

# District Highlights

Newtown Public Schools

“WHEREAS, we know that every student in our care has the right to an equitable educational experience - regardless of race, religion, ability, ethnicity, identity, socioeconomic status, or gender;”. This is the second statement in the Promoting Diversity & Equity Resolution that was adopted by the Board of Education on July 7th. While equity and diversity in the district has long been a priority for Dr. Rodrigue and the Board, when the issue took center stage nationwide the Board felt it was important to make an official Resolution to call out and reinforce our commitment to addressing issues related to student diversity.

In this newsletter we wanted to highlight what the staff and administration has done in the past, as well as what steps are being taken now and in the future to promote and improve equity and diversity. We also wanted to provide information related to professional development opportunities for our staff as they develop new and innovative ways to adapt and enrich their lessons and the associated materials for all of the students in the district. Finally we wanted to spotlight the work of one of our staff members who is promoting diversity through lessons he had been developing since late 2019.

So please join us in learning about the past, present and future of equity and diversity in Newtown Public Schools.

Daniel Cruson Jr. and Deborra Zukowski  
BoE Communications Subcommittee

**November 2020  
Vol 1 Issue 2**

**Board of Education  
Communications  
Sub-Committee**

**Members:**

Daniel Cruson - Chair  
Deborra Zukowski

You can email the board at:

[newtownboe@newtown.k12.ct.us](mailto:newtownboe@newtown.k12.ct.us)



*At Our Core*

## Promoting Diversity & Equity

Resolution  
Newtown BOE – 7/7/20

Promoting Diversity & Equity

WHEREAS, we believe that ALL students should be inspired to attain and apply the knowledge and skills and attributes that lead to personal success while becoming a contributing member of a dynamic global society;

WHEREAS, we know that every student in our care has the right to an equitable educational experience - regardless of race, religion, ability, ethnicity, identity, socioeconomic status, or gender;

WHEREAS, we agree that institutional racism and bias promote barriers to student learning, create academic gaps, and directly conflict with the core values and beliefs of Newtown Public Schools;

WHEREAS, we must vow to confront all incidents of inherent bias and racism in our schools and hold all individuals accountable for their actions;

WHEREAS, we value differences in others' beliefs, intellectual ideas, and backgrounds;

WHEREAS, we promote an appreciation of diverse cultures, groups, people, and perspectives;

WHEREAS, we celebrate the individual academic, social, and civic contributions of individuals within our school community;

WHEREAS, student, parent, staff, and community voices are integral in building a climate of trust, respect, and dignity while creating opportunities that minimize disparities in educational outcomes;

WHEREAS, we believe that continuous improvement requires the courage to change long-standing biases and institutional norms;

Now, therefore, the Newtown Board of Education RESOLVES to:

- \* support the development of academic pathways, instructional activities, extracurricular opportunities, and field experiences that promote a richer awareness of culture and racial diversity;
- \* review and monitor policies on diversity, inclusion, and equity;
- \* review curriculum in grades K-12 through the lens of multicultural and diverse perspectives;
- \* establish a clear protocol that records and reports incidents of racism occurring within the schools and holds all staff and students accountable for their actions;
- \* review and employ mechanisms (e.g., anonymous tips, trusted adults) to allow students and staff to share sensitive or confidential information that will help in the investigation of acts of bullying, harassment, and racism;
- \* continue to support best practices and social/emotional programs and resources to ensure that every student feels safe in a supportive environment;
- \* provide training for all staff aimed at maintaining a safe, inclusive, and equitable learning environment for all students, including students of color;
- \* support the Superintendent's initiatives in creating community conversations in diversity and equity that will lead to systemic improvements.

