

West Hartford Public Schools

Agenda Item: Diversity Advancement in the West Hartford Public Schools

Meeting Date: October 17, 2017

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Through: Tom Moore, Superintendent

Background:

This report is an update from the Office of Diversity Advancement which summarizes the work of the Equity and Diversity Council's (EDC) subcommittees. The EDC is a district-wide structure that serves to develop systemic approaches to enhancing our policies, practices, programs and the teaching and learning process. To this end, the EDC aims to ensure equitable opportunities and support for each and every student. The five subcommittees of the EDC frames its priorities, strategic choices, targeted outcomes and recommendations around the District Development Plan goals. Further, the EDC applies a real-time equity lens to closely examine Board policies and identify impact for opportunities and barriers.

- 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.”

The **Cultural Competence Continuum** is a framework in which the EDC's focus and strategies are grounded. WHPS subscribes to **cultural competence** as an iterative process defined as *a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency or among professionals and enable that system, agency or those professions to work effectively in cross-cultural situations. Cultural consciousness, cultural responsiveness and cultural advocacy are the tenants of this framework.*

The subcommittees of the Equity and Diversity Council are organized around the district's goals and strategic efforts. These structures work as separate entities and also in collaboration, utilizing a combination of data, scholarship, stakeholder voice and expert consultation to facilitate equitable education, environments, and systems that support the success of all students, including those from underserved populations.

The five subcommittees are:

- Student Achievement and Educator Capacity-Building
- Family and Community Engagement
- Open Choice Enhancement
- LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bi-Sexual, Transgender, Questioning) Advisory
- Ethnic Affairs Committee

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Student Achievement and Educator Capacity-Building

Student success is the primary goal of this subcommittee and is leveraged by educators' knowledge, skills, experience and dispositions for cultural competence. This subcommittee pays explicit attention to the multi-dimensional ways in which policy, practice and programming can advance and impede student success. Reducing predictable disparities in student achievement among racial, ethnic, socio-economic, language and mandated special needs groups is of critical concern and urgency for this task-force. This subcommittee uses social justice scholarship to engage in moral dialogue about systemic inequities and the influence of honor, respect, and value of diversity in theory and in practice. The educators and community members of this growth-mindset cadre collaborate to create pathways from hope to change.

Capacity-building at the student and educator levels require teaching and learning to be made relevant and accessible to students of diverse backgrounds. Building educators' capacity for cultural competence is a gradual process. The **Connecticut Cultural Competence Standards for Professional Learning** guide and support the district's efforts. This standard is defined as *Professional learning that enhances both educator practice and outcomes for each and every student facilitates educators' self-examination of their awareness, knowledge, skills, and actions that pertain to culture and how they can develop culturally-responsive strategies to enrich the educational experiences for all students.* The three professional development vehicles currently in action among this subcommittee are: text-based and podcast discussions and analysis; identification, application and evaluation of evidence-based methods; and contributions to a district-wide compendium of sound educational strategies and programs intended to optimize the potential of all students and support families.

Specific evidence and products of this action-oriented work group include:

- Facilitation of Collaborative Inquiry Teams (CIT), centered around culturally responsive teaching and the brain; culturally responsive differentiation in the music and arts classrooms; and developing curriculum that is culturally responsive
- Review of athletic coaches' training modules to ensure the inclusion of a cultural competence module, reinforced through modeling and practice by adults (coaches) and students (athletes and team captains)
- Creation of a Schoology site that serves as a growing warehouse in which resources for culturally relevant and responsive curriculum and pedagogy are maintained. The site includes links to research literature and professional websites <https://www.schoology.com/> access code to join is 2FN2V-GT64R
- Development and maintenance of the EDC webpage on the WHPS website with links to resources
- Collaboration with the Professional Learning and Evaluation Committee (PLEC) on activities that include building capacity of the membership to lead school-based cultural competence professional learning experiences
- Collaboration with and consultation to other EDC subcommittees on topics specific their focus areas and targets

