

Newtown Board of Education

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Subcommittee

Central Office - Board of Education Conference Room
3 Primrose Street, Newtown, CT 06470

October 26, 2023, 6:00pm

MINUTES

Present: Alison Plante (Chair), Dan Cruson (Member), Deb Zukowski (Member), Chris Melillo (Superintendent), Jana Briggs (Nixon & Co.), three members of the public.

Call to Order: 6:05pm

1. Public Participation

None.

2. Approval of Minutes from August 24, 2023 Special Meeting

Mr. Cruson moved to approve the minutes of the August 24th Special Meeting. Ms. Plante seconded. Motion passed 2-0. (Ms. Plante abstained because she was not present at the August 24th meeting.)

3. Update on Progress Against DEI Workplan

Jana Briggs gave an overview of Nixon & Co.'s visit to Newtown earlier this week. They visited all 7 schools and met with the Equity Teams in each building. Each Equity Team is comprised of the school's two Equity Leaders, the School Culture and Climate Leader, and the building administrators. The main focus of this visit was to work on two goals within the DEI Workplan: Goal 2 ("District Leadership will advocate for and support district-wide DEAI efforts") and Goal 4 ("Build capacity to operationalize DEAI work within Newtown Public Schools"). *[See Appendix A for workplan.]* For Goal #2, we are first focused on external communications and supported Chris's recent communication about DEI in his recent newsletter *[See Appendix B]*. We are also beginning to focus on how we will measure impact over time. One of the metrics for Goal #2 will be whether stakeholders feel that messaging around DEI work has improved, and this will be measured in mid-year and end-of-year surveys. For Goal #2, we will survey the Equity Teams in each building to understand their level of comfort and support related to the DEI work.

Nixon & Co. are also preparing for a professional development day on November 9th with the Equity Teams from each building (35 people in total). The goal of this session will be to acclimate the teams to the workplan and zoom in on the specific work to be executed this year. They will ensure that the Equity Teams understand all the dimensions of diversity and how to create welcoming and inclusive environments within their school buildings to foster each student's sense of belonging.

Ms. Briggs continued to describe Nixon & Co.'s visit to the schools this week. During their meetings with the Equity Teams, they outlined the workplan at a high level and also gathered questions from the teams, as an input to the professional development session in November. We want to be responsive to the needs of each building, as they may vary by school. Ms. Briggs and her team generally want to be visible in the schools.

Ms. Briggs and Mr. Nixon will be in Newtown again for the November 9th professional development, at which time they will also meet with Mr. Melillo to prepare for their visit in the second semester.

Ms. Briggs explained that they are beginning to establish a baseline for teacher-level metrics. The focus for this year is about establishing and training the Equity Leaders in each building, and the focus for next year will be more at the level of all the teachers – but it’s important to begin establishing the baseline at the teacher-level now. To do this, Nixon & Co. and Mr. Melillo are using the learning walks that are already being done, plus data from the Climate and Culture surveys. Ms. Briggs and her team are currently reviewing the data from the most recent survey to determine which indicators make sense to use as metrics.

Mr. Cruson asked if Ms. Briggs has a sense yet of what will eventually be included in the professional development for teachers. Ms. Briggs isn’t sure yet. The professional development in November will be for the Equity Teams, and we won’t get to the teacher-level until next year – but they will start planning for it later this year.

Ms. Plante asked if the committee can preview the survey that will be sent to the staff. Ms. Briggs said yes, she will send to Mr. Melillo and Ms. Uberti to distribute to the committee.

Ms. Plante asked if we have full Equity Teams at each building. Ms. Briggs said yes, we have full teams at each building and no gaps. The teams are excited to learn and help teach and support their colleagues. Mr. Melillo noted that he thought it made sense to include the Climate & Culture leader at each school in the Equity Teams given the adjacency.

Ms. Plante asked about next steps regarding external messaging, beyond the Superintendent’s newsletter. Mr. Melillo explained that there will be additional messaging coming from the school principals. Last year was a planning year and ensuring we understood the current state; this year is a “building capacity” year. We are already picking up great tactics from Ms. Briggs and her team. It’s really about making sure that we are thinking about DEI not as a separate “lesson” but as something that is embedded in our curriculum. For example, the new elementary ELA curriculum is more diverse than the prior Readers’ and Writers’ Workshop curriculum. Teachers are reporting that the accompanying literature is more diverse, and that students are seeing themselves in what they are reading.