# Diversity and Equity: A Framework for the Future

By Dr. Lorrie Rodrigue

Amidst a global pandemic, the nation watched the untimely death of George Floyd. While questions regarding race and equity rose to the forefront of a national discourse, educators and leaders in Newtown were compelled to confront issues of discrimination and inequities within our own district and reimagine practices that would sustain a respectful learning environment for all students. Local narratives shared during community conversations pointed to harassment and bullying issues and called for the implementation of appropriate changes in policies and practices. The Board re-examined its commitment to ensure an inclusive, emotionally safe environment for all students through the creation of a resolution and the adoption of a new Diversity and Equity policy. As Superintendent, my goal was to develop a framework that would ensure a respectful and equitable learning environment – a framework informed by listening to student and parent concerns, reviewing current practices in relation to district core beliefs, supporting the expansion of our social-emotional program for students, and identifying staff professional development opportunities focused on diversity and equity.

## Community Conversations

In July, I engaged in conversations with students and families to unpack what some students, particularly students of color, had experienced in the past. Students shared stories of incidents involving racial harassment and other forms of bullying, as well as the perception that a lack of accountability became a barrier to the level of trust in finding appropriate resolutions. One student mentioned that she had been “uncomfortable” sharing concerns in the past since “nothing really changed.” Parents raised questions around policies and practices, and the need for a clearer understanding regarding the specific protocols for identifying, investigating, and responding to incidents of harassment or bullying.

These conversations were both courageous and challenging. They pushed district leaders to reflect on the current social-emotional landscape in each of our schools. While stories were highly personal to individual students and their families, the collective narrative encouraged leaders to begin to frame a stronger foundation for change and to review practices that would support a more inclusive school environment. Although the District had practices in place to help students deal effectively with harassment or bullying, it was timely to revisit expectations and their alignment with the District’s core values and beliefs, as well as the integration of deliberate measures to ensure student safety and emotional well-being.

## From Policy to Practice: Creating a Safe and Equitable Learning Environment

A perception shared by some families involved incidents of harassment that may have been witnessed by others who failed to intervene. After the BOE approved Promoting Diversity & Equity, a resolution that embraced a commitment to maintaining a safe and inclusive learning environment, we began to review current practices in student management and accountability. The resolution makes it clear that incidents of racism would be recorded and reported, and that school leaders would hold all members of the school community accountable. Working with our district administrative team, efforts will also include strengthening social-emotional learning (SEL) activities and teaching students to be advocates. A unit in the district’s Second Step program calls for students to become “upstanders,” encouraging students to stand up for others when they observe behaviors that conflict with values of respect, inclusivity, and tolerance.

Efforts to review and revise curriculum are equally integral to impacting positive change. During community conversations, students shared their feedback that learners, as active participants, should have a “voice” in the selection of texts taught in K-12 classrooms. The Board’s resolution addresses the need for a multicultural and diverse lens in the process of curriculum review and revision. While staff talked about the candid discussions they had with their students on the topic of racism elicited by novels such as To Kill A Mockingbird, students noted that works of fiction and non-fiction should be included that balance the image of marginalized groups, showing them not solely as victims in their communities but in more positive and successful social, political, and economic roles. The mechanism for reviewing curriculum currently occurs through staff committees and the Board’s C & I (Curriculum and Instruction) subcommittee. Soliciting input from students and assessing content so it is culturally responsive will be critical to supporting systemic change in the years ahead.

Policy 5145.42 Racial Harassment of Students and the development of Policy P0523 Equity and Diversity address the rights of all students to learn in an environment that is “free from discrimination”. While all students are encouraged to reach out to trusted adults when issues of harassment, racism, or bullying occur, the use of Anonymous Alerts at the secondary level encourages students to report issues of concern to administrators confidentially through a dedicated phone app. The district is also exploring the inclusion of a diversity compliance coordinator that will oversee incidents related to diversity and equity, and who would work with staff, leaders, and families to find positive solutions to all incidents brought forward.

Educators know that positive outcomes are more likely to occur when the learning environment provides for the development of social-emotional skills and community building. While district policies are meant to guide staff and leaders in ensuring behavioral expectations are met, our SEL program continues to support students in creating strong bonds with their peers. The Second Step program in grades K-8 empowers students to manage their emotions, build positive relationships, learn empathy, and deal with conflicts, including recognizing bullying. At the high school level, and through dedicated advisory periods, students are motivated to talk about issues, understand others’ points-of-view, confront inappropriate behaviors, and become positive advocates. Project Adventure’s Social-Emotional Learning programs at the secondary level also work to strengthen students’ skills in the development of social and emotional competencies, including leadership, communication skills, and a growth mindset approach. A growth mindset fosters students’ ability to learn social-emotional lessons in managing emotions, teamwork, and problem solving. Through many of the SEL activities, students learn to listen to and respect others’ ideas and perspectives.

