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District Diversity Coordinator Mikaela Simms speaks at the Brattleboro Town School Board's June 5 meeting.

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\$100,000 would support students of color and the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Social Justice

By Olga Peters/The Commons

BRATTLEBORO—On Tuesday, June 25, voters of the Windham Southeast School District will consider a funding amendment to the proposed merged \$50 million fiscal year 2020 budget.



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Schoales, the chair of the Town School Board, is one of two Brattleboro representatives on the WSESD board and also one of the people proposing the amendment.

He noted that, if approved, the additional funds would add approximately 0.3 cents to the education tax rate.

At the June 5 Town School Board meeting, members of the administration and Diversity Coordinator Mikaela Simms spoke at length about trying to make progress in meeting the needs of students of color.

At the meeting, Simms said that the proposed funding would create “infrastructure in the schools,” including designating school leaders for social justice and diversity.

That leadership would help reinforce and engage teachers, helping them internalize subsequent trainings in these matters by consultants.

“This is about following the money and showing what our priorities are by really making an investment in this way for our families,” Simms told the board.

She told the story of a student who told her, unprompted, “I haven’t had one teacher of color since I’ve been here.” She described her struggle to engage the demoralized and disengaged student in passing his classes.

“We have to act like the house is on fire, because kids are slipping through the cracks,” she said. “This is not just about optics, it’s really about our students, and it just becomes harder and harder for them as they get older.”



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teachers as diversity coaches, similar to the teachers who currently act as literature or math coaches.

“A lot of people don’t know that more than 20 percent of students in Brattleboro are children of color,” Schoales said.

Yet the district employs no teachers of color, a fact that he fears could send local students a bad message.

Schoales said that students of color need positive role models to combat the negative messages they receive from a society steeped in systemic racism.

Students of color benefit from a diverse teaching staff, according to an article on the Southern Poverty Law Center’s website tolerance.org, “Closing the diversity gap: New research sheds light on how to inspire, recruit and retain teachers of color,” which cited research by the Brookings Institution and Princeton University.

According to Schoales, the broader concern for the school district is to “change the climate in the schools.”

“Our schools need to reflect our communities,” he said.

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