

West Hartford Public Schools

Agenda Item: Equity and Excellence Update

Meeting Date: June 6, 2017

From: Roszena Haskins, Director for Continuing Education and Diversity Advancement

Through: Tom Moore, Superintendent

Background:

The Mission of the West Hartford Public Schools is, *to inspire and prepare all students to realize their potential and enhance our global community*. This commitment statement is the hallmark of our vision for equity and excellence and the framework for what guides our District Development Plan goals, strategic initiatives, and practices.

- Goal One is to “Advance Achievement for all students and reduce disparity between and among groups.”
- Goal Two is “Nurture the intellectual, physical and emotional well-being of students and create a safe and respectful learning community where all students are held to high expectations.”
- Goal Three is “Attract, retain, and develop high quality staff by providing professional development resources and appropriate learning.”

This past year, the West Hartford Public Schools initiated a systemic multi-year commitment to building our capacity for cultural competence. Cultural competence is defined as a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in systems, agencies, or professionals and enable that system of stakeholders to work effectively in cross cultural situations. Cultural competence implies that organizations have a way to understand the cultural backgrounds of the children and families with whom they work.

District structures such as the Equity and Diversity Council (EDC) and the Professional Learning and Evaluation Committee (PLEC), coupled with several community partnerships, aim to examine and enhance our policies, practices, programs and the teaching and learning process toward ensuring equitable and inclusive opportunities and support for each and every student. Efforts throughout the district that support the mission of the WHPS and promote a diverse and inclusive community do so through the facilitation of increased awareness, respect, equity and access to opportunities. The following programs and initiatives described in this report are just a few indicators of how our educators’ cultural consciousness, responsiveness and advocacy have influenced student engagement, connectedness and leadership in positive ways.

The West Hartford Public Schools subscribes to a strong inclusion philosophy. Built on the concept of *Unified Theater*, *Unified Recess* at Norfeldt Elementary School seeks to eliminate barriers between children on the playground during recess. Generosity is contagious and one child’s request to help others has blossomed into ninety-six children interacting at recess. This general education initiative promotes and boasts benefits for all students on the playground, and transfers into the classroom. Together, students interact and play cooperatively to experience the joy of slides, swings, sand, and bubbles through creativity and appreciation of different abilities. Paraprofessionals witness friendly connections, and the transformation from tears to laughter. Parents can rest in assurance of knowing their children are valued and cared for on many levels during their school day by teachers and student peers. *Unified Recess* also gives teachers the confidence each child is recognized, respected, lifted up. *Unified Recess* calls upon the Norfeldt school community “to be a part of something bigger than ourselves.” It seeks to bring out the best in each child. For we realize, by including ALL, we can help children to reach their full potential. *Unified Recess* exemplifies compassion through play where “Everyone belongs here.”

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The district-wide cultural competence development work aims to ensure culturally sensitive and equitable learning environments in which students of varying cultural identities and groups feel a sense of belonging. Bristow Middle School's Be You-nique Club embodies this principle. The club's mission is to bring the uniqueness of our students and staff together where adolescents and adults can educate one another about their differences and have fun doing it. The activities are created by students and serve both students and staff. Be You-nique Club started at Bristow in 2014 and welcomes everyone to join. The club is open to all grades, 6-8, and involves a variety of activities to celebrate the diversity that makes the school community vibrant, as well as unique. Be You-nique has helped those who have reportedly felt "left out" to feel "a part of."

Club members have taken ownership for the planning and implementation of many activities such as celebrating Black History Month with a Rosa Parks presentation and discussion and Human Rights Day announcements, videos, and bulletin boards for the entire building. Further, on United Nations Day of Tolerance, students made announcements and encouraged an all-school-wear-blue and colorful bracelets that were worn by all students and staff. Be You-nique club members also encouraged others to wear eclectic socks on Lots-of-Socks Day to promote awareness on Down Syndrome Awareness Day. During Autism Awareness Month, Be You-nique students created and distributed puzzle piece pins for the entire school. The social justice advocacy efforts of the Be You-nique club extends into the surrounding community. This past year, participants created holiday cards for their neighbors and residents of the Hughes Home.

District programs that foster cross-age peer connections show evidence of increased student engagement and achievement. The American School Counseling Association affirms, "an association between serving as a cross-age peer mentor and improvements academic self-esteem and connectedness." There are several effective cross-age peer programs and interventions that take place within the West Hartford Public Schools. The middle school WEB (Where Everyone Belongs) program at Bristow, King Philip and Sedgwick is designed to enhance the elementary-to-middle school transition for students. One hundred and twenty-five grade 8 students serve as trained leaders and peer mentors to welcome incoming sixth graders and support their transition to the middle school. Sixth grade students have reported that the interactions that they have had with their eighth grade peers have helped to increase their level of comfort as a student new to the middle school and has fostered unexpected friendships throughout the year.

Similarly at the secondary level, Links Crew and NCCJ Anytown participants are two programs designed to promote a positive school climate, school engagement and connectedness, while building student leadership skills. Several students from Conard and Hall participate in NCCJ Anytown, a weeklong empowerment experience, designed to provide practical tools that they need to promote respect, understanding, and inclusivity within West Hartford. Interactive experiences allow students to explore topics such as prejudice, discrimination, and bias. NCCJ Anytown participants unite across differences to serve as leaders and community builders in West Hartford.

Link Crew is a national program run by an organization whose sole purpose is to help freshmen feel more comfortable, as well as help them achieve success in their first year of high school. Juniors and seniors of Conard and Hall high schools serve as trained Link Leaders. In this capacity, the student leaders coordinate freshman orientation and transition programs designed to welcome and support freshmen. Freshmen are assigned a Link Leader upon entry to the high school. The Link Leader assumes the responsibility as a mentor during the paired student's first year. Link Leaders are individually selected from a large pool of applicants based on specific criteria and strong evidence of being a good role model and positive leader on their school campuses.

Each year, students enrolled in Conard High School's advanced acting class, *Specialized Performance Study* (SPS), complete a Fictional Character Day project. In preparation for this day, the students research fictional characters, create costumes and environments, and develop interactive activities. They also write and perform original monologues based on their research. The culminating activity is a full day of total immersion portraying their characters as the students spend the day in the Conard main hall, living in environments they have created while interacting with the students and teachers. This year, the program invited 4th graders from Charter Oak International Academy (COIA) to take a tour of the backstage and learn about preparations for the high school musical. COIA students also learned about the technical elements of theatre, including lights and sound, and had the opportunity to engage with the

fictional characters. The interactions between the 4th graders and the high school students were meaningful and positive as indicated by reflection letters from COIA students to Conard High School students. The *2016-2017 Conard/Charter Oak International Academy Collaboration* also integrated science and relationships through a Newton's Laws Children's Book project.

These programs are just a few examples that illustrate how enhancing educators' cultural competence and capacity to be culturally responsive can have a favorable impact on student achievement. It is with an understanding that building our cultural competence is an iterative process that requires evaluating, examining, challenging, and adapting educational practices. In turn, educators are better equipped to facilitate equitable education, environments, and systems that support the success of all students, including those from underserved populations.

Dr. Roszena Haskins will be available to answer questions, along with a cadre of student presenters and staff who will report on district efforts in support of diversity, inclusion, and equity. Students and staff will be introduced at the presentation.