

Superintendent of Schools Dr. Marcia Lyles is trying to broker peace between factions at the Academy for Performing Arts at Henry Snyder and Innovation high schools, during a recent visit where she met with student representatives in trying to bring the two schools - in one building - closer together.

Ever since Innovation's opening two years ago, at least some Snyder supporters have criticized the arrangement because both occupy the same Bergen Avenue site, Snyder's original home for decades.

Monique Andrews, head of Snyder's Parent Council, has contended that Innovation's sharing of resources, including teachers, once reserved solely for Snyder, has adversely impacted the Snyder experience and Snyder students and parents have periodically attended board of education meetings to complain they have been neglected since Innovation's founding.

For instance, some Snyder students complained last year that they did not receive the full attention from at least some of their teachers because they were being shared with Innovation's students.

Andrews, in fact, has likened the co-existence to having a charter school share space with a public school, while draining badly needed resources from that public school.

Snyder is a traditional neighborhood high school that has long served students in the city's Greenville section, while Innovation is a high school that draws students from throughout Jersey City based only on a lottery system that does not require taking specialized entry exams (similar to a state-supported charter school).

Those admitted to Innovation, however, enjoy some advantages such as having the ability to take certain courses offered from nearby New Jersey City University for advanced credit.

The concerns prompted Lyles to visit Snyder in an effort to reassure the district's commitment to helping that high school.

"One of the things we need to do is find out how we can co-exist," said the superintendent, when speaking of her visit early in the school year at the board's Sept. 15 meeting. "If we can't do it here, then we can't expect them (students) to do it out there."

During her visit, also involving among others, Associate Superintendent for Secondary Schools Dr. Ellen Ruane, and Snyder's state troubleshooter Cathy Coyle, Lyles spoke to teachers and Snyder student leaders.

Regarding that meeting, the superintendent observed, "They suggested there were things we could do together, and I suggested they send me their ideas."

But Andrews later complained to JCEA.org that the situation for Snyder, the target of state intervention to try and significantly improve academic performance, has worsened because, in its third year, Innovation continues expanding at Snyder's expense.

"This year, for the first time, they (innovation) put five classes on the first floor, in addition to what they already have in the basement," complained Andrews, who alleged the effort is similar to trying and "segregate" the two schools with "separate but unequal" facilities, meriting the filing of a U.S. Civil Rights Act complaint under Title 6.

"This is a takeover, and it's going to even get worse when they try finding space for the 12th Grade next year," she said.

Lyles insisted in an email that the record will show Snyder has received ample resources to keep it viable in the coming years, including via spending funds on "facilities work," as it continues working with the state in trying to improve.

"Innovation has not taken any resources from Snyder. Snyder is amply funded," she wrote.

"Last year, they received over \$350,000 in (federal) Title I (monies) alone. Innovation did not receive anything, although there are certainly Title I eligible students in the school. This year, their Title I allocation is over \$300,000. Once again, Innovation did not receive an allocation."

Lyles told JCEA.org certain teachers that have previously served Snyder exclusively have been committed to Innovation, but only because of "declining enrollment" in Snyder that has also made more of the building's space available.

In alluding to some of the most recent results on the state's Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) tests for language arts and math, Lyles said during the board meeting, "We have committed teachers at Innovation. We have committed teachers at Snyder. I think you saw we made progress at Snyder and we want this to continue."

Andrews, however, told Lyles her report offered no data on how the results impacted Innovation's population.

"I didn't see any information on Innovation," she said. "Yet it's supposed to be a high school."

Lyles assured Innovation's standing is valid, stating, "This year, it received their (state Department of Education) code for (reporting PARCC test) scores."

Lyles also told Andrews that Innovation students' standardized test results have already been factored into scores at the regular city high schools they might otherwise have attended.

Yet Andrews contends the school is still lacking because it has not yet been accredited as a high school by the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools.

JCEA.org tried reaching a representative of Innovation's PTO for a response, but was told only principal Dr. Wachera A. Ragland Brown had such information. The principal did not get back to us by deadline following repeated calls.

Lyles explained both schools have "a different focus," with Innovation's being STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) and Snyder's being "the arts," and she described Snyder's teachers as "remarkable."

The superintendent noted that deserving Snyder students have their own opportunity to participate in a "dual enrolment" program with Hudson County Community College.

Andrews voiced fears that Lyles' ultimate objective could be trying to phase Snyder out over time.

"To me, all signs point to her eventually trying to turn Innovation into a charter school, completely at Snyder's expense," she warned.

Yet Lyles said Innovation's lottery admissions process, while similar to that of charters, is not new to the district.

"The lottery is the fairest way to admit students," she wrote. "Yes, they do that in charter schools, but we've been doing it for early-childhood (education) for years."

Lyles said she is committed to trying to bring harmony to the two schools, as it is a district's function to promote such values.

"I look at it as my role to unify, not divide and I welcome the opportunity to work with anyone who wants to do that, she wrote, further assuring, "There are no 'favorites.' Every child in JCPS is important, and we will do whatever it takes to ensure each one has choice and opportunity."

In her email, Lyles did not address Andrews' claim that she had planned to visit Snyder a second day to confer with groups of students, but relented when she learned some of the youths were planning "a walkout" in response.

By Chris Neidenberg