

Educators call Town Hall meeting over tensions

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WEST PALM BEACH — Cultural differences between African-American and Haitian youth may have led to the slaying of two teens at a “Sweet 16” party in September.

With that in mind, the Black Educators Caucus of Palm Beach County has organized a town hall meeting for this Thursday, Dec. 6 to discuss understanding these cultural differences and find ways to help stem the violence.

According to caucus president Ronald Leonard, the killings were said by some people to have involved African-American and Haitian-American youth gangs.

"We've got to understand each other's cultures and socialization skills," Leonard said. "I have heard that American boys (in the past) used to bully Haitian kids. We don't want (another act of violence) to happen again."

In September, gunfire broke out at the party held at the Newcomb Banquet Hall at the Riviera Beach Marina, 180 E. 13th St.

Two male youths were killed and six other party-goers, including murder suspect Rijkard Jean-Baptiste, were shot but survived.

Jean-Baptiste, 20, was arrested on first-degree and second-degree murder charges in the slaying of Antonio Hinds, 17, of Riviera Beach, and Andy Joseph, 16, a Palm Beach Gardens High School sophomore.

Palm Beach County State Attorney Peter Antonacci is reportedly seeking the death penalty against Jean-Baptiste.

Riviera Beach Police Chief Clarence Williams said at a press conference following the shootings that he was aware of reports of a rift between African-American and Haitian-American youths but he did not think that was what led to the violence in this case.

"The proliferation of handguns into urban settings needs to be addressed," Williams said.

Leonard said bridging cultural gaps between the two groups may help improve relations and defuse volatile situations.

“There are some (African-American) adults that don’t get along with some Haitian (adults),” he said. “That perception is passed down to their children.”

Palm Beach County School Board Member Debra Robinson said much of the misunderstanding between the two groups is based in ignorance.

“We are really all one. Basically our ships have stopped at difference places,” she said. “We all have contributed not only to our country but to the world.”

Robinson said the manager of the African, African-American, Latino and Women’s Studies department for the school district, Myra Leavy Bazemore, is working to make the Haitian culture and contributions of Haitians more prominent in the school curriculum.

“The (curriculum) doesn’t clearly state the inclusion of Haitians. When we say, ‘African,’ we really mean African Diaspora,” she said. “We are actively working on infusing (Haitian history and awareness) into the curriculum.”

Bazemore said the Palm Beach County School District K-12 infusion of African, African-American studies, which is mandated by the state, will include Haitian history, books, videos, training for instructors and professionals who are of Haitian descent.

She said she also believes that tensions between African-American and Haitian-American students are largely due to a lack of knowledge and understanding concerning the two cultures.

“As we learn about ourselves and our common history, we learn to appreciate that and understand each other,” she said.

Parents, students, educators, civic leaders and social activists from both the African-American and Haitian-American communities are expected to attend

the town hall meeting.

Leonard said the discussion will be critical in seeking solutions that could contribute to policy changes in the school district.

He said he is hoping that the meeting will help prevent violent incidents in the future, such as this deadly conflict between students of two different cultural backgrounds.

“We are trying to use whatever resources we have to make sure it never happens again,” he said.