



## Adams: Giving Dunlaps's students a global, diverse education

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While we're welcoming new elected officials, let's welcome Dunlap Community Unit School District 323's two new board members, Beth Rhee and Dawn Bozeman.

Bozeman, by the way, is probably Dunlap's first black board member. No doubt she is the first, but "probably" is just in case an expert on Dunlap's black history digs up someone who served in 1916 before Dunlap schools became part of a unit district.

Anyway, Bozeman's election is more of an "Oh, really" than an "I-never-thought I'd-see-it-in-my-lifetime" moment. It is, however, one more example of central Illinois' journey into the post-civil rights era. Slowly, sometimes kicking and screaming? Yes and yes, but there's no going back.

Diversity, as well as challenging opportunities for all students, were themes of Bozeman's campaign. She wants to see the administration and staff reflect the student body. On the campaign trail, some people took that to mean something other than what she said. "But it's not a black and white issue," says Bozeman, who moved to the area in 2008 when her husband was named a vice president of Caterpillar, Inc. "It's a global issue."

Indeed, empowering students to excel in a "global" society is part of the district's mission statement. In fact, diversity is built into Dunlap's DNA.

When two grade schools and a high school consolidated into Unit District 323 in 1969, officials saw fit to assure Dunlap's unincorporated areas always had representation on the school board. At least two board members have to be from unincorporated areas at all times, which means candidates from more rural areas are guaranteed two seats on the seven-member board even if they don't win the most votes.

Makes cumulative voting for Peoria City Council's at-large elections look tame, but it says the district was thinking about diversity from the beginning. And the system resulted in a hint of generational diversity when a Dunlap High School junior was elected to the board in 2007. Joe Eberle, then 18, was believed to be the youngest school board member in the state at the time.

P.S.: Eberle, a student at Illinois Central College who lives and works on a farm and lists his occupation as busboy at a restaurant, was re-elected from the unincorporated area in April, along with Amy Fairfield Doering.

That's diversity, but nothing like the suburban diversity that came as Peoria grew, with the city's help, and Dunlap schools took in more and more students with Peoria addresses.

"Not everything is white and wealthy in Dunlap," says Superintendent Jay Marino.

Most of the district's approximately 150 new students a year are new to the state or country. Though the district has a sizeable population of students who are Asian or of Asian descent, there's as much diversity among them as there is in the variety of first languages for many students.

"Last I knew, we were somewhere about 37 different languages spoken at home," says Marino, listing Spanish, Greek, Polish, German, Arabic, Japanese, French, Burmese, Cantonese, Romanian, Urdu, Mandarin, Vietnamese, Bengali, Pashtu, Tamil and Gujarati among them.

"That kind of diversity impacts all aspects of the district, down to food service," he says.

And that kind of diversity, along with parents with educational experiences from other states and countries, presents challenges well beyond building new schools and passing referendums to build them (unlike another public school district we know).

Board member Paul W. Park is one of those parents with higher expectations for Dunlap schools. Born in Illinois, raised in Korea, he was elected to Dunlap's school board in 2009. I won't say he's the first Korean-American elected to the school board, but it was major enough for a Korean-American online newspaper based in Chicago to ask him to write a weekly column on being an elected official.

He did for about a year and half. Unfortunately for me, it's in Korean.

Like many parents, including Rhee (who was the top vote-getter) and Bozeman, he's pushing for a stronger curriculum in Dunlap schools - for instance, more foreign language classes starting in earlier grades and more advanced placement courses in high school. "The board has done a great job of spending tax dollars wisely," he says. "But we haven't offered more to students."

Park welcomes the new board members because he believes their mindset is similar to his. "Even if this district is doing well in central Illinois, that's not enough," he says. "Our competition is global."

And diverse.

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Central Illinois's journey into the post-civil rights era will be finished when you no longer write primarily about the skin color of the people who are elected, but about what they stand for.

I'm happy to see that the citizens of the Dunlap school district voted for people who worry more about setting high standards for students than about how many of each color are in each class.

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