Family and Community Engagement

What happens in the classroom inherently affects student achievement, but it is the relationships between schools, parents and communities that significantly influence student success. The elements of the Family and Community Engagement subcommittee's research and targets aim to provide opportunities for family engagement and seeks to address barriers based on five key principles: 1.) Providing a welcoming school environment and reducing identified barriers; 2.) Active two-way communication utilizing a variety of mediums. 3.) Positive communication regarding student behavior & achievement to families. 4.) Communication that allows for the identification of experiences that increase dialogue opportunities. 5.) Opportunities for families to be involved and influence planning/policy utilizing their expertise. Schools which serve to engage and partner successfully with all families are those where every family feels welcomed in their child's school as a respected ally. The Family and Community Engagement subcommittee of the EDC will be exploring ways to assess our schools' current successes and challenges in welcoming and partnering with all families by piloting a Welcoming Schools assessment. This approach will feature school walkthroughs, brief surveys, and focus groups to include a range of perspectives. The information gathered will inform future work at volunteer schools and for the district.

Specific evidence and products of this action-oriented work group include:

- Development of the School and Town Family Resource Guide for WHPS families
- Attendance at CREC's Annual Family and School Engagement Conference
- Translation services provided to Continuing Education ESL adults with school-age children for parent-teacher conferences and PPT meetings
- Development of an elementary school-based parent and teacher Diversity Committee initiated by a parent on this subcommittee
- Presentations given to the Parent Teacher Council (PTC), Conard High School PTO, People Empowering People participants of the COIA Family Resource Center and the School Board
- Collaboration with and consultation to other EDC subcommittees on topics specific their focus areas and targets. The Family and Community Engagement subcommittee has been closely linked to the work of the Open Choice Enhancement subcommittee

Open Choice Enhancement

The Open Choice program is an inter-district, public school program intended to improve academic achievement, reduce ethnic, social and economic isolation, and provide a choice of educational programs for public school students in the Hartford region. Subcommittee members recognize that the unique sacrifices and needs of Open Choice families require more individualized study and support beyond what WHPS does for West Hartford resident families. The challenges that Open Choice families face may not be common for West Hartford families, and all school staff need to be aware and responsive (i.e. Families with students in multiple districts, multiple schools within district, transportation challenges before/after school, snow closures and delays, etc). The make-up of this subcommittee includes educators and parents of Open Choice participating and non-participating schools who are committed to supporting the moral and ethical goals of the school integration program.

Specific evidence and products of this action-oriented work group include:

- Engagement in a needs-assessment with stakeholders across the district
- Identification of the research and best practices for family engagement and sharing/dialogue with our leadership team to inform school and district planning and implementation of those best practices
- Recommendations collected, discussed, shared and honored for creating connections between Hartford families and between Hartford and West Hartford families
- District-initiated planning and participation in a CREC educator in-service training about racism and bias
- Development and maintenance of the Open Choice Program webpage on the WHPS website with links to resources
- Attainment of target to place 100% of all new siblings placed at the same school through strategic seat declaration, enrollment, monitoring and outreach efforts
- Coordination of an annual Welcome Dinner and Information Session for new families of the Open Choice program
- Participation in the action-oriented Open Choice Book Club, a professional development experience designed to facilitate discussion about teaching a diverse student population
 - 2015-2016: Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research and Practice by Dr. Geneva Gay
 - 2016-17: New Ways to Engage Parents: Strategies and Tools for Teachers and Leaders, K-12 by Dr. Patricia Edwards
 - Book club members attended a kick-off event, three book club discussions and a culminating CREC Social Justice Symposium in which the authors were keynote speakers
 - Participants worked with CREC facilitators to build capacity and develop a plan for engaging parents, through the lens of equity
- Presentation to the Parent Teacher Council (PTC) and School Board
- This subcommittee has been closely linked to the work of the Family and Community Engagement subcommittee and has collaborated on efforts to welcome and engage families in schools

LGBTQ Advisory

Embracing diversity is a core value of the West Hartford Public Schools. We want all students and families to feel welcome, regardless of income, race, religion, or family structure. LGBTQ youth and families often have unique needs and concerns when it comes to negotiating a world which might not fully accept them. The LGBTQ Advisory, with the support of administration, seeks to ensure that our core value is modeled for students, families and employees. The LGBTQ Advisory offers support and resources for matters of concern to LGBTQ students and staff, and works to better promote inclusion, awareness and respect for all. This subcommittee has seen a growing membership of human justice advocates dedicated to building a safe and positive school climate for all students and their families.