Newtown school leaders will review and monitor practices and programs that are part of a sound framework. Providing staff with professional development in the areas of diversity and equity will help to strengthen their knowledge and skills for eliminating cultural, gender, racial and ethnic disparities. Working collaboratively and welcoming input from staff, students, and families is integral to change. Henry David Thoreau, famous writer and advocate of civil liberties, asked a powerful question, “Can a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other’s eyes for an instant?” As a District, we know we have work to do, but our collaborative, empathetic spirit and genuine commitment to achieve a safer, inclusive, and respectful environment will be the earmarks of future success.

# Past Efforts

By Dan Cruson Jr.

Equity and diversity has taken many forms within curriculum and instruction of Newtown Public Schools. Everything from individual lessons within classes, to full courses, to extracurricular activities have been a part of offerings in the schools over the years. Among those, there have been lots of successes as well as a few stumbles.

One of the main courses that deals with diversity is "Conversations on Race" that Amy Deeb has been teaching for 15 years. The course is a 1 semester elective course for sophomores through seniors and looks at topics such as inequities within education, where do prejudices come from, and do the effects of slavery still exist today. It gives students a chance to learn about themselves and where their ideas and stereotypes come from by opening up conversations. As the course continues, they are asked to take a stance on a problem that they see within Newtown and develop a course of action to address it. This is an ever evolving curriculum that fills in some of the gaps in regular US history courses as well as looking at current issues, such as an increased focus on the Black Lives Matter movement. During a discussion with Ms. Deeb, she mentioned that she has seen enrollment increase in the class this year in response to the events of the past 6 months.

Another program that has been run off and on in the past has been an exchange program with different cities in Connecticut. The first was a partnership with Bassick High School in Bridgeport, which was a 4 day exchange program. The program began with students generating a list of preconceptions they had about the school that they would be going to. Then the students would spend time as a member of the opposite school and when they returned they would compare what they saw to that original list. Ms. Deeb shared that most students would walk away from the program saying they would rather go to the opposite school and that the preconceptions they had were stereotypes. A conversation would ensue in both schools about where those stereotypes come from and how do we break down the barriers created by them. While it was successful, it suffered first from moving from Bassick to Danbury, and second from frequent changes in staff. These factors resulted in a loss of rapport between the teachers at the two participating schools which was important to make the program run smoothly. However, the search is continuing for a new partner school and there is a possibility that the program will return in the future.

Conversations about equity and diversity aren't just confined to a couple of courses and programs, but have been brought into many of the regular classes that students take. Western Studies, which is a required 9th grade course, was recently revised and approved by the Board of Education in May of 2020. The biggest changes were the expansion from a 1 semester course to a full year and now includes a large unit on the Holocaust. This new unit covers the pyramid of hate, genocide and what hate can do to people. The course includes resources such as survivor testimonials and a viewing of Schindler's List.

"Public Health" is another class that has created a lens to look at equity and diversity through. Susan McConnell shared how the class looks at the lack of equity in public health in the US. This includes examples such as certain groups being left out of social services and people of color not living as long even when they have the same economic circumstances and level of education. The class gets into the stressors for people of color in a white world and how that impacts their health.

The World Language classes are a logical place to present diversity in different ways to students. The

classes are more than just conjugating verbs and learning new words, it is a chance to immerse students in the culture of the countries that the languages are spoken in. This includes the expectation that all students will study other cultures at some point as part of their summative assessments and is aligned from Level 1 through AP. When appropriate there is also an analysis of the different minority groups within those cultures, such as how the French celebrate African heritage because French is a major language in areas of Africa.

