

Newtown Board of Education Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Subcommittee

August 19, 2022, 9:00am
BOE Conference Room
3 Primrose Street, Newtown, CT 06470

MINUTES

Present: Alison Plante (Chair), Dan Cruson (Member), Deb Zukowski (Member), Chris Melillo (Superintendent), Anne Uberti (Assistant Superintendent) and three members of the public.

1. Call to Order

Ms. Plante called the meeting to order at 9:00am.

2. Public Participation

None.

3. Approval of Minutes from 6/14/22 Meeting

Mr. Cruson moved to approve the minutes of June 14, 2022. Seconded by Ms. Zukowski.

Ms. Zukowski moved to amend the motion, to replace the sentence "*He noted that unconscious bias can have a negative connotation if folks are bigots*" at the bottom of page 1 with "*Mr. Ramsey wants to be careful that we don't have folks think we are all bigots and not all unconscious bias is bigotry.*" Mr. Cruson seconded, adding that the request was consistent with his recollection of the discussion. Motion passes. Vote: 2 ayes, 1 abstained (Ms. Plante).

Ms. Zukowski moved to amend the motion, to replace the sentence "*Mr. Ramsey wants to be careful that we don't have folks think we are all bigots and that there is no unconscious bias of bigotry at all*" near the top of page 2 with "*Mr. Ramsey wants to be careful that we don't have folks think we are all bigots and not all unconscious bias is bigotry.*" Ms. Zukowski said she felt the change, as requested by Mr. Ramsey, was reasonable. [Mr. Ramsey's request can be found in Appendix A.] Motion passes. Vote: 2 ayes, 1 abstained (Ms. Plante).

Motion as amended passes. Vote: 1 aye, 2 abstained (Ms. Plante, Ms. Zukowski).

4. Discussion on Superintendent's Vision

Mr. Melillo presented his 5 Tenets on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion:

1. Our curriculum materials need to be supported with materials that are diverse. Diverse authors, protagonists and heroes should be infused in our curriculum. Children need to see themselves in the materials.
2. Students need to have safe spaces in our schools.
3. Any form of harassment, bullying, and/or racism will not be tolerated. Create an anti-bullying, anti-racist, and anti-harassment environment.
4. When studying topics in our classrooms, our students will learn through multiple lenses and points of view.
5. As educators, we need to provide all sides to topics and remain apolitical. In order to encourage critical thinking, we need to develop environments which allow students to wrestle with the material and make decisions on their own. That's where the learning occurs.

Mr. Melillo added that he has used versions of these 5 Tenets in his prior position and members of the school community were generally supportive of them. He also feels it is important to emphasize a proactive perspective.

5. Discussion on Plan to Fill DEI Coordinator Role

Mr. Melillo emphasized that he felt it was important to fill the position quickly, especially as we need someone to support the newly created equity teams. He would like to fill the position with a certified teacher. He also recommended creating a DEI District Advisory Committee that would include representatives from every building, administrators, and community members and so create a more informed and cohesive district-wide approach.

Mr. Cruson asked about the 4 Pillars. Mr. Melillo responded that he had spoken with Mr. Johnson, who agreed that the 5 Tenets would work. In addition, it is key to focus on training others in building the skills needed to ensure that all schools have what they need to sustain DEI efforts for the long term.

Ms. Uberti supports the changes. She noted that when she worked with Mr. Johnson, they both found it difficult to make district-wide decisions. Also, she said it was often difficult to coordinate with the PEAC DEI committee, as that group is less versed in the educational environment and requirements. Some of the PEAC projects will be migrating to the DEI Advisory Committee.

Ms. Uberti also mentioned that DEI Coordinator is a highly competitive field that spans both public and private organizations, so finding an external person within a reasonable time will likely not happen. In addition, our district includes lots of people who are very committed to our DEI work.

Mr. Melillo suggested filling the rest of the position's responsibilities with a person who is certified in teaching, as a "teacher on special assignment." Doing so would help the district

find a person who would understand teaching and curriculum and who could work knowledgeably with teachers and other educational professionals. The new DEI Coordinator would also be a member of the DEI District Advisory Committee and would have additional support from Dr. Kathy Gombos, Sandy Hook Elementary School Principal. By having a teacher in this position, it would also better ensure that the core of the work, expected to need multiple years, would be accomplished.

Mr. Cruson asked if a “teacher on special assignment” position can be unbounded re: time. Mr. Melillo answered yes.

Ms. Plante asked whether we already have a pool of candidates and what happens if a currently assigned teacher takes the position. Mr. Melillo responded that the position has not yet been posted but he believes there will be multiple applicants once it is. If a current teacher takes the position, his/her current position would be backfilled.

Ms. Uberti mentioned that there are 14 Equity Leaders identified and that training workshops have been selected for the professional development needed for the position. These workshops will be initiated after the new DEI Coordinator is hired.

