

Newtown Board of Education
Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Subcommittee
Reed Intermediate School Library – 3 Trades Lane, Newtown, CT 06470
June 1, 2023, 4:30 pm

MINUTES

Present: Alison Plante (chair), Dan Cruson (member), Deb Zukowski (member), Chris Melillo (superintendent), Anne Uberti (assistant superintendent), Kellen Nixon (Nixon & Co.), Jana Briggs (Nixon & Co.), Latonya Miller (Nixon & Co.), Julian (Nixon and Co.), Gjin Abazi (SADE Co-President), Miguel Gutierrez (SADE Co-President), and Rachel Torres (SADE advisor). No members of the public.

Call to Order

Ms. Plante called the meeting to order at 4:30 pm.

1. Public Participation

None.

2. Approval of minutes from April 27, 2023 Meeting

Ms. Zukowski moved to approve the minutes from the April 27th meeting. Mr. Cruson seconded. Motion passed unanimously.

3. Presentation: Students Advocating for Diversity and Equity (SADE) from Newtown High School

Mr. Gutierrez and Mr. Abazi jointly presented a summary of the goals and activities of the Newtown High School (NHS) SADE club (Appendix A). They described the relevance of the logo and mentioned that the club was able to stay active throughout the COVID disruption. The club’s mission is inclusion, including race, gender, ethnicity, etc. Everyone is welcome.

The two students then discussed some of the activities that the club has directed or participated in, including movie nights and a book club at NHS and Read Alouds at both Newtown elementary schools and C.H. Booth Library. In all Read Alouds, the participating students received a copy of the book, provided by C.H. Booth Library. As part of each event, SADE students would facilitate discussions based on the themes or situations described in the movies or books. The club also held a one year anniversary in honor of George Floyd’s murder and Black Lives Matter about three years ago.

The club meets weekly. It recently elected a new 15-member Executive board, of which Mr. Abazi and Mr. Gutierrez are co-presidents.

Ms. Plante asked how the Board could best support the club. Mr. Gutierrez mentioned that Mr. Johnson, the prior DEI Coordinator, had provided support for NHS students and that it is helpful to them to have a DEI Coordinator to act as a liaison.

Mr. Nixon said he loved the language represented in the logo, though he cautioned on the use of “equality”. The concept of accessibility will likely lead to a more diverse outcome than equality. The logo currently includes the words Equality, Community, Identity, Empowerment, Acceptance, and Inclusion.

Mr. Cruson said that if they think of other ways the Board may be of help, SADE representatives are welcome to bring those concerns to either the Board or, initially, the DEI committee.

Ms. Torres commented that current books used for the Read Alouds in the elementary schools are more than 20 years out of date, and asked how the Read Alouds might be able to use more modern books. Mr. Melillo said “We’ll work together on that.” Mr. Cruson added that he would be interested to help. Ms. Uberti stated that is was broader than the book selections. The Read Alouds include classroom discussions that transcend the book reading sessions, and so must be integrated into the curriculum. Teachers would need professional development. Mr. Melillo added that maybe they could start with certain teachers who already feel equipped to support those discussions.

4. Presentation: Nixon & Company Assessment and Recommendations

Ms. Miller began the Nixon & Company presentation (Appendix B) by reviewing the steps taken and current state of the assessment designed to inform the work plan related to building capacity in a sustainable manner. She reviewed the classroom walk-throughs saying that, at times, she noticed a lot of diversity - i.e., “everyone does things differently.” She also mentioned the sit downs with students. Ms. Briggs mentioned she was happy to see familiar student faces in Mr. Gutierrez and Mr. Abazi. She continued that this work was focused on the students with the goal of defining what would DEAI look like in Newtown, as set forth in the District’s DEI Statement. She gave an overview of the plan, noting that a key focus was to ensure that the plan was tangible and doable. The proposed plan has a three-year timeline, and is composed of four goals, outlined in the presentation. To be successful, the plan calls out the need for high-quality external and internal communication across all four goals for its duration and calls for oversight by each school’s Safe School (Climate) Committee.

