

Lewis & Clark Hosts "Equity in Education" MLK Commemoration

by Sydney Sinks, News Reporter
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GODFREY - Lewis and Clark Community College (LCCC) had a full house for their Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration on Jan. 25, 2024.

The event, themed “Equity in Education,” included music by Blancas led by Brenda Lancaster and student recitations from James Morissette, Kamiah Newby, Brandon Hayes Jr. and Madi Bouillon. Al Womack Jr., the Director of the Alton Boys and Girls Club, was the keynote speaker. He gave a speech titled “Are We There Yet?” and spoke about systemic racism in education.

“I do believe that our education system is built on racism,” Womack said. “They didn’t include Blacks when they first established the education system. Policies and practices perpetuate racial inequities and disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes. This form of racism is embedded in the system itself, impacting students, teachers and administrators at various levels.”

Womack said that the end of affirmative action would have “infuriated” King. He noted that there are severe discipline disparities, meaning that students of color and Black students tend to receive harsher punishments than white students for the same offenses, which contributes to the school-to-prison pipeline. Womack, who is on the Alton Community Unit School District #11 Board of Education, said he sometimes challenges the discipline that Black students receive.

“We have to challenge some of these referrals, some of the recommendations for expulsion. Just sitting in hearings two or three months ago, we challenged some administrators because I learned that some of those reports were inaccurate,” he said. “Our kids are labeled, they’re marked and they’re targeted.”

Schools with higher numbers of Black students are usually allocated fewer resources, and students of color are disproportionately placed in lower-level classes and special education programs, Womack said. Some resources and textbooks minimize the impact of BIPOC people and provide a eurocentric view, he added, and standardized testing can be biased.

Microaggressions continue to be a major problem faced by Black students and educators. Womack encouraged attendees to talk with their children about this so they are better equipped to identify, avoid and call out microaggressions.

He also talked about the number of Black educators in the public school system. According to Womack, Black teachers make up 6% of educators in public schools compared to white teachers, who make up 80%. Statistics show that Black students are more likely to graduate high school and enroll in college if they have at least one Black teacher in their early years of education.

“There are some school districts that don’t have a Black teacher. There are some school boards that don’t have Black board members. I think that leaves our kids out to dry,” he said. “I’m here to defend and protect all of our students, especially our students of color, to ensure they have a fair shot.”

Womack said companies and schools should empower their Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) coordinators and focus on the retention of Black educators and administrators. He also encouraged community members to attend school board meetings and concluded his speech by quoting King’s 1963 “Letter from Birmingham Jail.”

“Addressing systemic racism in education requires a comprehensive effort,” Womack said. “We have a lot of work to do.”

