

Board of Education
Communications Sub-Committee
October 5th, 2020
Virtual Meeting 1:00 p.m.

In consideration of public health, open meetings and the Governor's Executive Order No. 7B dated March 10, 2020 regarding PROTECTION OF PUBLIC HEALTH AND SAFETY DURING COVID19 PANDEMIC AND RESPONSE - FURTHER SUSPENSION OR MODIFICATION OF STATUTES; this meeting will include an option for the public to phone in to listen to the audio of the meeting. Please note that public comment will be received by phone at the beginning and end of this meeting.

Joining Info: Join by phone +1 984-221-1714 (PIN: 100 546 148#)

AGENDA

1. Call to Order
2. Public Participation
3. New Business
 - Approve Minutes of September 14th Meeting
 - Discussion existing articles for Equity and Diversity newsletter
 - Discussion of Technology newsletter for January
4. Public Participation
5. Adjournment

Board of Education
Communications Sub-Committee
September 14, 2020
Virtual Meeting 2:00 p.m.

Minutes of meeting held virtually.

Present: D. Cruson
D. Zukowski

1. Call to Order

Mr. Cruson called the meeting to order at 1:00 PM

2. Public Participation

None

3. New Business

- Approve Minutes of August 3rd Meeting
Motion made by Ms. Zukowski, 2nd by Mr. Cruson

Approved Unanimously

- Update on meetings for the Equity and Diversity Newsletter
The committee was still working on organizing meetings with the individuals they want to interview for the individual articles.

Ms. Zukowski suggested a review of the list of articles and names.

Mr. Cruson said he would send the list to Dr. Rodrigue to confirm who was needed to contribute to the articles.

- Start planning the Budget Newsletter for early 2021
Ms. Zukowski mentioned that she thought it would be best to have a budget newsletter in April. The newsletter would provide information about the approved budget for the community so that they can make an informed decision.

Mr. Cruson mentioned that in the past the committee had done two budget newsletters so that was why he thought we would have one in January. He then asked for suggestions on what the committee could do for a topic.

Ms. Zukowski suggested that the committee do a newsletter focused around technology in the district. Topic would include both how it is used in general and how it has changed due to Covid.

Suggested article topics could be:

- Closer Look with Carmella
- Blended instruction using technology in classroom delivery of instruction
- Impact of Covid on technology
- Year to year total administration of the program under normal circumstances (number of devices and management)

- Working towards one to one devices

4. Public Participation

None

5. Adjournment

Motion made by Mr. Cruson. Approved Unanimously. Adjourned at 1:30 PM

Respectfully submitted:

Daniel Cruson Jr.
Chair

Diversity and Equity: A Vision for the Future

Amidst a global pandemic, the Nation watched the untimely death of George Floyd. While questions of 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 the district and reimagine practices that would sustain a respectful learning environment for all students. Local narratives shared during Town gatherings and 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 students through the creation of a resolution and review of policies and practices to establish a clear vision for the future.

Community Conversations

In July, the Superintendent 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, including the need for a clearer understanding regarding protocols for identifying, investigating, and responding to incidents that demonstrated 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 Practices: Creating a Safe and Equitable Learning Environment

After the BOE approved *Promoting Diversity & Equity*, a resolution that embraced a commitment to maintaining a safe and inclusive learning environment, school leaders began to review both existing and new practices. One perception shared by families involved incidents of harassment that may have been witnessed by other students or staff but failed to intervene. The resolution makes it clear that incidents of racism would be recorded and reported, and that school leaders would continue to hold all members of the school community accountable for their actions. The resolution further calls for students to become “upstanders,” encouraged to stand up for themselves or others when behaviors conflict with values of respect, inclusivity, and tolerance.

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 other works of fiction and non-fiction might be reviewed to balance the image of marginalized groups in more positive roles. The mechanism for reviewing curriculum currently occurs through staff committees and the Board’s C & I (Curriculum and Instruction) subcommittee. Continuing to assess content that is culturally responsive and soliciting input from students will be critical to supporting systemic change in the months and years ahead.

In concert with the resolution, both 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 compliance officer that will oversee incident related to diversity and equity, and who would work with staff, leaders, and families to find positive solutions to incident 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 social-emotional 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, manage conflicts, 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. Through many of the SEL activities, students learn to work collaboratively, listen to and respect others’ perspectives, and approach school with positivity and trust.

Newtown Public Schools has established practices, both existing and new, that will continue to be reviewed and monitored for their effectiveness. 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.