Within each goal, the plan provides work tasks beginning in August 2023 across district stakeholders including faculty, students, and the BOE via the BOE Diversity Standing Committee. All stakeholders, including relevant student groups, need to follow an iterative check-and-adjust process of improvement for sustaining capacity since it is dependent on who is there and what is happening at the time. Hence, the plan is a living document, and relies on professional learning activities for the stakeholders.

Mr. Melillo commented that concerns have been heard and misconceptions clarified. All stakeholders should have a voice and be able to ask questions. To do this, everyone needs to be on the same page. The plan includes metrics for each goal, and he agrees that iteration is key. Mr. Nixon added that we need to

ensure that the metrics match the understanding of progress. Iterative review is important to ensure that the data is capable of representing the progress. If not, then a shift to new metrics may be needed.

Mr. Nixon continued that it is important to have a culture of data-informed practices and that each school should have the capacity for ensuring that they become part of the culture of each school. The practices need to be in alignment with the Safe Schools Committees. There also needs to be a culture of accountability. The plan needs a foundation of best practices and a plan for growth related to accountability. The plan includes steps to understand foundational pieces prior to operationalizing. For example, by grading for learning and not student personalities, one honors individuals, provides accessibility, and accepts students for who they are.

Ms. Plante asked to understand the practical steps required for establishing a “culture of accountability”. Ms. Briggs noted that the rules across schools are inconsistent. As a district, we need to first establish our standards and expectations, then establish clear practice and implementation across the schools. Practices are not being consistently implemented. Mr. Melillo added that we need to have consistency among the schools, both horizontal (i.e., across elementary schools) and vertical (i.e., progression from elementary to intermediate, middle and high schools). Ms. Briggs continued that norms are important. People feel safe when they know what to expect in areas like classroom practices as well as the language and culture of the broader community.

The conversation then moved to the capacity to operationalize. There are many dimensions for diversity. The goal is to make sure that every student feels appreciated and valued. Instruction needs to be from multiple viewpoints, to encourage academic discourse without being bounded by personal or group bias, especially by teachers. For students to engage, learning need include people that look like them and perspectives from cultures and traditions that resonate with them. Regarding SADE, it is important to continue to sponsor activities. However, we need to make sure that those remaining after the activities finish are able to address any follow-on discussion.

Ms. Zukowski asked about the extension from an 8-month contract to a three-year facilitated project. Do we have the funding needed to make this happen? Mr. Melillo replied that there are resources in next year’s budget for the work. The work is too important for a “hit and run” approach. It needs time and expertise to create roots.

Ms. Torres added that her colleagues need help in eliminating bias. What will that look like? Ms. Briggs responded that it will be partially addressed through professional learning and partially aided by community practice. People should feel comfortable making mistakes. Mr. Melillo continued that when he first arrived here from his prior district, he was surprised to hear that staff have concerns about reaching all students because his prior district was very different. Mr. Cruson agreed with making mistakes. Ms. Uberti stated that people need to know that people are afraid of making mistakes. Building protocols for conversation is key. Also, we need a baseline for all staff so all kids can succeed.

Mr. Nixon added that schools being seen with welcoming spaces as the norm is an important part of success. What is really key is the practice of leveraging multiple student viewpoints, including their

lived experiences in the lessons. People who “look the same” may have significantly different experiences. Cultural experience matters.

Ms. Plante noted that she had recently read the raw data from the Strategic Plan survey and observed that this plan may encounter resistance from some respondents (members of the community), and therefore the external messaging component of the plan will be critical. Mr. Melillo agreed, and noted that we need kids to allow themselves into the space if we want them to soar. Ms. Zukowski added that we need messaging that is inclusive. Everyone is welcome into the same circle.

Ms. Uberti said we need a face-to-face parent advisory committee composed of people from the school community with diverse perspectives. This group could create advocates that better reach our community. Mr. Kellen added it is like learning - learning from another’s lived experience, not becoming the another. Understanding, not “getting it right or getting it done.” Ms. Briggs added that teachers use multiple lenses. We need to do that – model different perspectives.

