

Board of Education
Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Sub-Committee
June 14, 2022
9:30am
BOE Conference Room
3 Primrose Street Newtown, CT 06470
Minutes

Call to Order

Call to order at 9:30am

In attendance - BOE members Rebekah Harriman, Dan Cruson, Don Ramsey, DEI Coordinator Wesley Johnson, and Superintendent Dr. Dr. Lorrie Rodrigue. 5 members of the public were also present.

Public Participation

No public participation

Approval of Minutes of 5/10/22

Moved by Dan Cruson second by Rebekah Harriman, minutes of 5/10/22 unanimously approved

Continued Discussion on Training for DEI Subcommittee Members

Ms. Harriman referred to the google document that committee members had populated with their ideas for the Committee's Professional Development. (document is attached to the minutes)

Ms. Harriman noted that in reference to the discussion on the Four Pillars, the library reached out to offer an education session for community members.

Mr. Johnson discussed the idea of Dr. Coleman coming in as a topic expert for the committee on the 4 pillars, as he developed the language and it will be the framework that we are using.

Mr. Ramsey asked if Dr. Coleman came in to discuss, could we then make changes to the pillars. He noted that it 99% looks good, but he has a couple of things he would like to adjust.

Mr. Ramsey spoke about being leary of uncovering unconscious bias because everyone is biased and it tends to be a complex process, and could open Pandora's box. Mr. Cruson said that it was his impression that this has already been offered in PD to the staff. Dr. Rodrigue noted bias is actually done instructionally in classrooms. It is the lens through which we want our students to view things. It is not an uncommon topic or anything new.

Mr. Ramsey asked if it focused on other things besides race, to which Mr. Johnson indicated that it did – age, gender, race and other areas.

Mr. Cruson stated that it is about setting you on a journey of self-discovery, giving you the tools about yourself to help you learn.

Mr. Ramsey noted that he likes the term introspection.

Ms. Harriman discussed that she has been involved in workshops around uncovering unconscious bias, and that these conversations can actually bring groups together, it can help increase understanding, knowing that we are in a safe space, coming together to learn.

Mr. Johnson noted that what it really does is cause us to examine the ways that we have been socialized – what we feel is normal. It causes us to expand our perspective

Mr. Ramsey expressed that the word unconscious makes him a little nervous. He likes the term introspection. He noted that unconscious bias can have a negative connotation if folks are bigots.

Mr. Johnson said that DEI is a field of study. Using the terminology associated with the field of study is important.

Mr. Ramsey wanted to know if microaggressions are the same thing as “using more tact”. Mr. Johnson replied no, and defined microaggression as a statement, action, or incident regarded as an instance of indirect, subtle, or unintentional discrimination against members of a marginalized group such as a racial or ethnic minority. Mr. Ramsey wants to be careful that we don’t have folks think we are all bigots are that there is no unconscious bias of bigotry at all.

Mr. Johnson clarified that the intent is that we enter into these places recognizing that we are entering a safe and brave space. Ms. Harriman asked Mr. Johnson to put together the format of the PD with resources for the next meeting with a plan to launch in September. Mr. Ramsey wants to entertain other methods of conducting board workshops that blend with DEI research.

Continued Discussion on Equity Sustainability Planning/Materials Review

Ms. Harriman thanked Mr. Johnson for sending the Committee examples and asked what the next steps to develop the plan are. Mr. Johnson answered that there are other platforms that can do the work of developing the plan such as PEAC and the equity leaders in each building. He would like a draft to come to the Committee for a review once complete. Ms. Harriman asked that someone on this subcommittee be a part of the development team and Mr. Johnson agreed.

Mr. Cruson asked if the Board Resolution on DEI would serve as a backbone to the work. Mr. Johnson agreed that it would. Mr. Ramsey asked if the resolution was a live document and if it was possible for the resolution to be modified. Ms. Harriman reminded Mr. Ramsey that he had asked this question at previous subcommittee meetings and that any modifications to the resolution would have to come from a Board vote.