Ms. Uberti commented on where we started from and where we are now. There has been evidence that we need more cultural competence in our classrooms, citing a recent example involving a middle school history lesson. She also said it was hard for Mr. Johnson since he did not know school systems well. What we need now is someone who knows pedagogy, teacher mentoring, and curricula.

Mr. Cruson responded that there is something to be said in favor of a person outside of educational circles, though the perfect person would be such a person who also had deep knowledge of education.

Mr. Melillo said that consultants can help to ensure that the overall effort is more well-rounded. He does not want to wait for the perfect candidate, as that would likely take several months or more, and may end up not being longer-term again. Other districts have this structure. His last district worked with consultants who helped the educators learn and understand DEI, and then the educators put that learning into practice in the classroom. What is key is that students should have common experiences across each grade and there need to be consistent approaches across each school. They should use the same materials and the teachers should have the same professional development. In addition, the 5 Tenets should provide coherence across the schools in the district.

The committee then reviewed the Position Statement, included in Appendix B.

Ms. Zukowski asked if we should focus only on the diversity of our learners. Could we add language to extend it to include the diversity of the world our students will graduate into.

Ms. Plante asked whether the intention is for this person to handle incident management. Mr. Melillo responded that there will be some of that; however, more in the capacity of supporting the administrators and teachers at that school.

Ms. Uberti said that the Statement was in alignment with the CT State Department of Education.

Ms. Plante said the description was good, and filling the position with a teacher was sensible since it will allow us to fill the position quickly.

Mr. Cruson suggested that the statement should include some reactive elements. Mr. Melillo responded that there is a future end-game in which incidents will be handled by people in the buildings, once we build the expertise. Ms. Uberti added that we always have to be reactive. The key is to learn how to stop the incidents from happening in the first place.

6. Discussion on Establishing a DEI Baseline

Ms. Zukowski pointed out that in order to measure the effectiveness of the DEI Coordinator and our DEI efforts, we need to know where we are starting from and how far we need to progress to get there. She would like to understand what is a reasonable set of metrics in the context of the educational system.

Ms. Uberti responded that identifying these metrics is one of the responsibilities of the new DEI Coordinator. The metrics will be both quantitative and qualitative. Once established, these metrics will be presented to the Board and tracked on an ongoing basis.

Mr. Cruson expressed caution about setting an “end goal” on something like this, and emphasized the need to continually step back and ensure we have the right targets.

7. Continued Discussion on Training for DEI Subcommittee

Training for the DEI Committee is still planned. Mr. Melillo mentioned that he knew of two reputable trainers: Dr. Tamika LaSalle (a Professor in the Department of Educational Psychology at UConn) and Kellen Nixon from Nixon & Company that specializes in training for both companies and boards of education.

Ms. Zukowski said she felt it important that all parties in the district have coherent training, and recommended that we undergo the same training as the teachers, where it makes sense. She also asked if perhaps Mr. Johnson would be able to provide that training prior to leaving. Mr. Cruson responded that there is some overlap, but that the Board may have issues related to being a board that teachers do not share.

Ms. Plante agreed that she would be in favor of “tasting the soup” (i.e., having the same initial training as the teachers) and also agreed that more nuanced training may be needed for the Board. She asked if members of the Board could also sit in on teacher training.

All agreed that there is a balance between Board member time commitment and the scope of training. Also, they agreed that the training should take place sooner rather than later.

Ms. Uberti added that training of the Board should be in alignment with the staff. She will put together a list of training topics that have been done thus far, noting that training has focused more on the high school than on other schools.

All agreed to pursue training with Mr. Melillo's contacts, as well as reaching out to Mr. Johnson to see if he would be willing to deliver some training.

8. Discussion on Meeting Dates through January 2023

Future meeting dates:

Friday, September 16, at 8 am

Friday, October 14, at 8 am

Thursday, November 10, at 8 am

Friday, December 9, at 8 am

Thursday, January 12, at 8 am

9. Public Participation

Kate McGrady, 26 Philo Curtis Rd. She loves the idea of having the DEI Coordinator be a teacher, since we need to make sure that we equip teachers to deal with things in the classroom. But she's also concerned that something will be lost, that the district needs a "lens" other than an educator. Mr. Johnson was so good because he was not a teacher. We need to continue such support for families, especially when events occur that need a strong response. She suggested using the grant funding for such a second person, otherwise the district might potentially lose future funding. Mr. Melillo mentioned that the district can use the grant to pay for other DEI-related expenses too.

Nerlande Foote, 14 Bear Hills Rd. She values the work that Mr. Johnson has been doing, and was concerned that this very important position would be eliminated. She now knows that it is not being eliminated. We need to make sure we get the right person to ensure that we do best by our children. Also, she asks that we take steps to ensure that the new person does not get overwhelmed.