Mr. Abazi added that diversity is more than skin color. We need to broaden this. Diversity includes ethnicity, culture, family life, even the sports that a student participates in. These create identity groups. We should work towards the SADE goal of inclusion. Ms. Torres added that SADE needs to reach students of color. SADE is now mostly white students and she is concerned that they need to achieve a broader reach across the NHS community. Mr. Nixon suggested to create a fishbowl opportunity. Ms. Zukowski suggested reaching out the ELL, neuro-diverse and other communities may help show SADE’s welcoming of diversity.

Mr. Nixon and his colleagues will present their workplan at the next Board of Education meeting on June 6th.

5. Public Participation

None.

6. Adjournment

Mr. Cruson moved to adjourn the meeting at 5:59 pm, seconded by Ms. Zukowski. Motion passed unanimously.

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

Appendix A

SADE Presentation

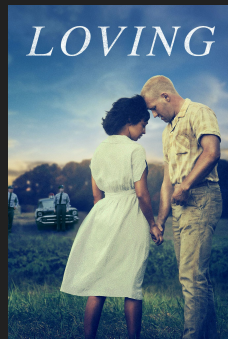
S.A.D.E.



Our Mission

In SADE, we strive to foster an inclusive and open minded community that offers equal acceptance to people of all races and ethnic backgrounds. Our mission is to encourage open and candid dialogue that will help connect people in a way that promotes equality. Through various initiatives and discussions that connect staff members and students, we hope to create a welcoming environment where all students feel empowered, accepted and acknowledged.