In regards to extracurricular activities, the NICE club has been a big part of bringing different diversity to students. The club strives to bring culture to students without them needing to travel. They sponsor programs such as the popular International Week at the High School and set up presentations from students and alumni that have had the opportunity to travel abroad (either for recreation or study). Ms. McConnell shared an example about a presentation done by students who had visited many different temples around the world and talked about their experiences at each.

The club has also been a big part of the exchange and travel programs that have run through the years, starting with China in 2010. China was followed by France, Spain, India and most recently Panama (which has been delayed due to the ongoing pandemic). These exchanges happen on a regular basis and communication has continued even after the trips, although connecting remotely has been challenging at times. While there have been hopes to continue programs through remote connection and even expand them to other students who did not attend the original exchange, things such as time difference and language barriers have made this challenging to realize in practice. However, the exchanges themselves have been extremely positive, both for the students who travel and the families that sponsor students that come here. Ms. McConnell shared that this past year there were a number of families that hosted that didn't have a direct connection to the High School. This is extremely positive and helpful as NICE is always looking for families to host students when they visit Newtown.

Bringing diversity and equity into the schools is clearly not a new idea and something that Newtown has worked on for a long time. Not everything that is piloted and tried ends up working out long term, but just trying is an important step forward. These are just a glimpse of some of the programs that exist currently and much more work is left to be done, which will be discussed in our next article.

*I would like to thank Amy Deeb, Timothy DeJulio, Kim Longobucco, Susan McConnell and Elizabeth Ward for taking time to sit down and talk with me for this article.*



# Curriculum & Instruction

By Daniel Cruson Jr.

Curriculum and instruction is a cornerstone of the student experience by driving what the teachers present and how the students learn material throughout their school career. After exploring the past efforts within the district (as outlined in my previous article), I had a chance to sit down with Anne Uberti, Assistant Superintendent, Dr. Frank Purcaro, Director of Teaching and Learning, Dr. Kathy Gombos, Principal of Sandy Hook School, and Dr. Matt Correia, Principal of Reed Intermediate School, for a conversation on equity and diversity through the lens of curriculum and instruction. I opened the discussion by asking what we are doing to improve equity and diversity in our curriculum and the first thing that Dr. Gombos said was that we had to “take a serious look at everything we do.” She elaborated to say that we have to make sure that we are not missing opportunities to teach students about diversity, racism, equality and justice. Our Social Emotional Learning program (SEL) is wonderful and covers topics like kindness, empathy and being an advocate. However it doesn’t go the next step, for instance in literature it doesn’t identify groups or characters and open the discussion about what makes them diverse. We need to be looking for these missed opportunities to tackle tough social issues.

Dr. Purcaro picked up the conversation there by mentioning that we need to look for the opportunities to integrate discussions on diversity and equity in the larger curriculum. He mentioned that Social Studies throughout the K-12 curriculum is where topics and themes can be most easily integrated. There are already a lot of topics discussed on the 7-12 levels but there may be more opportunities to be found in the K-6 curriculum. He then brought up that the process of looking for these opportunities had begun in the Social Studies curriculum committee during the spring but it got delayed due to COVID-19 and the audit was recently renewed for the K-6 curricula.

In agreement with Dr. Purcaro, Mrs. Uberti elaborated saying that the 7-12 curriculum has a wide range of courses that provide the opportunity for students to view our world through a variety of different lenses and sources in both Social Studies and Language Arts. However, looking over the whole of K-12 curriculum, coverage is very uneven and there is room to flesh out the topics in an age appropriate way for younger students.

Cultural awareness was an area of improvement that Dr. Correia mentioned he had been thinking about lately. He feels that it is important to teach students that people come from different cultures and that this is what shapes who they are and what is important to them. Helping them to respect these cultural differences cultivates the empathy needed when interacting with other people. He called out the 5th and 6th grade curricula that is being presented to the board this year as having great pieces of literature that will help students connect to cultures and become culturally aware.

