

Newtown Board of Education
Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Subcommittee

BOE Conference Room
January 12, 2023, 8:00 am

3 Primrose Street, Newtown, CT 06470

MINUTES

Present: Alison Plante (Chair), Dan Cruson (Member), Deb Zukowski (Member), Chris Melillo (Superintendent), Anne Uberti (Assistant Superintendent), Kellan Nixon (remote), and one member of the public.

1. Call to Order

Ms. Plante called the meeting to order at 8:03 am.

2. Public Participation

None.

3. Approval of minutes from December 9, 2023 Meeting

Mr. Cruson moved to approve the minutes from the December 9th meeting. Ms. Zukowski seconded. Motion passes unanimously.

4. Introduction to Kellan Nixon and Initial Overview of Current State Assessment Process

Mr. Nixon introduced himself and the work he will be doing for the district. He said the work would focus on cultural responsiveness targeting the whole child. As part of that, it was important to ensure that students feel safe in the classroom. His consulting group has four years of experience doing this type of work across a broad range of communities. Initially, the work will begin with a needs assessment intended to understand the district's best practices and challenges, focusing on practices related to critical thinking.

Ms. Zukowski asked for elaboration on the types of needs he will include in the assessment. Mr. Nixon responded that there are three classes of needs: personal, institutional, and community practice. Personal looks at where all the stakeholders (students, staff, and family) are with respect to knowledge of and understanding about cultural responsiveness. Institutional focuses on understanding the norms and structures related to cultural responsiveness of both the schools and community. Community practice calls out how culturally responsive programs and classroom staff get the resources needed. Mr. Nixon said that it is clear that there has been a good amount of work thus far. The assessment will summarize what exists, what is working, and opportunities for further improvement. These

needs span classroom instruction, professional learning opportunities, curricula, and teacher comfort.

Ms. Zukowski followed up, asking to move the conversation up a level. That is, how will we know that building cultural responsiveness is improving our overall education? Are there metrics, like representation in programs or school climate concerns, we can use to ensure that our efforts are working? Mr. Nixon said the success is demonstrated via the individual student. “Who are they” and “how is their culture reflected in the classroom”? Are the facilitators able to engage their students, including them more actively in the lessons? Success, in sum, is to “measure how proximate the cultural responsiveness in the classroom is the cultural identities of the students.” This is done using observation. Typically in a classroom observation, both the teacher and the children are performative for the first few minutes. Once a few minutes pass, however, more typical norms set in and students begin to “show their identities,” after which the observers look at participation and teaching/learning dynamics. The observers then sit with the principals to better understand the overall school dynamics. Mr. Nixon described that with these observations and the rest of his work, he is able to identify 3-5 priorities for the district, with professional development and a plan that supports them. There are systems-level things, however, (e.g., discipline, special education) that can perpetuate inequity and you won’t necessarily in a classroom observation. They may manifest when you look across many observations, but really having impact at the systems-level is a heavier lift. We will start with the needs assessment to understand what’s happening on the ground.

Ms. Plante asked about the overall plan of work, including who, when, and how long. Mr. Nixon responded that he is working on the detailed workplan for the first 60 days, which will focus on the needs assessment. This effort will lay out the initial step for assessing district needs including methods used, and will include engaging students (e.g., SADE membership) along with other stakeholders. It will continue onto the work needed to understand what exists (“what we are working with”) relating to the overall status of DEI. Mr. Nixon did note that the libraries appear to have a diverse set of library books and that teachers are “making space for students.” The plan will provide information on where the district is excelling and also opportunities for improvement, defining key priority areas. Each priority area will include 3 to 5 tactics, grounded in best practices, on how to move forward.

The effort will take about 8 months and will include some of the four Nixon and Co. Consulting Group associates. Mr. Nixon and associates will be providing guidance on content development and classroom management along with coaching and observations. Mr. Melillo has worked with Mr. Nixon in the past and added that he has focused on educational practices including deescalation and others that help teachers be successful in the classroom. Mr. Nixon looks at the DEI though the lens of the whole community, not just specific groups.

5. Approval of 2023 Committee Meeting Schedule

Ms. Plante presented a possible calendar for the 2023 calendar year, as shown in Appendix A. Ms. Zukowski moved to approve the 2023 Committee Meeting Schedule. Mr. Cruson seconded. Motion passes unanimously.

6. Approve Refinements to DEI Goal Statement

Ms. Zukowski shared her proposed editorial updates to the version of the DEI Goal Statement presented to the Board on Sept. 20, 2022. Mr. Cruson asked why the characteristics list in the definition did not use “including but not limited” language used in policies. Ms. Zukowski replied that the lists in policies are typically exhaustive of all required items. The emphasis of the Statement is to illustrate the breadth of characteristics along with referring back to the policy for the more complete list. The committee agreed to update the Statement as requested. Mr. Cruson suggested that the examples of characteristics be removed from the definition, leaving the link to the policy. Ms. Zukowski responded that the intent is to have simple language. The examples help illustrate the breadth of DEI characteristics. The link is available for those who prefer to read more fully. The committee preferred to leave the examples in, as edited. Ms. Uberti requested that the final bullet be updated to “various perspectives” as opposed to “all sides” since it may be difficult and/or time consuming to include all perspectives. The committee agreed to update the Statement as requested. Mr. Cruson motioned to accept the Statement as amended. Ms. Plante seconded. The motion passed unanimously.

The September 20 version, with edits shown, and the final version are available in Appendix B.

7. Public Participation

None.

8. Adjournment

Mr. Cruson moved to adjourn the meeting at 8:55 am, seconded by Ms Zukowski. Motion passed unanimously.

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

Appendix A

NEWTOWN BOARD OF EDUCATION Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Subcommittee 2023 Schedule of Meetings

Meetings will be held in the Central Office Conference Room at the Newtown Municipal Center, 3 Primrose Street, at 6:00pm (*unless otherwise noted*).

January 12 (*8am*)

February 23

March 23

April 27

May 25

June 22

July 27

August 24

September 21

October 26

November 16

December 21

January 11, 2024

Appendix B

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Statement (Proposed edits)

Diversity, equity and inclusion are words, that, when used together, describe policies and programs that promote the representations, participations and contributions of different groups of individuals as set forth in Policy 0523 Equity and Diversity, including, for example, people of different race, culture, ~~color, creed or~~ religion, ~~ancestry national origin~~, mental and physical ability, ~~age, marital status, physical appearance, family structure, citizenship status,~~ sexual orientation, or gender expression or identity, ~~economic status, veteran's status, or other distinguishing personal characteristics.~~

More specifically:

- 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.
- As educators, we need to provide all sides to 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.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Statement (Final version)

Diversity, equity and inclusion are words that, when used together, describe policies and programs that promote the representations, participations 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, and gender expression or identity.

More specifically:

- 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.

- 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.