

Newtown Board of Education Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Subcommittee

**BOE Conference Room
3 Primrose Street, Newtown, CT 06470**

September 16, 2022, 8:00 am

MINUTES

Present: Alison Plante (chair), Dan Cruson (member), Deb Zukowski (member), Chris Melillo (Superintendent), Anne Uberti (Assistant Superintendent) and four members of the public.

1. Call to Order

Ms. Plante called the meeting to order at 8:01 am.

2. Public Participation

Jessica Velasco, 103 Brushy Hill Road, read a portion of CAGE Board responsibilities that included that Board members are not responsible for the day-to-day operations of the district. She asserted that the Newtown Board of Education gets involved in such activities – when it is not its role. Creating Goals and Objectives for the DEI Coordinator is not within the Board’s role and she believes this is an effort by some Board members to “water down” the DEI policy. One common thread she hears is that members mention other groups when talking about DEI, including SPED. SPED is already protected and it is addressed in other programs. Mentioning BIPOC is not political. It is not the Board of Education’s role to “win the hearts and minds” of the community, but rather “to protect the children.”

3. Approval of Minutes from 8/19/22 and 9/9/22 Meetings

Mr. Cruson moves to approve the minutes from the 8/19/22 and 9/9/22 meetings. Ms. Plante seconds. Motion passes unanimously.

4. Continued Discussion on Goals & Objectives for DEI Coordinator role

Ms. Plante said that there was no input related to the DEI definition and program goals received from the other Board members. The Committee then made one more pass through the document, editing for grammar and brevity.

Ms. Zukowski then asked how the document might guide efforts within the DEI program. She called out three DEI program goals that she felt could be derived from the definition. 1) The document calls for someone (or several someones) to be the “face of DEI” for the school community, including students of color and their families, LGBTQ+ students and their families, ELL students and their families, and others as listed in the definition. 2) There should be one or more staff members who are knowledgeable of and contribute to, as appropriate, each of the programs and policies related to DEI. 3) There should be at least one staff member to

oversee to overall program and ensure that all programs and policies, taken together, realize the tenets, as provided in the document. These are the people who would help inform the Board of the overall progress of the program.

Mr. Melillo said that he agrees with the “Face” for the community. Wes was the support for many. However, DEI is not just a program for individual groups. White students benefit from the program by being better prepared for the future. Mr. Cruson agrees. He thought that the list as represented by Ms. Zukowski was too specific.

Ms. Plante said she is okay with the document as is because it is consistent with the Board’s current policy and not breaking new ground beyond the Board and Committee’s scope.

Mr. Melillo mentioned that he joined recent training provided by George Coleman, during which Mr. Coleman discussed the “Four Pillars.” Mr. Melillo noted that the “Four Pillars” was very similar to the tenets listed in the document. Mr. Cruson agreed. Ms. Zukowski also agreed that the “Four Pillars” was similar though it went into more depth.

Ms. Zukowski then continued one level deeper into the three goals she mentioned earlier. Who would fill the roles? Were there any that the DEI Coordinator would fill, e.g., being one of the “Faces” for the community and possibly being the one who would oversee the overall the cohesiveness of all of the programs?

Ms. Uberti reiterated what she had said in the prior meeting, that when the coordinator position is filled, they would work to create a broader plan. One person cannot be “everything to everybody.” The overall goal is to infuse DEI understanding into school practices. The plan would call out who is responsible for each of the components.

Ms. Plante agreed with Ms. Uberti, and questioned how Ms. Zukowski’s questions were related to the task at hand of completing the document.

Mr. Cruson moved to send the document to the Board. Ms. Plante seconded. Passed unanimously. The document is included in Appendix A.

5. Continued Discussion on Training for DEI Subcommittee

Mr. Melillo again mentioned Kellen Nixon. He is a DEI trainer with experience training Boards of Education, and Mr. Melillo likes his style. Mr. Melillo also suggested George Coleman who, as a former CT Commissioner of Education, would understand the work of the Board. Mr. Coleman also happens to be a Newtown resident. Mr. Cruson added that Mr. Johnson had previously suggested the Mr. Coleman come to a DEI committee meeting.

Ms. Plante said that Mr. Johnson offered to do the training and added that the training could be opened up to other Board members on a voluntary basis.

Mr. Melillo added that Dr. Tamika LaSalle, another trainer he had mentioned earlier, is now a professor at Georgia State University and would likely be difficult to schedule.

Ms. Plante asked how the Board might pay the trainer fees. Mr. Melillo mentioned that this could be considered Professional Development. Ms. Zukowski mentioned that there is an account set aside for BOE expenses that might be used. Mr. Melillo will follow up with the Director of Business and Finance.

Mr. Cruson agreed with Ms. Plante that the training could be open to the full Board on a voluntary basis. Ms. Zukowski disagreed. She believed that the DEI committee should take the training first to see how it might inform the overall work of the Board. She mentioned an article about DEI training in the New York Times Magazine that suggested that some DEI training may not be effective. [*It is entitled "Whiteness Lessons" in the July 19, 2020 version of the magazine.*] Ms. Zukowski asked if the training would have relevant messages for Board members and be meaningful to their work for the district.

Mr. Melillo mentioned that he heard of issues from a prior DEI training session provided by Re-Center that was problematic. Mr. Cruson agreed, saying that he and a member of the public had taken the training in preparation for the search for the first DEI Coordinator.

The committee then continued the discussion, noting that Mr. Coleman had recently provided training to the district's School Equity Leaders. Mr. Melillo further added that four of the teachers who had participated in the earlier training reached out to Mr. Melillo and Ms. Uberti with comments about it being a great program. All agreed that it made sense to ask Mr. Coleman to provide the training.

6. Public Participation

Don Lococo, 27 Hi Barlow Road, expressed concerns about the committee's unwillingness to bring in other Board members for the training. Normal workplaces have standard training, a common practice that helps the companies avoid potential court cases. He urged the committee members to not "coddle" the other members.

Kate McGrady, 16 Philo Curtis Road, mentioned she has been attending the Social Emotional Health and Wellness Committee meetings, and juxtaposed the interactions that committee has with the Health and Wellness Coordinator with what the Board is doing in regard to the DEI Coordinator position. She believes that the DEI Coordinator position is being micromanaged.

7. Adjournment

Mr. Cruson moved to adjourn the meeting at 8:40 am, seconded by Ms. Zukowski. Passed unanimously.

Respectfully Submitted,

Deborra Zukowski

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

Appendix A

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Statement

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, including 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, gender expression or identity, economic status, veteran's status, [add "alienage"? - consult HR and align to current Federal language] 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 related discussions, and to draw their own informed conclusions. That is where true learning occurs.