

West Hartford Public Schools

Agenda Item: Equity and Excellence Update

Meeting Date: June 5, 2018

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

Through: Tom Moore, Superintendent

Background:

As an organization, West Hartford Public Schools pledges to recognize the worth and dignity of every individual by fostering respect for cultural diversity, promoting inclusion, and showing a deep commitment toward institutional equity across all areas of our programs and services. The Mission of the West Hartford Public Schools is *to inspire and prepare all students to realize their potential and enhance our global community*. The District Development Plan goals, strategic initiatives and practices are aligned with this commitment statement and supported by WHPS Board of Education Policies.

There are several district structures and community partnerships that aim to support our vision and mission for equity and excellence. The district-wide Equity and Diversity Council (EDC) and the Professional Learning and Evaluation Committee (PLEC) are two formal structures that support and guide our systemic efforts. These two important structures have provided pathways for increasing our collective capacity and levels of understanding within the broad arena of cultural competence.

This past year, Whiting Lane implemented Racial Justice Training sessions for fourth and fifth grade students and families, as well as an in-depth professional development experience for the entire faculty. Educators, students, and staff engaged in a meaningful, interactive conversation about race and the history of racism in our country, looking carefully at defining the different realms of racism (i.e. personal, interpersonal, cultural, and institutional) and the impact that our own unconscious biases may have on our individual decision-making processes. The Racial Justice Training used a format that included a variety of instructional strategies, including: story-telling, multimedia videos, informational handouts, identification of a common language, questioning techniques, etc. Feedback from these learning experiences suggested that the program was effective in raising awareness. Further, the Racial Justice Training sparked a journey of self-reflection and a call to action which left participants with feelings of personal empowerment and a strong sense of hope and optimism for the future. Follow-up activities within the Whiting Lane fourth and fifth grade classrooms have assisted in sustaining the momentum. The partnership that has been established between Whiting Lane faculty and staff, the PTO and Racial Justice Trainers, Kari Nicewander and TJ Harper have been instrumental in terms of moving the school community forward towards even greater levels of acceptance and inclusiveness. Overall, the Racial Justice Program at Whiting Lane has influenced a shared collective responsibility to bring light into the shadows and to unmask racism so that we can fully dismantle it.

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The District strives to provide an instructional program that offers windows for students to see the world around them and mirrors for them to see reflections of themselves in the context of teaching and learning. According to scholars Dr. Zaretta Hammond and Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop, multicultural curricula coupled with culturally responsive pedagogy “can serve as a mirror to those whose lives are reflected in texts that are read in the classroom. When students read about the lives and experiences of others, texts serve as a window.”

Wolcott Elementary School has embraced the concept of “windows and mirrors” throughout the school community. The Wolcott Library is dedicated to increasing diversity in the collection they offer, lessons taught, and events that they host. This is accomplished through several avenues such as the curation of their library collection. By purchasing literature that reflects and honors the diverse communities found within West Hartford and our greater world, students and staff have access to resources that allow them to meet goal two of the WHPS: *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.* This year, Wolcott’s Library Media Specialist, Sarah Lynch, ran a Diverse Books Tasting during a teacher meeting. This “tasting” allowed teachers to preview diverse titles from the Wolcott Library so they could make a list of titles they wanted to use in their upcoming lessons or read alouds. Ms. Lynch has also worked with library media specialists across the District and the Townwide Curriculum Specialists to support content area curriculum by selecting diverse titles to be embedded into curricular units.

In preparation for the annual Book Fair and author/illustrator visits hosted at Wolcott, the library media specialist works with the vendor to ensure that diverse titles will be included. When hosting authors or illustrators for a visit, Wolcott also ensures that representatives from a wide variety of communities are included. The authors who have presented to the school community self-identify as multi-racial, LGBTQIA, and children of immigrants.

To highlight the diversity of the vibrant school community, Wolcott secured a muralist who painted the entire intermediate hallway from floor to ceiling, showcasing a myriad of characters from children’s books. These murals reflect diversity in children’s literature and Wolcott’s school community. Murals include *Dream Drum Girl* from Cuba and *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon* inspired by Chinese folklore. Through a visually welcoming environment, Wolcott students see themselves, the global community, and characters from the books they read.

Cultural competence is a key focus in the District Development Plan and a vital component of professional learning. As our district continues to grow in diversity, an emergence of cultural shifts signal the need for greater platforms to access funds of knowledge that our students possess and the experiences that they bring to the school community. Recently at Hall High School, students representing students of color, English Language Learners (ELL) and the LGBTQIA community (LGBTQIA refers to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning or Queer, Intersex and Asexual or Allied) designed and delivered a two-hour Curriculum and Staff Improvement (CSI) session on an early release Wednesday. The CSI was driven by the belief that student voice is an essential component in our work to increase our cultural competency and by a needs assessment survey of students from each of the above groups, with input from school administration and teachers.

Student Voice; Building our Cultural Competence is a continuation of the District’s work to strengthen our cultural competency as it relates to understanding our students and creating classroom environments that are conducive to learning for all students. Through this CSI that was delivered using a workshop model that combined large and small group framing, content delivery, processing and reflection the faculty was

able to learn from the three student groups what they feel they need to be successful in the classroom. Students opened the session with a whole-group audience of certified faculty by unpacking the workshop purpose and objectives. Then, participants broke into small groups to rotate through three twenty-five minute student-led workshop presentations on the experiences and needs of students of color, English Language Learners (ELL), and the LGBTQIA community. The professional development session concluded with a whole-group debriefing and discussion of key take-aways for culturally responsive professional practice.

The aforementioned programs and initiatives described in this report are just a few examples and indicators of how our efforts to build our capacity for cultural competence have influenced our practice and have fostered adult and student understanding of and appreciation for cultural and individual differences in ways that all students have opportunities to thrive.

Dr. Roszena Haskins will be available to answer questions, along with student and adult presenters who will report on district efforts to support diversity, inclusion and equity. Participating students, parents and staff will be introduced at the presentation.