4. Superintendent’s Update

Mr. Melillo discussed the District’s response to recent world events, including the war in the Middle East and the mass shooting in Lewiston, Maine. He provided information from the Department of Justice that was sent to the principals of all of our schools [See Appendix C]. He described the broad network of social and emotional supports that Newtown already has in place and how each piece is being activated. He has been in touch with the Equity Teams in each building as well as the social workers, counselors and psychologists to ensure that all students and families who are directly impacted are being supported. We have extensive SEL curriculum and administrators are also ensuring it is being delivered with fidelity (including things like Project Adventure and Second Step), particularly as it relates to the anti-bullying themes. We are exploring expanding the existing Kids in Crisis program down to the elementary level with a pilot program at Middle Gate. Mr. Melillo is planning to use his next newsletter to remind parents and families of the various ways to report bullying, including the Anonymous Alerts app, the Bully Boxes at each school, and speaking directly with a trusted adult in the building. Newtown has a strong SEL program, though he is working to ensure that our programming is responsive to the world events.

Ms. Plante asked for additional information on the Bully Boxes. Mr. Melillo explained that they are physical boxes in the elementary schools, Reed, and the middle school that are locked but have slots on top. Students

can write a note to report bullying and place it in the box. The boxes are checked frequently by the school counselors. They are basically a physical version of the Anonymous Alerts app. Not everyone feels comfortable reporting bullying directly to an adult, so the boxes are just another mechanism for students to report.

Mr. Cruson asked how the students know that the Bully Boxes exist and where they are located. Mr. Melillo responded that the teachers mention it, in addition to the social workers and counselors telling students about them. Mr. Cruson said that we should add one at the high school if there isn't one already, and Mr. Melillo agreed to look into it.

Ms. Plante said that it makes sense to focus on the students and families that are directly impacted, but questioned whether there is opportunity to use the current world events as a teaching moment and opportunity to educate other students who may not otherwise be aware of what is happening and the impact it may have on their classmates. Mr. Melillo agreed that it could be, and it relates back to our prior discussion around the dimensions of diversity. It's critical that students and staff understand the dimensions of diversity so they can be empathetic towards each other.

Mr. Melillo is planning to send another Superintendent's Newsletter before the end of October. He has received positive feedback on his September newsletter (regarding the DEI message in particular). If parents have questions or concerns, he would welcome them to visit the schools to see firsthand how curriculum is delivered. Our goal is to make sure that kids feel comfortable in our schools. Kids learn better in welcoming spaces, and when they can see themselves both in their physical surroundings and the curriculum.

5. Public Participation

Nicole Maddox, 14 Nighthawk Lane, spoke about the Department of Justice "United Against Hate: Identifying, Reporting, and Preventing Hate Crimes" event that was held the prior evening at the Community Center. The second half of the session in particular discussed schools. The biggest takeaway is that there is underreporting and "if you see something, say something". She would encourage the District to bring the same group of experts back to have a discussion with school leaders. Mr. Melillo said that it is critical for school administrators to follow up with students and families after incidents have been addressed to explain how they were handled. Though there will be things that cannot be disclosed because of FERPA, follow-up is key in order to build trust. He also noted that new state legislation that makes significant changes to state bullying laws goes into effect with the 2025-26 school year.

Jessica Galterio, 8 Surrey Trail, asked what happens with reports that go into the Bully Boxes at the schools. Mr. Melillo explained that they are similar to the Anonymous Alerts app in that students can submit reports anonymously. Counselors check the boxes, retrieve any reports, and consult with administrators to address the report appropriately. Ms. Galterio said that a lot of what was discussed at the DOJ event was around establishing patterns, and asked if the District tracks reports in some way. Mr. Melillo responded that if appropriate, the reports are tracked in PowerSchool.

6. Adjournment

Mr. Cruson moved to adjourn at 7:00pm. Ms. Zukowski seconded. Motion passed unanimously.

THESE ARE DRAFT MINUTES AND ARE SUBJECT TO THE APPROVAL OF THE BOARD OF EDUCATION DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION COMMITTEE.

Appendix B: Excerpt from Recent Superintendent Newsletter re: DEAI

What is DEAI?

We hope this newsletter finds you in health and actively engaged in the conversations surrounding our public education system. We want to shed light on an effort taking place within Newtown Public Schools that has captured attention and sparked curiosity and concern among community members. We are referring to the journey towards Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion (DEAI).

