

Workshop emphasizes diversity

• *Plainfield schools: Employees take part in Friday event*

By **Catherine Ann Velasco**
STAFF WRITER

PLAINFIELD — To help break down cultural barriers in Plainfield School District, about 2,600 teachers, staff and administrators were asked during diversity workshops Friday to pick one goal to work on this school year.

Some of the 18 goals were: respect styles and approaches that are different than my own; uncover concerns people have with me; acknowledge my biases and assumptions and work to challenge them; and refuse to join in jokes that could offend individuals, another group or culture.

To reach all of its employees, the district held four workshops Friday. At the end of each, participants were asked to tell the person next to them their goals.

The purpose of the workshop was to show how diversity can strengthen the district that has seen a growing enrollment of minority students.

Staff was shown ways to communicate with students a little better and identify behaviors that lead to a respectful and inclusive environment, said Bea Young, founder and board chairwoman of The Kaleidoscope Group LLC, the Chicago organization that presented the custom-made workshop after meeting with administration, teachers and staff.

"Luckily, diversity is a skill. Like any skill, whether it's wallpapering or riding a bike, it gets learned step by step," said Susan O'Halloran, one of three presenters. "If we will do that, we can create climates where our students can really learn, they feel appreciated, they feel like they belong, they feel valued. And, we know students can't learn unless they feel that and because of you some students are going to feel seen and recognized — maybe for the first time in their life."

But Troy Cicero, another presenter, admitted it may be difficult.

"Not everyone embraces that change. A lot of people might get polarized and paralyzed by fear. So what we bring to diversity awareness is not us here to change your values, but for us to raise your awareness and your consciousness so you are better prepared for the challenges, for the changes and the choices that you are going to make on a daily basis in a more diverse school environment," he said. "Students need for us to model inclusive behaviors. They need for us to model respect around differences. We must prepare them for this multicultural world which will really be the real world."

Diversity is a variety of abilities, of skills, of experiences and cultural backgrounds that enable schools to achieve superior results, O'Halloran said. She said diversity doesn't have to be a solemn church service where people are being told what they are doing wrong — instead it can be a celebration.

"We get to be more of who we are," she said. "I get other ideas of who I can become ... often my own culture limits me."

Cicero asked people to look below the tip of an iceberg to see beyond physical traits.

"People unconsciously make assumptions based on what they see. It doesn't mean that we are bad people ... When we explore below the water line we are able to break down assumptions," he said. "If we don't challenge our assumptions, it leads to stereotypes, which leads to prejudice, which leads to discrimination."

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