 positions to make up for shortfalls but is only proposing to hire seven and Wegner said those are required positions.

Among its other proposals, Staunton City Schools is asking for a 6% pay raise for all staff and an increase to \$15.50 an hour for instructional assistants. The raise is less than what neighboring school divisions in Augusta County and Waynesboro are proposing.

The school division is offering free after-school childcare for employee's elementary-age children and covering a 22% increase in insurance premiums for employees.

This all in an effort to retain current teachers and attract new ones, both of which have been a problem in Staunton. As of Monday night's meeting there were 21 staff vacancies, including seven teachers, in the school division.

There's also a substitute teacher shortage, with Human Resources Officer Jonathan Venn telling the school board during a work session Monday that "there are very few qualified subs."

With a lack of teachers and no subs to fill in for them, 17 teachers in the city have given up their planning periods to cover classes. They're being compensated — \$76,000 is the total being paid, said Wegner — but as Board Member Amy Wratchford pointed out, that's not counting the cost it's taking on teachers, with burnout a real possibility.

In a newsletter sent to families of students in the school system last week, division officials put it bluntly at the very top, "Our Schools are in Crisis."

"We stand with you to advocate for school funding from our city that is at least on par with that of our region," Christine Hawley, president of the Staunton Education Association, told the school board Monday. "In this time of great need, it is unconscionable to do less. It is my great hope that our members of city council here or listening tonight are willing to respond appropriately."

Wegner said Waynesboro City Council is expected to contribute \$17.4 million to its school division next year in the proposed budget, \$2.7 million more than Staunton.

"This data set may come as a surprise to many who believe in and trusted Staunton's financial commitment to education," Wegner said.

Wratchford said the talent is in the school system, the potential is there for it to be an elite division, but the funding isn't.

"If we can't fund them, then we can't take advantage of that talent," she said.

Staunton resident Allison Profeta joined the meeting remotely during the budget public hearing and directed her message to city council.

"I'd like to remind any council members who are in attendance or who are listening, that they've sat in that very room and praised frontline workers during the pandemic," she said. "Teachers and staff are frontline workers who literally put their lives and health at risk over the last two years to make sure that our children were safe and supported and educated and we cannot as a city just stand by and watch them not get properly funded."

Profeta also noticed that Amy Darby, the council's liaison to the school board, wasn't present. It had been mentioned at the beginning of the meeting that Councilman Stephen Claffey was substituting for Darby, who was celebrating a birthday.

"I think that's horrible she's not there," Profeta said. "She's one of the council members who repeatedly asked Superintendent Dr. Smith every time he presented during the pandemic pre-

vaccine, when we had no idea who was most at risk, constantly asking him when kids were going to be back in schools. So I hope that she is going to be a leader on city council and push her other council members to fully fund your budget since she so badly wants kids back in school.”

Claffey and Mayor Andrea Oakes were in the audience representing city council at the meeting. The News Leader asked Oakes to talk following the meeting, but she said she had another meeting to attend and pointed toward Claffey, saying he would be willing to talk.

Asked about the \$600,000 difference in the school board’s request and council’s preliminary offer, Claffey said they hadn’t seen all the figures.

“No opinion yet,” he said. “We’re all taking it in and we’re seeing what everybody needs.”

Claffey said he couldn’t say one way or the other if what the school board is asking for is reasonable.

The school board has a called meeting Monday, March 21 to adopt the proposed budget. Three days later city council has a work session and meeting schedule. The school board and city council have a joint work session scheduled for April 14, and city council is scheduled to vote on the budget April 28.

As Augusta County adds more school resource officers, experts say proper training critical

By Patrick Hite

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VERONA — Soon all Augusta County students will be seeing more deputy sheriffs in their schools, at least that’s the plan. The board of supervisors recently approved \$1.7 million in funding to add 12 additional school resource officers (SROs). That will give each school in the county an SRO, although that likely won’t happen by the start of school as the Augusta County Sheriff’s Office will have to hire and train officers first.

School Superintendent Eric Bond said it’s been a longtime strategic goal of the school board to have a school resource officer for every school.

“Our SROs are essential, not only for providing security measures,” Bond said, “but building trusted relationships with our students and communities.”

That last part, building relationships with students, is key to the program being successful, said Gerard Lawson, a Virginia Tech education professor and licensed professional counselor.

School resource officers are nothing new, although, originally, they had a more community policing philosophy, according to Lawson, forming relationships that led to proactively

addressing concerns. The real shift in their focus came in 1999 following a mass shooting at Columbine High School in Colorado as the officers became more about maintaining law and order in schools.

Lawson said we're slowly starting to see a shift back to the community policing philosophy, which he believes is important for the success of any program.

"The better outcome is for that police officer, that SRO to be so well known and so respected in the school that students will go to them and say I've heard that so and so is going to do something," Lawson said. "We do see reports of that, but they don't typically make the news."

Stopping a problem before it ever happens is preferable to quelling an act of violence once it has begun, Lawson said. The professor hasn't looked at the data since a deadly shooting in Parkland, Florida at Stoneman Douglas High School in 2018 killed 17 people, but up until then he said someone other than the shooter had prior knowledge about every school shooting in the United States.