We understand that DEAI initiatives may be met with skepticism or apprehension by some individuals in our community. We value the range of opinions within our community and believe it is critical to engage in open, honest discussions about the work taking place in our school system. By doing so we can progress together by embracing our differences and striving for a more equitable future for all students. It is essential to embrace a broad spectrum of perspectives, including those that may disagree with the program's objectives. Varied points of view are valued, as they contribute to constructive dialogue and help us find common ground to create a more inclusive and equitable educational system that benefits all students and stakeholders. Embracing diversity of thought ensures a more comprehensive and effective DEAI program that addresses the unique needs and concerns of our diverse community.

Diversity, Equity, Accessibility, and Inclusion are not merely buzzwords; they symbolize a commitment to establishing a school environment where every student feels valued, respected, and empowered to succeed. Newtown Public Schools is committed to providing these opportunities for ALL students regardless of their background or identity enabling them to excel academically, socially, and emotionally. The Newtown Board of Education's goal regarding DEAI efforts is to ensure each member of our educational community has the full opportunity to thrive in our schools through educational excellence and continuous personal and professional growth. To achieve this goal, the District needs to provide students with the tools each needs to succeed, regardless of background, race, color, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, religion, nation of origin, native language, socioeconomic status, or any other distinguishable situation. Further, the district needs to provide a school environment equipped with supportive and stimulating learning opportunities, resources for social and emotional growth, and exceptional educators who can guide students through their learning journey and prepare them for their future career and/or college experiences.

The successful implementation of DEAI extends beyond the confines of the educational institution and requires a willingness to accept differing viewpoints from the community, even those who may disagree with DEAI initiatives. Open and respectful dialogue with dissenting voices is essential for fostering understanding and collaboration. Embracing diverse perspectives from the community can lead to more comprehensive and effective DEAI strategies, helping to bridge gaps and dispel misconceptions. It demonstrates a commitment to transparency and inclusion, which, in turn, can contribute to a more harmonious and equitable learning environment for all students and stakeholders, ultimately enriching the educational experience.

Some individuals worry that DEAI initiatives might compromise standards. In reality, DEAI aims to ensure that every student has access to reaching their academic potential. By providing support and resources to students we can enhance academic achievement within our district.

We believe that:

- 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, whether based on 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, or other distinguishing personal characteristics, 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's where true learning occurs.

The district is focused on creating an environment where individuals from all walks of life feel valued and supported. At its core, this mission involves a deep commitment to understanding and embracing the myriad dimensions of diversity, be it cultural, racial, socioeconomic, gender, or beyond. By actively creating an environment where differences are not merely acknowledged but celebrated, the district aims to facilitate meaningful interactions, dialogue, and collaboration among our staff, students, and their families. Through these efforts, we aspire to build a more cohesive and compassionate community, where everyone has the opportunity to thrive and contribute.

In conclusion, we firmly believe that by working and embracing the diverse needs of all of our students we can create an inclusive and equitable educational experience. Newtown Public Schools is dedicated to being transparent, accountable, and collaborative throughout the DEAI journey. We invite all members of our community to engage in discussions, attend meetings, and share their thoughts and ideas. We strongly believe that the more community voices we have involved, the better we can shape our DEAI initiatives according to our community's values and aspirations. We urge you to stay involved, ask questions, and express your thoughts as we continue on this journey. Together we can ensure that Newtown Public Schools remains a place where every child has the opportunity to thrive.

Christopher Melillo
Superintendent



The U.S. Department of Justice Community Relations Service (CRS) provides services to communities to respond to community tension and allegations of bias and hate incidents.

U.S. Department of Justice Community Relations Service (CRS)

Preventing and Responding to Bias and Hate Incidents in K-12 Educational Settings:

A Toolkit for School Communities and Leaders

Students, parents, and school administrators deserve safe and inclusive environments that are free of harassment and discrimination. Well-designed and facilitated opportunities for groups to dialogue together can enable divided communities to address differences, through respectful sharing of perspectives that moves towards solutions by focusing on the common good.

Best practices for especially difficult conversations ▼

- ▶ Redesign meeting formats to help keep difficult conversations productive and respectful, such as smaller meetings or breakout sessions.
- ▶ Provide multiple opportunities for community members to dialogue together, recognizing that everyone may not be comfortable with the same meeting format or available at the same time.
- ▶ Create a meeting structure that is conducive to productive dialogue where all perspectives can be shared by using ground rules that emphasize civil and respectful discourse, designating positions with clear roles (facilitator, timekeeper, etc.), and announcing a specific meeting purpose that sets participants' expectations about the meeting.
- ▶ Keep meetings on track with experienced facilitators who can acknowledge and defuse the emotion behind statements, reframe issues to focus on concerns and interests, and assess the participants' readiness to reach a solution.
- ▶ Use co-facilitators so that if one needs to address the needs of one or a small group of participants, the other can keep the meeting moving forward.
- ▶ Recognize that groups may not be ready to collaborate on solutions if they don't feel that they have been heard.
- ▶ After community members have had sufficient opportunities to share their perspectives, create a process for community groups to collaborate on solutions.
- ▶ Ask CRS for meeting design or facilitation support.
- ▶ Request CRS's Facilitating Meetings Around Community Conflict in-person or virtual training.