Further, the advisory has invested time identifying the needs of educators, in an effort to design professional learning experiences that support district goals to promote safe, positive and inclusive learning environments for a.) students to thrive and b.) educators to demonstrate equity and excellence in education. During LGBTQ subcommittee meetings and early-release Wednesday professional development activities, many subcommittee members plan and implement opportunities to build their capacity for cultural competence, as well time to share, collaborate and reflect upon promising practices with their colleagues on current, pressing and sensitive LGBTQ topics.

Specific evidence and products of this action-oriented work group include:

- A study conducted of Gender Neutral Bathrooms: Policy and practice; what is currently in place in each building and what is needed; school-based implementation of recommendations
- Curriculum Review: Examination of the Grade 5 Human Growth and Development curriculum to examine where recommendations can be made for developmentally appropriate curricular materials (reference: www.weneeddiversebooks.com) and will continue the review through the district's formal curriculum review and revision process.
- Consultation and collaboration with USJ professor Elijah Nealy, Ph.D. and author of *Transgender Children and Youth: Cultivating Pride and Joy with Families in Transition*
- Participation in department, building and state-wide professional development on LGBTQ topics (e.g. Gender Identity, Policies and Laws, and Enhancing Inclusive School Communities) in partnership with True Colors, Inc. and Bridge Family Services. The advisory has also amassed educational and support resources from organizations such as PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) and GLSEN (Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network)
- Administration of a district-wide professional development needs assessment on LGBTQ topics
- Educator-student-parent-community coordinated high school LGBTQ panel presentation, *Ally is a ~~Noun~~ Verb: LGBTQ Teens Speak Out*
- Presentations to the Parent Teacher Council (PTC) and building-level staff
- Collaboration with and consultation to other EDC subcommittees on topics specific their focus areas and targets

Ethnic Affairs Committee

This subcommittee is comprised of two action work groups: The **WHEA/WHAA Ethnic Affairs Committee** is a local level of the Ethnic Minority Affairs Committee of the Connecticut Education Association comprised of educators across the district who collaborate, plan, and support programs and opportunities for expanding and sustaining educator diversity. The **Future Educators of Diversity** program, in partnership with local colleges, encourages, provides training, mentorship, and support for high school students of color to enroll in a Connecticut teacher preparation program.

WHEA/WHAA Ethnic Affairs Committee

There is a plethora of evidence about the positive impact that teachers of color have on students. Not only does teacher diversity have favorable influences on students of color, there is mounting evidence that all students can

benefit from having exposure to teachers of color. For example, having a highly qualified diverse teacher workforce builds positive identity and relationships among students across differences. While the shortage of teachers of color remains of national concern, low teacher retention is statistically significant. According to a 2015 Albert Shanker Institute report, The State of Teacher Diversity in American Education, “The most significant impediment to increasing the diversity of the teacher workforce is not found in the recruitment and hiring of teachers of color... Rather, the problem lies in attrition: teachers of color are leaving the profession at a higher rate than other teachers” (American Federation of Teachers). WHPS’ teacher diversity recruiting has grown to an average of 22% racially and ethnically diverse new teachers annually; yet our overall teacher racial and ethnic diversity make-up is roughly 8%. While the district has made a concerted effort to build our human capital through the lens of equity, it is the support and retention of our teachers of color that have been placed at the forefront of the Office of Human Resources and the Ethnic Affairs Committee agenda. The “invisible tax” burden that some educators of color reportedly feel is a contributing factor to why some teachers leave school districts of predominately white teaching staffs. The Ethnic Affairs Committee is concentrating efforts to support educators of color and build community among all educators.

