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Council members spar over racism as Elgin officials table decision on police officers at U-46 schools

By: James Fuller



Tish Powell



Toby Shaw

Elgin City Council members withheld their blessing of a plan Wednesday night to keep eight city police officers in Elgin Area School District U-46 hallways for the 2020-21 school year until they get more information about an admitted disparity in the number of Black and Hispanic students arrested by those officers.

The pending \$1.1 million agreement touched off a heated debate on the council over how much value the program adds in keeping students out of trouble versus branding them as gang members or tagging them with criminal records at a young age.

Only council member Toby Shaw said he was ready to support the program as it stands. He delivered comments fueled by statements made by citizens at the outset of the meeting that labeled the Elgin Police Department as inherently racist.

"Those things do not describe the Elgin Police Department," Shaw said. "I've had to hold my tongue for weeks. I'm done. Enough. If we go around saying everyone is a racist when they are not, that's a huge problem. Those are the most divisive terms you can ever use. If we want to improve things, why are we trying to put up a huge wall between people? We put the best of the best in our schools."

But council member Tish Powell, who initiated the call for more information, told Shaw his comments come from a perspective that's not experiencing the possible negatives of having police in the schools.

"As a white man in America, who does not have black children, you have a very different view and a very different experience in this country," Powell said. "I am the only person up here who is a parent of a black son who goes to U-46. If we determine that we want our officers in Elgin school used differently than how U-46 wants them to be used, then we need to have that discussion with them. You're fired up? I've been fired up. Bring it. I'm ready."

Only some of the council members seemed to have data shared with the U-46 school board back in August. That data showed 343 students had been arrested in the 2013-14 school year compared to 36 students in the 2019-20 school year. The decline in arrests followed a change to a new intervention program that uses online learning, self-assessment and education for parents about drug, tobacco and alcohol use, and domestic and sexual violence prevention, as well as conflict resolution.

Still, school district officials said a "disproportionate" number of arrests continue to be Black and Hispanic students compared to the overall school population.

Those numbers weren't presented to the city council Wednesday. That led to calls from the majority of the council for more data and time to make a decision.

The council voted to table the matter until they can have a full presentation from the police department and U-46 on the current state of the program and possible changes.