At this point the conversation went in a bit of a different direction as Dr. Gombos pointed out that there needs to be a focus on the adults that are teaching the curricula. She pointed out that the activities of the summer and fall have shown that a lot of us aren’t comfortable with these topics ourselves and it makes it hard to teach them to students. It creates a desire to skim over the tough conversations as we want to be kind and not hurt anyone. Dr. Correia added that educators want to always protect their students and agreed that leads to the desire to skip topics just because they could be hard or sensitive. However, teachers need to embrace these topics instead of skipping them. Both agreed that this is where professional development enters and all four acknowledged that they were thankful for the opportunities that were available and provided by the district because the staff were very interested in taking advantage of them. Ms. Zukowski takes a deeper dive into Professional Development opportunities being provided

in our next article.

Student voice was the last big point mentioned by Mrs. Uberti during our conversation. She talked about an advisory group consisting of students she was in the process of forming and was planning to meet with two to three times this year. This group would consider a variety of topics, one of which would be equity and diversity in the curriculum. The focus would be on receiving feedback and incorporating it into the ongoing curricular redesign. She shared that there has been work done internally on how to frame the discussion of these topics to foster a productive and age appropriate conversation for the full K-12 population. Once the process is tested and running fully she mentioned that it would be nice to be able to revisit topics and see how the student perspective is changing over time.

By the end of the call it was clear that everyone agreed that there is work to be done and that it would take time and commitment to accomplish all of this work properly. But all clearly had ideas on where the starting points were and how we move forward to close up some of the gaps and best serve a diverse set of needs among the students. That work would require support from all levels of the district, from students, to teachers, to administration, and even the board. However, the needed support is there and everyone is excited to play their part in the ongoing work required.

## Professional Development

By Deborra Zukowski

The Board of Education's "Promoting Equity & Diversity" resolution asserts, in part, that "continuous improvement requires the courage to change long-standing biases and institutional norms" and resolves that the district will "provide training for all staff aimed at maintaining a safe, inclusive, and equitable learning environment for all students, including students of color." There are two distinct aspects to such development programs, Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and classroom instruction. Together they will help ensure continuous improvement in racial and multicultural inclusiveness - in how the curriculum is taught and in the readiness of students to learn.

### *Social Emotional Learning*

The district has a SEL effort that focuses on five attributes of emotional health: self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision making, social awareness, and relationship skills. Lessons are provided to all Newtown students through the Second Step (K-8), Project Adventure (5-12), and Project Empower (9,10) programs. In addition to the existing instruction, the district will be adding activities that help students understand and embrace their self-identity and learn about implicit bias, in an age-appropriate manner.

The district is also planning to expand SEL training to educators and staff, to help them better learn about how to communicate effectively and responsively with students from diverse backgrounds. Some district educators are participating in a field test for a Second Step program dedicated to equity and diversity. These educators are exploring how their own social emotional understandings might impact their connections with their students. Do they hear their students' authentic voices? Do they recognize how their own lives' perspectives are the same as or different from their students? Can they read their students' facial expressions to discern how their students hear them? District educators will also participate in other SEL-based training to help address their concerns about inadvertently saying the wrong thing, or being misinterpreted. This training aims to help them more confidently engage their students in multicultural conversation.



Finally, as opportunities arise educators will be encouraged to take on-going SEL seminars related to equity and diversity both internally and externally. To date, sixteen educators and staff participated in a three-session seminar entitled, “How Do You Become an Antiracist When You Don’t Know How to Talk About Race.” These seminars were provided by the non-profit Connecticut Center for School Change. The center’s page related to equity and diversity can be found at: <https://ctschoollchange.org/services/social-justice-equity/>.

### *Classroom Practices*

Professional training related to the classroom focuses on making the instruction of the curriculum more inclusive for every student present. The goals include: making the classroom a more welcoming space, ensuring that instructional activities and materials represent diverse people and cultures whenever possible, and engaging students in conversations that span the diversity inherent in the subject matter.

Currently, there are examples of each of the three goals. In elementary schools, some students see pictures of people who look like them in their classrooms. Also, they can choose a paper that matches the tone of their own skin, rather than just white, medium brown, and black, when constructing a person. In Reed, when learning about US nutritional guidelines, students also see posters of nutritional guides from other countries with different diets. These posters become a part of the conversation. In the middle school, students engage in a conversation about racial and cultural awareness because staff took the initiative and worked together to respond to student behavior that was considered racially and ethnically insensitive. (See "A Closer Look" for more detail.) In the high school, students who take “Conversations on Race” start the course with a set of activities that focus on helping them see others based on who they are rather than what they are, and so better understand the perspectives and experiences (their own and others) that may underlie some of the threads within a conversation.