Movie Nights



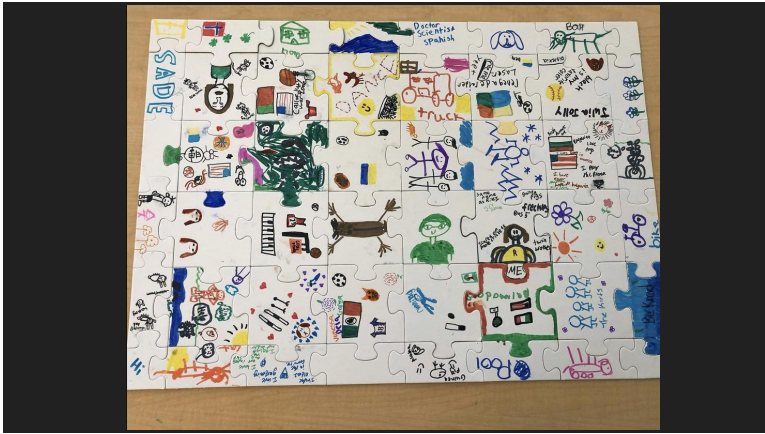


Sandy Hook School Read Aloud

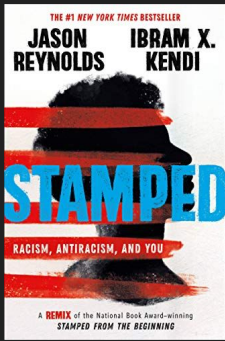


C.H. Booth Library Read Aloud

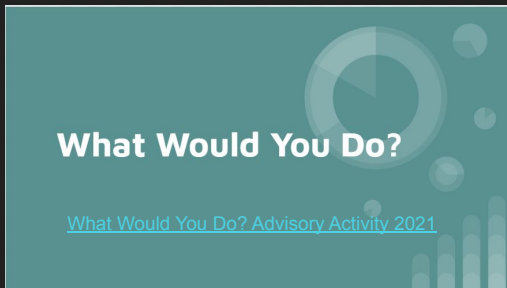




Book Clubs



Advisory Lesson for Freshmen & Sophomores



Community Events



Morning Meetings







We Welcome a New E-Board for 2023-2024



Appendix B

Nixon & Co. Presentation

	Newtown Public Schools DEAI Commitment	
<p>Diversity, Equity and Inclusion are words that, when used together, describe policies and programs that promote the representations, participation and contributions of different groups of individuals as set forth in Policy 0523 Equity and Diversity including but not limited to people of different race, culture, religion, mental and physical ability, sexual orientation, or gender expression or identity.</p> <p>More specifically:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Schools should be welcoming and supportive spaces for our students.- Our curriculum should be infused with materials that include diverse authors, protagonists, heroes and historical figures.- When studying topics in our classroom, our students will learn through multiple lenses and points of view.- Schools should embrace kindness and diversity. Any form of harassment or bullying based on personal characteristics, as enumerated above, will not be tolerated. <p>As educators, we need to provide various perspectives on topics and remain apolitical. To encourage critical thinking, we need to develop learning environments that allow students to identify and understand perspectives provided in the material and related discussions, and to draw their own informed conclusions. That is where true learning occurs.</p>		

 Newtown Public Schools DEAI Work Plan 														
Purpose and Background		Goals and Objectives				Evidence								
Building on the district's current priorities and the recommendations of Newtown Public Schools' Superintendent and leadership team, Nixon & Co. Consulting Group shall act as Project & Lead Facilitator for continued development of NPS's DEAI Work plan, specifically focused on increasing student achievement and engagement through exploring Dimensions of Diversity and other Cultural Identities		Goal 1: Current State Assessment				DEAI Workplan Development								
		Goal 2: District Leadership advocacy & support				Internal/External DEAI messaging								
		Goal 3: Culture-making within local schools				Messaging of school-level DEAI efforts								
		Goal 4: Operationalizing the work via PL				PL Surveys								
Plan of Action														
Task	Responsible	Status	Year 1				Year 2				Year 3			
			Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
Goal 1: Current state assessment of Newtown Public Schools in service of building a 3 Year DEAI Work Plan														
Initial Consult	Nixon	Completed	■											
Building Walkthroughs	Nixon	Completed		■										
Board Update	Nixon	Completed			■									
Student Listening Sessions	Nixon	Completed				■								
Student Listening Board Update	Nixon	In Progress					■							
DEAI Workplan Development	Nixon / Newtown	In Progress						■						
Final Board Report	Nixon	In Progress							■					
Goal 2: District Leadership will advocate for and support district-wide DEAI efforts														
Develop 3-Year DEAI Plan	Name	In Progress					■							
Internal Messaging of DEAI efforts	Name	Not started						■	■	■	■	■	■	
External Messaging of DEAI efforts	Name	Not started						■	■	■	■	■	■	
Assessing org capacity for DEAI work	Name	Not started							■	■	■	■	■	
PL in coordination w/ BoE	Name	Not started							■	■	■	■	■	
Measuring Impact: Goals & Metrics	Name	Not started								■	■	■	■	
Parent Advocacy Team	Name	Not Started									■	■	■	
Goal 3: Establish a culture of data-informed practices to build capacity for DEAI within Newtown Public Schools														
DEAI Community of Practice w/ Safe Schools Committee	Name	Not started						■	■	■	■	■	■	
Culture of Accountability	Name	Not started						■	■	■	■	■	■	
Assessing org capacity for DEAI work	Name	Not started							■					
Messaging of DEAI Initiatives (school level)	Name	Not started								■				
Modeling Best Practices / Protocols	Name	Not started									■			
Grading for Learning	Name	Not started										■	■	
Goal 4: Build capacity to operationalize DEAI work within Newtown Public Schools														
Creating welcoming and supportive spaces	Name	Not Started						■						
Understanding Dimensions of Diversity	Name	Not started						■						
Holding space for necessary conversations	Name	Not started							■					
Creating interpersonal and group dynamics	Name	Not started								■				
Fostering a culture of collaboration	Name	Not started									■			
Presenting instruction from multiple viewpoints	Name	Not started										■		
Leading classroom discussions without bias	Name	Not started											■	
Relevance: Learning that looks like me	Name	Not started												
Grading for Learning	Name	Not started												