Jessica Velasco, 103 Brushy Hill Rd. She's very happy the role will continue and recognizes that there is still a lot of work to be done. Supporting teachers and principals is important, and parents need to be supported, too. She noted an incident that recently happened that affected her son. She felt the incident was addressed properly.

10. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 10:25 am.

Respectfully Submitted,
Deborra Zukowski

THESE ARE DRAFT MINUTES AND ARE SUBJECT TO THE APPROVAL OF THE BOE DEI
COMMITTEE

Appendix A

Email from Don Ramsey, prior member of the DEI Committee. Dated: August 17, 2022

To: Alison Plante, Chair of the BOE DEI Subcommittee, Deborra Zukowski, BOE Chair and member of the DEI Subcommittee, and Dan Cruson, BOE member and member of the DEI Subcommittee

From: Don Ramsey, BOE member and recent member of the DEI Subcommittee Re: June 14, 2022 Minutes Approval agenda item for the August 19, 2022 DEI Subcommittee meeting

Dear Members:

Though Rebekah Harriman's three page minutes (as she simultaneously chaired the meeting) are remarkably accurate, I need to modify two distinct discrepancies to ensure accuracy for the public.

The first correction is in regard to the sentence that reads, "He noted that unconscious bias can have a negative connotation if folks are bigots." The expression made by me should be recorded for the minutes as, "He noted that unconscious bias can have a negative connotation to imply that folks are bigots."

The second correction needs to include a modification to the sentence that reads, "Mr. Ramsey wants to be careful that we don't have folks think we are all bigots and that there is no unconscious bias of bigotry at all." The sentence should read, "Mr. Ramsey wants to be careful that we don't have folks think we are all bigots and not all unconscious bias is bigotry."

I know this is a rather unusual circumstance due to the fact that two new DEI Subcommittee board members (not present at the June 14, 2022 meeting of the DEI Subcommittee) are now called upon to approve the minutes for that meeting. I have confidence that the aforementioned corrections will be made in the appropriate manner.

Thank you so much! Don Ramsey

Appendix B

DRAFT 8.18.22

Teacher on Special Assignment - Coordinator of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

Position Overview

The Coordinator of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (CDEI) will collaborate with leaders, staff, students and families to fulfill Newtown Public School's commitment to fostering a school environment that ensures all students feel safe and included. Through training, coaching, modeling and mentorship, the CDEI will support teachers in delivering instruction that is culturally sensitive and representative of our diverse population of learners both within our schools and the world into which they will enter as adults. The CDEI will serve as a thought-partner with key stakeholders in order to advance strategies, practices and programs that promote acceptance and inclusion regardless of differences. This position will work to shift the culture of Newtown Public Schools to one that gives students--particularly underserved students--equitable access to the resources they need to grow and thrive. The Coordinator of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion is expected to travel among the schools within the district to fulfill the responsibilities of this position.

Responsibilities

- Serve as the district ambassador for diversity, equity, inclusion and cultural responsiveness
- Identify and share resources and information with staff and leaders on matters related to diversity, cultural competency, equity and inclusion
- Assist teachers in Grades PK through 12 in developing cultural competency and in developing/delivering lessons through this lens
- Serve on Curriculum Development Council to assist teachers in developing/reviewing new and existing curricula to ensure it is inclusive and representative of our diverse learners
- Under the direction of the Assistant Superintendent and building administrators, plan and provide professional development related to diversity initiatives
- Participate in and assist in planning for the district's DEI Advisory Committee on diversity, equity and inclusion
- Work with teachers to provide practical supports, strategies, and instruction on inclusion/inclusivity
- Create strategies for leaders and staff to support students, caregivers and families experiencing bullying, racism, harassment and discrimination
- Develop ways to foster community participation/support for the work
- Collaborate with others to compile relevant data collection and analysis to evaluate effectiveness of the district's diversity initiatives
- Regularly consult and engage with external diversity and inclusion professionals to identify best practices

- Deliver presentations when requested
- Attends monthly Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Subcommittee of the Board meetings
- Meets with the Assistant Superintendent at designated times/dates

Qualifications

- Valid CT teaching certification (013, 005, or 305); 092 Intermediate Administration or Supervision certification is preferred
- Five years of successful classroom teaching experience; formal and/or informal leadership experience
- A collaborative work style is required
- A deep understanding of the Social Justice Standards, the four components of cultural competence and familiarity with the State Board of Education's Position Statement on Culturally Responsive Education
- Strong organizational skills and technological proficiencies and verbal and written communication abilities
- Demonstrated leadership qualities and an ability to think systematically
- Experience in developing and implementing diversity, equity and inclusion strategies
- Strong written and verbal communication skills
- Ability to develop and maintain respectful and supportive relationships with all staff members
- Comfortable with facilitating adult learning
- Adept at disaggregating and analyzing data using a variety of platforms