"Our task, number one, we'd like to get those high capacity magazines and assault rifles and those things out of kids' hands," Lawson said. "But we also want for there to be an opportunity for us to be able to have somebody intervene in a preventive way and the better relationships that are built within the schools the more likely that's to happen."

While Augusta County wants an SRO in every school, there are no immediate plans to add additional officers in Waynesboro or Staunton.

Staunton currently has one SRO at the high school. Superintendent Garrett Smith said last week that the position was just filled after the previous officer left the police department. In Waynesboro, per Superintendent Jeffrey Cassell, there are two, with their primary assignments at the high and middle schools, although they will serve all schools as needed. Cassell said the school division will continue discussions with the Waynesboro Police Department regarding additional SROs as staffing allows.

Jamie Dunn was an SRO and is now head of the program in Waynesboro.

"It's a very rewarding position," he said. "You get to build relationships, you get to impact younger people who get to see you in a different light. You're still an officer, but your focus is building relationships."

Per Leslie Koogler, who is in charge of the SRO program in Augusta County, training for officers headed into schools includes:

- They must complete the basic law enforcement class at the academy
- They go to a weeklong school resource officer class at the academy
- They go through ALICE (Alert, Lockdown, Inform, Counter, Evacuate) training
- They go to a weeklong CIT — crisis intervention training class
- They are trained to respond when there's an active shooter

Valerie Slater would like to see at least one more requirement for SROs — that they have to interact with students who have had the most negative encounters with law enforcement officers in school settings.

Slater is the executive director of RISE for Youth, a Richmond-based nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that promotes the creation of healthy communities and community-based alternatives to youth incarceration.

She sees a benefit if school resource officers listen to students who have had negative interactions without blaming the student or finding excuses for officers. She said all the training in the world by other officers, by other adults, won't change the way SROs might potentially look at a student of color or a student with a disability or maybe a student who isn't dressed as well as others or one who is acting out because of an issue that officer may not be aware of.

"You're not going to change the way you view that student by listening to other adults," Slater said, "but perhaps by listening to students who have had the worst experience that might do something."

Lawson agrees that this step is critically important in training law enforcement officers to be in schools. He cited data from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration that showed two-thirds of students in kindergarten through 12th-grade have had some sort of traumatic experience that would qualify them for having PTSD.

"If those kids are getting triggered throughout the day by authority figures telling them to do something and that sort of activates that fight or flight response, they're shutting down instead of engaging and at some point they may actually start to engage a fight, part of that fight or flight."

In talks with SROs, Lawson said the support they need is around better understanding how to manage students with a trauma history or children with pre-existing mental health conditions so the officers don't complicate anything and, in fact, can help support those students.

"They wanted more information on how better to work with families," Lawson said. "If they are the liaison between the community and the schools, and that truly is how this was designed, working with families was one of the things that they had asked about."

One place where Lawson said SROs that he talked with didn't feel well prepared is active shooting drills. Lawson said many administrators felt the officers were capable of handling that situation if it occurred, but officers were telling him a different story.

When it comes to that type of violence, and if schools truly think more school resource officers will help prevent threats from entering the buildings, Slater has an idea how to make that work better.

What she would like to see is, eventually, school resource officers to be less of a presence inside the schools and more established on the outer perimeter. She called it a step down method where maybe there is a satellite office just outside the school building.

"If we're trying to keep bad things out, then don't be in the building waiting for them to breach," Slater said. "Be on the outside making sure they never do."

Then what is supposed to be outside is kept outside, including the officers, Slater said. She's concerned that children of color will be negatively impacted by school resource officers in the building.

The Sentencing Project, an advocacy group based in Washington D.C., released a report last year showing that, in Virginia, Black youth are 4.8 times more likely than their white peers to be held in juvenile facilities.

Slater has looked at data involving students of color who end up in the justice system and said that the number one referral source in schools is police officers.

"If the police officers are the number one referral source from schools and you add more police, what do you think the outcome is going to be?" Slater said. "And if it has an adverse effect or a disparate impact on students of color, the deck just feels stacked."

Lawson isn't so sure it's the SROs escalating that disparity, though. His studies showed that the disparity actually began in the classroom when the student was sent to the office. His studies found that more Black students were referred for disciplinary issues than their white counterparts, but it didn't always begin with school resource officers. Lawson said that disparity is maintained throughout the rest of the process.

"So the ratio stays about stable when you're looking at who is suspended and who's expelled," Lawson said. "And then even further out who goes to court. That disparity is maintained throughout the rest of the process, but it actually begins in the classroom."

Lawson's research has also found that school resource officers are more successful when they are selected because they have an interest in working with kids and are more focused on building relationships with students as opposed to the law enforcement piece of their jobs.

"The challenge comes in when you have an area that just assigns people to it or this is seen as a punishment that if you're not pulling your weight in other parts of your responsibilities, you'll be assigned as the SRO," Lawson said. "That's really where we see the problems sort of emerge because they need to be part of that community. They need to be seen as a positive role model, as an asset instead of a risk for kids."

When that's done well, Lawson said, there are much better outcomes between students and school resource officers.