

Frustrated students ask Pleasantville board for payment from summer program

CLAIRE LOWE Staff Writer

PLEASANTVILLE — Eight high school students who participated in a summer education program at Rowan University say they haven't received the stipend they were promised as compensation from their district.

“The language in the contract specifically stated that if the requirements were met, they would be rewarded,” senior David Moran told the school board at its Tuesday meeting. “We promised you guys 100 percent commitment and we gave it, but yet that is not seen from you guys.”

Moran and his classmates wanted to know when they would receive the \$200 for their participation in the Rowan Urban Teachers Academy. Their question, for now, remained unanswered.

Superintendent Clarence Alston said Moran was “absolutely right” and they were trying to figure out how to get the students paid. He said the problem was the district was not allowed to pay the students directly but was unaware of that fact when the agreement with Rowan was signed in April.

“This was a new program, so there were some things that were missing because it was new for all of us. We have worked it out for this particular round, and we've got to make sure we keep our commitment to you,” Alston said. “Everything you said is accurate, and we'll certainly improve from that.”

The Pleasantville school board approved a memorandum of understanding with Rowan in April 2018 to participate in the Urban Teachers Academy, a program aimed at increasing interest in teaching in urban districts through direct experiences in classrooms. The students spent two weeks in Glassboro in July and August completing assignments, keeping a portfolio and teaching and planning lessons to urban elementary school children.

According to the agreement signed by Pleasantville, the district would provide all funding for the program, including paying for the Rowan faculty and students who facilitated the program and a \$200 stipend per participant. Although initial interest was high, only eight students from Pleasantville High School agreed to the full terms of the contract, which included an 84-hour time commitment, said student Karina Rojas, who completed the academy.

The students said they have been asking administrators since September what is happening with the stipends and getting different answers. Moran said the most frustrating answer he has received was, “Just give it time.”

“In our perspective, we've been waiting so long,” he said after the meeting, which led the students to go to the school board.

Moran said the district should be more prepared when it offers programs to students. He said he will have a hard time encouraging other students to participate because of the lack of transparency.

Rojas told The Press the agreement was approved under former Principal Edward “Jim” Bonek. Bonek is in jail on child pornography charges. Howard Johnson was moved from the Leeds Avenue School to the high school to fill the vacancy.

But none of that is important, Rojas said.

“It doesn’t matter who’s principal and who’s not,” she said after the meeting. “This was board-approved.”

Rojas suggested to Alston a gift card might work, and he said that is an option the district is considering.

“We have not forgotten about you, and it’s been bugging us for eight months as well. We felt really bad because you were committed and we’re so proud of you to stick with it. And we do have that responsibility to you,” Alston said.

Alston said the district plans to participate again this summer and has figured out it can pay Rowan, which could then distribute the stipends to the students.