Dr. Rodrigue cautioned going forward with any changes as the team and leaders are invested in the resolution and it has been a good strong framework to start the work. Mr. Johnson noted that it is one of the better resolutions he has seen. Mr. Ramsey asked where Mr. Johnson had seen other resolutions, and Mr. Johnson replied that many districts, non-profit organizations and businesses have DEI statements and resolutions. Mr. Ramsey asked Mr. Johnson to send him examples of others.

Update on School Based Equity Leaders for 22/23 School Year

Mr. Johnson reported that he is most excited about this, as one person cannot work in a “silo” to move forward DEI in a district. He noted that two Equity Leaders have been identified for each building, they will be trained and will become a go-to resource in their building. He went on to note that he will have regular conversations and meetings with them. Ms. Harriman expressed that this is a great idea and is thankful for the staff that raised their hands to lead.

Update from Staff

Mr. Johnson reported that the district’s DEI website will be going live by the end of the school year. It will be a resource for staff and the community and will be a record of the work taking place throughout our district. It will be connected to the SEL page on the District’s website.

He further reported on the read aloud presentation at Reed School that engaged nearly 300 6th graders in response to the uptick of the use of racial slur at the school. The book was “Desmond and the Very

Mean Word". Every cluster had an overwhelming response and rich dialogue. Mr. Johnson was impressed by the thoughtfulness of the students.

Mr. Ramsey asked if there had been any feedback from the students in writing. Mr. Johnson responded that is part of the plan and they are following up on the results.

Mr. Ramsey asked Mr. Johnson who developed the programming. Mr. Johnson answered that it was a collaborative effort between himself, Dr. Correia, the Library Media Specialist and others.

Mr. Cruson asked if we have talked about expansion district wide and Mr. Johnson noted that they are developing a host of resources on ways to engage students to in an age appropriate way

Mr. Ramsey asked Mr. Johnson to bring the lesson plan for this program to the C & I subcommittee.

Dr. Rodrigue expressed that she is glad to see the work moving forward. She continued that engagement of the staff is not new, but the investment is. She continued to note that this is something that educators really want to bring to their classrooms to meet the needs of all of their students.

Public Participation

Wendy Leon-Gambetta, 19 Sawmill Ridge Road, thanked the Committee for meeting. She spoke that after the George Floyd murder she starting doing reading and learning and understanding terminology and feels that it is really important that we understand DEI is an area of study. She can see wanting to make the terminology familiar, but learned that we all have to speak the same language. It should not be a job of the board to come up with language, but we need to use the language that is already there. The work is uncomfortable and hard and she commends the Committee for doing it. She ended by thanking Dr. Rodrigue for her part in it.

Motion to adjourn was made by Mr. Cruson, Seconded by Mr. Ramsey. Motion passes unanimously. Adjournment at 10:25am.

DEI Subcommittee Professional Development - What do we want to learn/discuss?

This document will serve as a planning guide for Professional Development around DEI for our Subcommittee.

- Defining the terms Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
- Uncovering unconscious bias
- Best practices for implementing a culture of inclusion within an organization
- This bullet was added by Don Ramsey. I would like to discuss the second bullet in further detail before I would offer support. With respect to the first and third bullet I think we are on firm ground with a "symposium" type of format after the board participates in a "general group process" bonding type of retreat (after Chris Mellilo assumes his duties). I would also like to see elements of a more positive proactive, humanistic, and activity oriented approach to gaining greater unity in conjunction with appreciation for the beauty of our diversity. The same opinion expressed herein is also applied to our subcommittee. I also favor adding "equality" to the discussion for a more complete understanding. Indeed, one program that we already have that comes to mind is our own Project Adventure program. Marching Band, Musicals, Athletics, and our Capstone Projects are great examples and are also the kinds of things board members can learn from and utilize for our own professional development activities (on a volunteer basis of course). When I say that, I am referring to the principles involved as opposed to the actual experiences. Thank you Wesley for initiating this document.

Dan's Additions -

I agree with the three topics above, but also feel there would be value in further learning/discussing:

- A better understanding of the four pillars that will be forming the basis for the work being done within the district
- Defining what Culturally Responsive Curriculum is/isn't
- Microaggressions - Define what they are and how to recognize them (particularly in yourself).

These are just the items that I can think of, but admit that I "don't know what I don't know". So I am open to other topics being included as well that I may not have thought of.