A new class of promise for BLS racial harmony

U.S. Attorney Carmen Ortiz played absolutely no role in the recent election of Ado Jean-Noel as senior class president at Boston Latin School and Lynn Bashir as senior class secretary.

But this development may prove far more effective in restoring racial harmony within the storied walls of Boston's premiere public school than anything the feds or Ortiz could hope for.

"I wanted to make sure the divisions were healed, that we didn't take what was happening around us and let it affect us negatively. I wanted to bring us together," Latin's new senior president told me recently.

Ado Jean-Noel, the 17-year-old son of Haitian immigrants, is among the 9 percent of black students at Boston Latin. He won the presidency with a message of bringing students together and closing the racial divide.

"To become class president," Jean-Noel said, "you can't appeal to just one demographic, obviously. And the feedback I received on my campaign message was overwhelmingly positive.

"I was very encouraged by that. I think there were a lot of things being said in the media last year that we were not a unified class," he added. "I didn't want people to succumb to the negativity. I wanted us, all of us, to stay positive for the future."

Bashir quietly nodded in agreement. The BLS class secretary was born in the Sudan 17 years ago and now lives in Roslindale. In contrast to Jean-Noel's optimistic fortitude, Bashir said she ran a "laid-back" campaign, but that hardly diminished the depth of her feelings about the troubles that engulfed the school last year.

"What frustrated me," Bashir said, "was that the issue stopped being about the students and ended up being about the media wanting to tear down the school."

The building is not the issue," she said. "We're proud. The issue was when things happened and the appropriate disciplinary actions didn't happen.

Neither Jean-Noel nor Bashir, who were juniors last year, said they knew any of the students at the heart of last year's incidents. And though both said the eruption took them by surprise, their reactions to it differed.

"I felt the way the story was presented," Jean-Noel said, "cast blame on all of us, which was definitely not the case."

Bashir, on the other hand, said that after her initial surprise, what she felt was relief.

"I was happy it was coming to light. I joined #blackarbys during the second half of the year. I had never been in a place before where I felt safe to talk about stuff like that," she said.

"On the whole, I think what happened last year was helpful and important, because people were hurting and their voices weren't being heard. And you can only hold something back for so long."

Jean-Noel tutors younger kids in his Brighton neighborhood who happen to be involved in the Exam School Initiative program that both he and Bashir took advantage of. He's proud of the fact that several of his pupils got into Latin this year.

Jean-Noel hopes to attend MIT, while Bashir has her eyes on Tufts and career in medicine. "But there are several other areas I'm interested in as well."

Jerry Howland, who answered an SOS call to become Latin's associate headmaster last spring, said, "Ado and Lynn are just two selfless, wonderful students who've earned the admiration of all their peers, black, white and Asian."

The calm assurance on this veteran teacher's face seems to suggest that whatever fixes BLS may require won't be the province of Carmen Ortiz or the feds. They will be handled by extraordinary students like Ado Jean-Noel and Lynn Bashir.

'The promise': BLS senior President Ado Jean-Noel and class Secretary Lynn Bashir are pushing a positive message coming off the school's racial divide last school year.