

I am an American We are One Nation **GIVING STUDENTS OF COLOR A BOOST**

School district official fosters leadership, aims to improve graduation rates

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USA TODAY NETWORK

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Sebastian Witherspoon

Location: St. Cloud, Minnesota **Profession:** Director of equity services for St. Cloud school district

Mission: To help improve graduation rates and participation for students of color



JASON WACHTER/USA TODAY NETWORK

As director of equity services, Sebastian Witherspoon works to narrow the achievement gap for students of color in the St. Cloud, Minnesota, school district.

When a group of mostly Somali students walked out of Technical High School in 2015, St. Cloud, Minnesota, school district was thrust into the news.

Protesters said the catalyst for the walkout was twofold: a social media post depicting a Somali student in a wheelchair and implying she was affiliated with a terrorist organization, and an incident involving fruit being thrown at a Somali student.

For Sebastian Witherspoon, who has been with the district for six years, the walkout was a lesson, one that proved the district needed to be more attuned to the daily lives of students and create new forums for communication.

“Student voice matters. We learned that what they have to say matters, and we learned that students have a tipping point, even though they are extremely resilient,” he said. “That sped up the process of having these groups.”

Witherspoon is director of equity services for the district. He works to help improve graduation rates and participation for students of color through parent involvement groups, classroom collaborations, professional development and leadership programs for students.

“We exist because students of color, especially in Minnesota, do a lot worse than white students academically,” Witherspoon said. “We understand a lot of our kids have additional barriers that middle-class white kids don’t.”

St. Cloud school district has a much higher percentage of students of color than surrounding districts.

Witherspoon said St. Cloud school district’s equity services department focuses on the whole child. “A lot of our work is not around academics; it’s around helping students get to a place so that they can access education,” he said.

“I didn’t believe that the color of your skin and your circumstances should define your outcome,” Witherspoon said of his drive to help students. “I just did it initially to be a role model, to show up, but that’s not enough. Kids need much more than someone just saying, ‘You can do it! You can do it!’ They need resources. ... They need someone to be there and to help them through the process.”

Q&A WITH SEBASTIAN WITHERSPOON

What does it mean to you to be an American?

For me, as an African-American male, it means I have an obligation to do my best every day, to acknowledge the freedoms that I currently have, and to honor the people that came before me in the best way that I can, considering the tumultuous journey they had to go through for me to get here. So I have to honor that and do my best to represent not just my family and my students and my school, but represent being an African-American male and what that means positively, and to role model, and to not take that for granted ever.

What moment motivated you to launch this effort?

I think one of the most challenging moments of my life was when I didn’t graduate from high school and all my friends did. I was sitting up in the balcony watching them graduate, and I was bawling like a little baby, because I knew I should have done that. Then on top of that, knowing the people that I disappointed. I think that started me on this trajectory, but ultimately what really lit a fire in me was seeing black men in America be stereotyped and marginalized and be put in a box ... and knowing that it’s not that cut-and-dried. I don’t want to see young people like me not be successful just because of the color of their skin.

What gives you hope or what concerns you?

The same thing — seeing people change and seeing people not change. You know, we all have biases, but (what gives me hope is) really being pleasantly surprised by having really pleasant conversations with people who you’ve already stereotyped and thought that they were going to show up one way but didn’t. But on the flip side, it’s

the same thing, (being concerned with) somebody who you don't expect to act like that kind of shows a bad side of themselves.

What do you hope to accomplish through your efforts?

That I look back one day and say that I made a difference. ... It's the idea that you can see the fruits of your labor, that you did this for a reason, and you can see that you made a difference.