While some great examples exist throughout the district, the district can do better. As a first step for developing professional training modules, the district will look within to find even more examples with the goal of leveraging and expanding such curriculum-based practices throughout the grade. The district will also expand professional development to ensure that there is continuity of instructional ideas and practices related to diversity across grades and schools.

### *Current Status*

## **DID YOU KNOW?**

Dr. Derrick Gay is a Diversity and Inclusion Strategist who consults with organizations, both domestically and abroad. Over the past 23 years, he has partnered with over 500 organizations across numerous sectors to deepen D&I capacity; enhance inclusion and engagement; attract, hire, and retain the best talent; and design strategy to maximize business and education goals.



While there have already been some opportunities for professional training related to equity and diversity, district-wide professional development formally launched with the Equity and Diversity Professional Development Day on November 3. Dr. Derrick Gay (see: <http://www.derrickgay.com/>) set the tone for the day with a keynote address. Dr. Gay is a well-regarded consultant in diversity and inclusiveness, with clients running the gamut from Sesame Street to the Columbia Business School. He has given two TEDx talks (available on his “about” page), has been featured in a wide array of media outlets including the New York Times, and is a Forbes contributor.

These professional development efforts are an integral part of the district’s Diversity and Equity Framework. As the district continues to implement all aspects of the framework, there may be changes to or expansions of the professional development goals mentioned earlier. Through such continuous refinement long-standing biases that may be present within classroom instruction can be confronted and addressed, leading to a safe, inclusive, and equitable learning environment for all students.

*Special thanks to Anne Uberti, Assistant Superintendent of Newtown Public Schools; Deborah Lubin, kindergarten teacher; Michelle Y. Failla, Reed 5/6 Health teacher and District K-12 Health/PE Coordinator; Ann Deeb, Newtown High School Teacher; and Katherine Abrego, Newtown High School Spanish teacher. This article would not have been possible without their sharing of knowledge, experiences, and enthusiasm.*

## **A Closer Look**

### **with Andrew SanAngelo, Newtown Middle School Library Media Specialist**

By Deborra Zukowski

#### **Please give a brief history of your time with the Newtown Public School District.**

I have had a long history in the Newtown Public School District as I am starting my 22nd year as a teacher at Newtown Middle School. For the first 19 years of my teaching career, I taught 7th and 8th grade students social studies by having the students think about the significance of historical events, their societal impact, their ramifications, and how they are connected to our present-day lives. For the last three years, I have been teaching as the Library Media Specialist in the middle school.



#### **What motivated you to develop lessons related to equity and diversity?**

Equity and diversity lessons have always been a part of my social studies classes and the department’s curriculum. During my first year as the library media specialist, I became aware that some of the students had written some insensitive comments in each other’s yearbooks. When I discovered that the nature of the comments were hateful, racist, and anti-semitic, I wanted to transform this ugly incident into a teachable moment for the students of the middle school.

#### **When and how did you go about developing your lesson proposal?**

After talking to the middle school’s administration and recording the actual comments that the students wrote, I visited Shari Oliver who is one of the middle school’s social studies department coordinators. Mrs. Oliver is a trusted friend and colleague who I knew could have a frank conversation about developing a lesson or lessons that could address some of these disconcerting racial issues that the middle school was experiencing as evidenced in the yearbook. Mrs. Oliver and I unequivocally decided that as a school we should address these types of issues, and approached our administrators with the idea of creating lesson plans that could be delivered to the entire student body.

