

NINA MOINI: This fall, a St. Paul elementary school will transform itself with a new learning model. Benjamin E. Mays, which currently runs under the International Baccalaureate, or IB, umbrella, will instead be built around an Afrocentric program and curriculum. It's been years in the making, and it's historic. Benjamin E. Mays will become one of the only Afrocentric schools in the state.

Joining me now to explain the new schooling model are two guests. Danielle Hughes is the principal of Benjamin E. Mays. Hi, Principal Hughes.

DANIELLE Hello. How are you doing?

HUGHES:

NINA MOINI: I'm good. Thanks for taking the time. Also with us is Stacie Stanley, the superintendent of St. Paul Public Schools. Hi, Superintendent Stanley.

STACIE Hi. Great to be here.

STANLEY:

NINA MOINI: So Principal Hughes, let's start with you. Can you talk about how this program came to be, the history, if it will, and what gaps it is responding to?

DANIELLE Yes. So the Afrocentric program is a long time coming. And it would not be here without the helps of the
HUGHES: community-- as we call, the village of the Rondo neighborhood. But it has been something that has been sought out, I would say, across the United States. And so we are lucky to bring a program that is ran through a public school model for the Afrocentric model.

But specifically, the Rondo neighborhood is a very prominent neighborhood where historically, there has been a lot of success in things that had happened. But with that history, there has also been a lot of trauma to the community and neighborhood. And with the highway that came many years ago, it displaced a lot of families and businesses. And much of the community said, it's time for us to have something that we can take pride in and ownership and have something specific for our families and students.

And so with a lot of advocating, the community came together for several years and reached out to the school district and just said, hey, we really need to do something for our African-American students. And so that kind of was the gist of how the start of the program came into existence.

I was hired last July. And I was hired as the principal to start the Afrocentric school. And I'm really excited for that and so blessed to have that opportunity. But it's a little bit about how that has come to be.

NINA MOINI: Thank you. That's really good and important context. Superintendent, I know you came into your position after the board had already approved this move. But can you talk about why you decided to immediately support it?

STACIE Oh, absolutely. First of all, really glad to listen to Principal Hughes. She is amazing and the person for leading this
STANLEY: school. And I'm third-generation SPPS family. And I can remember in the '70s being at a meeting with my mother where they were advocating for a school with an Afrocentric program. So this is truly life coming full circle for me.

Right now, almost 70% of our students at Benjamin E. Mays of the African diaspora-- they come from brilliant homes where collectivism is really important in the home, where working collaboratively together in the community is so important. And what will happen is the students will be able to learn in an environment that harnesses that and takes-- leverages that to foster student learning. And we know that in society, collectivism/collaboration is so important. And so it will benefit every student at Benjamin E. Mays.

NINA MOINI: Principal Hughes, since you're leading this program, can you talk about how the program was designed to specifically meet the needs of the students? How is it going to change what you're doing now with this new Afrocentric curriculum?

DANIELLE Yeah. So a little like Dr. Stanley had mentioned-- that the program would be a different approach to learning.

HUGHES: Much of the content that we will be teaching our students would be the same. But the approach is what we really center the learning about.

So again, the content is the same. But what does the learning look like for our students? How do we engage our students in the classroom. And really, through this-- building a sense of identity, a sense of purpose and responsibility, self-determination and collectivism, we're leaning into more of a communal approach to learning. And this is something that is very important to our students of color and how they receive teaching.

And so we're really trying to teach to the students, the students who are in front of us. Instead of the traditional model of education and how students have learned historically, we are really focusing on building a sense of cultural pride, teaching through love, highlighting equity and rigor.

When we approach it this way, the students-- they get to be seen and valued. They have a sense of purpose. There's research that says that when students see themselves in curriculum, they do feel safe. They feel seen. They feel valued. And they move from this sense of survival mode to really leaning into this high level of processing and creativity and interest. And so we're really shifting how the learning-- or how the teaching is happening.

Another thing that we're really focused on is bringing the community in in any way possible. How can we get the community in the building with our students learning and really lean into that village approach, which is something that is different than anything that I've seen or grown up with?

Those are some of the things that I think there-- are going to be very important that we do differently. I also think that we are-- we have been really intentional about the curriculum that we will be providing for students. So there has been a lot of intentional planning with teachers and educators to create a Afrocentric curriculum and that it will be interdisciplinary.

And so our students will learn about the African and-- diaspora throughout the day. So they will learn it across content areas. And I think the one thing that sometimes gets in the way of that is that there's an assumption that by focusing and centering African identity, that we're closing the door or forgetting about the rest of the community. And it's completely the opposite. If anything, it gives students a sense of security in their own cultural-- in their own culture and their well-being. And so we really want to shift from individualism and become more of a collective unit.

NINA MOINI: That community. Superintendent Stanley, St. Paul Public Schools also has an East African Elementary. There's a Korean language program that recently launched, as well, among several other cultural and language immersion programs. So I'm wondering, as superintendent, do you plan to continue investing in these kinds of programs across the district? Do you even have any new that you would want to talk about that you are-- have in the works?

STACIE STANLEY: Afrocentric program is the one that's really investing in right now. And you're right, we do have a robust set of language and culture programs. And that is because St. Paul, the city of St. Paul, is incredibly diverse. We know that students learn in different ways. And when they can, for instance, learn in their home language, in their heritage language, we know that that ultimately helps them to excel later in academics as they move into the secondaries.

And we also know across St. Paul that many of our families honor bilingualism, trilingualism. Actually, at Jie Ming, some 30% of the students are trilingual by the time they leave and they head off to middle school. So that is something that we value, that we honor. We want our families to know that they belong. And so that is why we have the myriad of programs that we do.

NINA MOINI: Well, we look forward to hearing about how it goes this fall. Thank you for joining us today.

STACIE STANLEY: Thank you so much.

STANLEY:

DANIELLE HUGHES: Thank you.

HUGHES:

NINA MOINI: That's Benjamin E. Mays Principal Danielle Hughes and St. Paul Public Schools Superintendent Stacie Stanley.