

# Hard Facts Report Raises Many Tough Questions

In August 2017, the Community Foundation and ACT Rochester expanded their reporting on racial inequities with a report called “Hard Facts: Race and Ethnicity in the Nine-County Greater Rochester Area.”

The regional report showed wide and persistent gaps in educational and economic outcomes among residents of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, affecting individuals and families throughout their lives and for generations to come. Even more shocking was the more severe disparity in our region compared to New York State and the country.

Community leaders thanked ACT Rochester for sharing this compelling data. Requests came in to talk with groups about the findings. Community workshops attracted hundreds interested in learning more. Discussion of the disparities was featured during the celebration of Frederick Douglass’ 200th birthday in 2018.

Then something unexpected happened: ACT Rochester Senior Director Ann Johnson got a request to speak to the sixth-grade class at Genesee Community Charter School. Then a fourth-grade teacher in the Rush-Henrietta Central School District called to say his students wanted to talk about the report’s findings.

“These young students gave me hope,” said Johnson. “They care. They wanted to know why people of color are treated differently than whites and what we can do to change things. They ask tough questions and they are not afraid to be bold.”

## **Students Look at School District Diversity**

In the fourth-grade classroom of Shane Wiegand at Sherman

Elementary School, students peppered Johnson with questions, all starting with the phrase “I wonder:”

- Why white people own the most homes?
- If racism and segregation are to blame for white people owning more homes than blacks?
- Will African Americans catch up? What is keeping them from catching up?
- Why whites are less poor today than blacks?



Before discussing “Hard Facts,” the students had studied redlining in Rochester and segregation through the stories of Ruby Bridges and Martin Luther King, Jr. They also watched The Children’s March and clips from July ’64, the story of Rochester’s riots.

One day, Khaliat Bishi, who is Nigerian-American, and Simra Hamad, who is Pakistani, both commented that they have never had a teacher who looked like them. Together with Bailey O’Connor, who is white, these three spent many lunch periods gathering data on their school and the Rush-Henrietta Central School District.

They referenced U.S. Census data and WXXI reports on the racial makeup of teachers in Monroe County, along with ACT Rochester data on poverty. They identified just one African American teacher in their school and fewer than a dozen teachers of color throughout the very diverse district. The three girls assembled a PowerPoint presentation and met with their school principal and the district’s two assistant

superintendents to share their findings.

“I was very impressed,” said Nerlande Anselme, assistant superintendent for student and family services, who is from Haiti. “They had a thesis, did their research, and in their presentation asked, ‘Do you see this as a problem in Rush-Henrietta?’ I said ‘Yes.’ ”

At the urging of its school board, this suburban Monroe County district is making diversity a priority. Wiegand is a member of a new 40-member Diversity Steering Committee that includes teachers, administrators, students, parents, community representatives, and leaders that is gathering ideas and discussing strategies for recruitment and ways to be more inclusive. The district recently hired its first African American superintendent.

### **Hoping to Make Our Community Better**

Genesee Community Charter School teacher Chris Dolgos read “Hard Facts” and believed it should be incorporated into the sixth-grade curriculum because it’s important for his students who are our community’s future citizens “to discover what it does take to make change happen.” It also dovetailed nicely with the yearlong theme of “Bridges and Barriers.”

The 30 sixth-graders’ initial reaction to the report was, “This is not okay. Why are adults letting this happen?” Their research went deep into issues related to affordable housing, poverty, and racism, and they explored ways for Rochester to be more inclusive. They asked great questions: “Why does our community look like it does? Why are some parts shiny and flashy and others are boarded up?”

“ACT Rochester shares information and provides the ‘what’ and ‘why,’ but people have to figure out the ‘how,’ ” Dolgos told his students.

With aspects of “Hard Facts” data on their minds, the students

divided into four groups that visited either Pittsburgh, New Orleans, Oakland, or Detroit. Students met with city leaders and community groups to learn about that city's problems and how they were being addressed. They also looked for ideas to bring back home. Students presented their findings to parents and the school community and created a "Whose Renaissance Is It?" Adobe Spark page, which outlines their research into Rochester's past and their hopes for its future.



The sixth graders also wanted to show their support for Rochester. With a grant from Expeditionary Learning Education's Better World Project – and help from local artist Shawn Dunwoody – they painted inspirational murals in each quadrant of the city. At School 12, they invited their family members and several dozen students from other Rochester schools to help with ambitious murals that cover sidewalks and several walls.

Paul Schramm, whose 12-year-old son was in the class, thought the conversations and research into race, poverty, and inequities were well timed. "These kids are very much aware of what keeps things separate today, and it's never too early to discuss it."

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**Top photo above:** Sherman Elementary School students Bailey O'Connor, Khaliat Bishi, and Simra Hamad, with fourth-grade teacher Shane Wiegand (photo by Caleb Parker).

**Second photo:** After completing murals in each quadrant of Rochester, sixth-graders from Genesee Community Charter School and their mural advisor Shawn Dunwoody returned to each location to sign their names. Here they are at Passaro's Deli on Clifford Avenue (photo by Erich Camping).