**What did you plan/hope that students would learn in your proposed lesson?**

When I thought about the students' comments in greater detail, I came to the realization that the students who wrote those comments were not racists; however, they were ill-informed and ignorant of the hate that they were spreading. Oftentimes, when students engage in negative behavior toward each other, students use excuses like, "we were only joking around," or "we are really friends." This type of response is unacceptable since the comments were particularly ugly and hurtful. I started to develop this lesson with the understanding that all students needed to be aware of the power that words have, and that racial and insensitive comments can carry an enormous weight. Once I decided on the focus of the lesson, it became a necessity to discover the right materials to engage students. Throughout the summer, I researched possible ideas to use in this upcoming lesson. I participated in a workshop for library media specialists at the Library of Congress and one of the presentations suggested using children's picture books to assist with teaching educational content. So I talked to their staff about finding the most appropriate book for this future lesson. As the 2019 school year began, I had not found an appropriate book to incorporate into this awareness lesson. Assistant Principal Jim Ross sent out an invitation to join Newtown Middle School's Safe School Climate Committee, and I joined so that I could share some ideas about this developing lesson with that committee. During those committee meetings, Mrs. Oliver mentioned the Anti-Defamation League and its Pyramid of Hate. After researching the Pyramid of Hate I decided to include it in the lesson that was beginning to take shape. Eventually, I stumbled upon a book of poems by Irene Latham & Charles Waters titled Can I Touch Your Hair? and with this discovery, I developed a lesson that contained two parts. One part would focus on using the Pyramid of Hate and the quotes from the middle school students in the yearbook, and the other would use Can I Touch Your Hair? as its main component.

**What material/instruction was included in the approved lessons? What were the reasons given for any material/instruction removed from your original proposal?**

Upon completion of the written lesson plan, Shari and I met with our administrators to discuss next steps and decided to share the lesson with staff during a professional development meeting. During the professional development, I shared the awareness lesson which was well received by the staff. There were a few concerns that the material may be a little challenging to 7th-grade students, but overall the staff believed that the lesson should be taught to our students. Eventually, before the lesson was to be taught to students the Superintendent of Schools should be consulted. It was upon this discussion that the quoted racially charged comments of the middle school students should not be used in the lesson so I was only to teach the lesson using the book Can I Touch Your Hair? I had connected with the Connecticut State Library and I was able to secure a text set of the books for use in the classes. In the meantime, I had spoken to and arranged a school visit by one of the authors of the book, Charles Waters. This visit was to take place in early April, so that meant that I had to teach the awareness lesson to all of the students before his visit.

**When and to whom was the instruction provided?**

By the end of February, I had talked to two teachers willing to implement the awareness lesson with me for their students. One taught in the 8th grade, and the other one in the 7th grade. As the lessons were being taught, I could get a sense of appreciation from some of the students who were making connections to the sensitive material being discussed. We received feedback from the students after each lesson, and some adjustments were made to the lesson.

**Did the school closure in March impact your ability to continue with the lessons and if so, why?**

Unfortunately, when the March closure occurred, the Awareness lessons did not continue. This type of lesson did not lend itself to be conducted over the newly developing distance learning platform.

**How did students respond to the instruction and resources provided, and could you tell if the lesson impacted them? If so, how?**

The teachers were able to start some of the classroom discussions by expressing some personal situations that were similar to the stories mentioned in the book, Can I Touch Your Hair? Some of the students were shaking their heads to the different scenarios that were being described in the book, and some of those students were willing to share some of their personal experiences that were similar to the book. Privately, one student thanked the teacher for teaching the lesson.

**Did the student responses influence future instruction of the lesson?**

The student responses that we were receiving only strengthened the fact that we needed to teach this lesson to the remainder of the middle school students, and its future students as well.

**Are there improvements to the overall lesson that you hope to develop?**

A lesson is never really complete. There are always tweaks and revisions that can be completed, but overall, the part about the awareness lesson that uses Can I Touch Your Hair? is fairly well developed. I would like to pursue the other part of the lesson that contains the yearbook quotes and the Pyramid of Hate as students would benefit from this material as well. In the awareness lesson, we used a quote from Martin Luther King, Jr. "People fail to get along because they fear each other; they fear each other because they don't know each other; they don't know each other because they have not communicated with each other." The ultimate goal of this lesson is to have students develop a sense of awareness of our differences within our society so that we can embrace those differences and learn from each other. We can not and should not be afraid of our differences.