Specific evidence and products of this action-oriented work group include:

- Developing and applying recruitment strategies such as participation in minority recruiting fairs; HBCU membership and tools; advertising via social media (e.g. Black Educators Rock) and attending educator diversity networking events
- Building the diversity of the inter-district summer high school staff provides the opportunity to work with prospective candidates and get a real sense of their qualifications and compatibility for future vacancies
- Serving as a summer high school practicum site for college teacher preparation programs
- Maintaining active membership and contributions to the CREC Minority Teacher Recruitment Consortium. The Consortium of CREC school districts meet and share current research and best practices on recruiting, retaining, mentoring and advancing teachers of color
- Promoting and co-facilitating Hartford County area New Teachers of Color Meet Ups, hosted on the campus of Central Connecticut State University (CCSU)
- Facilitating faculty and staff mixers including an after school dinner and discussion on ‘Uncovering Bias’
- Utilizing EDC teachers of diverse backgrounds to facilitate school-based professional learning experiences
- Making personalized contacts with WHPS paraprofessionals of color in our district currently pursuing teacher certification; coupled with providing professional development on cultural competence during parent-teacher conferences.

Future Educators of Diversity

This student-to-educator pipeline program was created and is sustained by school administrators, district leaders and teachers in the West Hartford Public Schools. The goals of this program are to ensure that future minority educators are identified, mentored, and encouraged to build relationships with those who can support them in their journey to becoming West Hartford professional educators. Students who successfully complete the program, meet higher education requirements, and complete educational certification will be guaranteed an interview for employment opportunities in the WHPS. The program was piloted at Conard in 2015 in collaboration with the University of Connecticut. There are currently 15 Conard potential future educators in the program. This year, Future Educators of Diversity has expanded to Hall High School and has 28 potential future educators.

This program enables West Hartford teachers, administrators, and university partners to collaborate on an extended basis and work with our aspiring educators. Participants work to develop supportive relationships to ensure a successful pathway to becoming a CT educator. This is accomplished by:

1. Providing a high school teaching training program including classes, internships, and student teaching experiences
2. Establishing and supporting participants’ college application process to CT educator certification

- programs through collaboration with State University admissions personal
3. Providing ongoing mentorship for participants by teachers and administrators during the program and process of becoming an educator, including academic skill set training and university linkage
 4. Receiving the support of the district human resources department to provide interviews for participants who have completed the WHPS FEOD program and educational certification requirements

This action workgroup is pleased announce that through their community engagement efforts and collaboration, Central Connecticut State University (CCSU) has recently underwritten a formal partnership agreement with WHPS for **Project Blue Devil Direct**. Under the Future Educators of Diversity program, CCSU college and WHPS district teachers and administrators will collaborate to support the recruitment of WHPS high school students interested in pursuing careers in education, placing special emphasis on recruiting students of color to areas of persistent teacher shortage (STEM fields [technology education, mathematics, and science education], world languages, and special education).

Conard and Hall students who participate in Project Blue Devil Direct will enjoy the following benefits:

1. Early application/admissions decision to CCSU
2. Financial aid application support, including access to scholarship funding
3. Access to dedicated CCSU academic advisor
4. Access and opportunity to develop teaching and related skills in WHPS and on the CCSU campus while participating in Project Blue Devil Direct
5. Access and opportunity to interact with CCSU faculty and student organizations focused on education while participating in Project Blue Devil Direct
6. Upon graduation from CCSU and licensure from the Connecticut State Department of Education, guaranteed employment-related interview with WHPS district leadership

While the teacher diversity shortage is not a problem unique to the West Hartford Public Schools, we can no longer wait for change to happen; therefore the members of this subcommittee have set forth strategic efforts to affect change, now. Our students already know that West Hartford is a great place to live and learn. The EDC has created a pathway for students to experience how great it is to work and grow within the West Hartford Public Schools. Our theory of action is IF we collaborate with accredited higher education teacher preparation programs that prepare our students to become highly qualified, culturally competent educators, THEN there will be better learning and greater opportunities for all students.

Summary

Achieving equity and excellence in education is complex work because it involves many intricate areas of study. The Equity and Diversity Council is just one formal structure organized to work toward closing group disparities, while maintaining a high expectations for academic achievement, physical well-being, social interaction and civic engagement. Further, the EDC maintains that it is prudent for students to see reflections of themselves in the professional staff and that their histories, backgrounds and experiences are also mirrored in context of teaching and learning.

While the EDC currently utilizes existing district metrics to examine the efficacy of our work, we will continue to interface with other district structures and partner with families, community agencies and research institutions to create metrics that more succinctly track and assess our progress. The district will remain steadfast in our efforts to identify contributors of achievement gaps, as well as high yield levers that help us to clear paths and transform life opportunities.