

Durbin updated on MJCFH events

Hightower details programs in progress

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U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin dropped by Edwardsville Wednesday morning, touring the Mannie Jackson Center for the Humanities and then getting an update from Director Ed Hightower about the center's recent initiative to improve the culture and climate in the county's schools.

It follows on the heels of a March 31 visit to SIUE by Gen. Colin Powell to help the center launch its Global Research Initiative.

After a brief tour of the building, Durbin and Hightower sat across from each other in a conference room and discussed, among other things, Jackson's goal that the center promote mutual understanding, respect, dignity and forgiveness. Hightower told him the center is uniquely positioned to use the environmental humanities to address the issues of environmental fairness and elevate the human spirit through human expression.

Durbin also learned about the Conversation Toward a Brighter Future, in which more than 200 Madison County students – including Edwardsville High School and Lincoln and Liberty Middle Schools

– will be creating projects designed to “help mitigate the negative discourse existing across our country” and developing an action plan for positive change.

To that end, a summit was held in February. Afterward, each school submitted abstracts.

The EHS plan – titled “New Student Ambassadors” – aims to improve how new students are welcomed to the school.

Hightower handed a copy to Durbin that outlined plans from each of the 14 participating schools.

The “Ambassadors” plan will require developing strategies and activities that better equip a new student to be “an active EHS student with a positive attitude, high standards and a desire to be a person of influence.”

Durbin was impressed. “That’s great. I like this. We need it. We know we need it.”

Hightower stressed that “the findings have to be replicable and that the solutions have to be measurable,” so other cities and states can readily use them.

The center opened its doors on North Main Street in late 2015 and launched its speaker series with Powell’s talk on March 31. The funds from the dinner, which sold



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U.S. Sen Dick Durbin, Mannie Jackson Center for the Humanities Intern Sydney Ehmke, and Mannie Jackson Center Director Ed Hightower discuss the Center's "Conversation for a Better Future" initiative.

out, will help the center's efforts.

The “New Student Ambassadors” program will incorporate ideas such as a hotline for questions or concerns and various ways to reinforce the center’s “four pillars” of respect, dignity, understanding and forgiveness using social media, students in classes, video announcements, teachers and counselors, reward

incentives and assemblies.

As Durbin flipped through the high school abstracts, Hightower noted the isolation so often experienced by new students often leads to bullying.

Durbin suggested that “if you see a victim, the rest of us have to come to that victim’s side and let them know they have friends. The nasty and mean things they’re

hearing don’t represent” the majority of students.

The Liberty and Lincoln project focuses on improving understanding and respect within the school, leading to self-esteem and acceptance. “Students have indicated that some individuals feel disenfranchised and alienated based upon their club selections, sports participations, interests and hob-

bies,” the students noted in their abstract. “This leads to tension between groups causing resentment and fractured self-esteem.”

The middle school project focuses on education, promotion, team building, and acceptance of individual choices, which should lead to a more positive school environment, according to the submission.