Host a public solidarity event against hate and bias. ▼

- ▶ Where appropriate and safe, public events and virtual convening can be used to raise awareness on bias and hate impacting communities.
- ▶ Share existing resources relevant to bias and hate, such as local human relations commissions, school programs, social services support, and programs supported by local community stakeholders.
- ▶ Create a space for survivors, supporters, and allies to express their concerns related to bias and hate, such as a community forum, [facilitated dialogue](#), listening session, or email tip box.
- ▶ Solidarity events can show community members they are not alone. Consider inviting other stakeholders such as faith leaders, community leaders, and law enforcement.

Be prepared for possible unrest, bias incidents, and hate crimes. ▼

- ▶ Identify and prepare for events where there may be an increased potential for hate or bias incidents.
- ▶ [Educate](#) community members on reporting procedures, hate crime laws, and best practices for protecting [places of worship](#).
- ▶ Alert local law enforcement about threats and other potentially criminal activity. Meet with law enforcement to learn about what and how to report.
- ▶ Coordinate plans for possible emergency situations such as targeted violence, hate crimes, and demonstrations with the potential for violence.
- ▶ Be aware of community events, observances, and holidays that may influence patterns of gathering and travel.
- ▶ Review materials and communications for [language accessibility and translation needs](#).
- ▶ Conduct a run through of your response plan to identify missing links and areas of improvement.
- ▶ Make law enforcement and community leaders aware of significant sites that may be targeted, including neighborhoods, workplaces, places of worship, consulates, embassies, cemeteries, historical monuments, and other congregate settings.

Take steps to mitigate the toll that bias and hate can have on the mental and physical well-being of impacted groups. ▼

- ▶ Have your working group engage with experts to ensure a common understanding of when and how mental health resources may be used.
- ▶ Some reported bias- or hate-related incidents have involved suspects with mental health issues. The working group can familiarize itself with local law enforcement processes for working with suspects with mental health issues.
- ▶ Provide [mental health resources](#) to survivors and members of communities experiencing hate and bias.
- ▶ Ensure first and second responders have access to adequate mental health and trauma support.
- ▶ Ensure survivor and witness resources are culturally appropriate.

Equip schools to respond to bias and hate incidents. ▼

- ▶ Encourage your school to have a cyberbullying and harassment policy.
- ▶ Train school officials on bias and hate incident reporting and investigation best practices.
- ▶ Reach out to impacted students.

CRS serves as “America’s Peacemaker” for communities in conflict by mediating disputes and enhancing community capacity to independently prevent and resolve future conflicts. Under Title X of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr., Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 2009, CRS responds to community conflicts arising from differences of race, color, national origin, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, or disability. CRS does not have investigative or prosecutorial authority. Rather, CRS impartially works with communities in conflict to help rebuild relationships, facilitate mutual understanding, and encourage the development of local solutions. CRS’s conciliators work directly with state and local officials, community-based organizations, community and civil rights advocates, faith-based groups, and law enforcement on a voluntary basis. CRS’s facilitated dialogue, consultation, training, and mediation are free and confidential.

Resources ▼

Facilitator Training, “Facilitating Meetings Around Community Conflict”
<https://www.justice.gov/file/1376611/download>

CRS services for school communities
<https://www.justice.gov/crs/our-stakeholders/educational-organizations>

Additional U.S. Department of Justice resources ▼

[Hate Crime Threat Guide](#)

Federal Bureau of Investigation

[Hate Crime Reporting – Working to Close the Gap](#)

Community Oriented Policing Services

[Improving the Identification and Reporting of Hate Crimes](#)

Community Oriented Policing Services

[Improving the Identification, Investigation, and Reporting of Hate Crimes: A Summary Report of the Law Enforcement Roundtable](#)

Community Oriented Policing Services

[Stop Hate: Action Steps for Local Communities](#)

Community Oriented Policing Services

[Helping Communities Prevent and Respond to Hate Crimes](#)

Community Relations Service

[Stop Hate & Build Inclusion: Resources for Law Enforcement and Community Partners](#)

Community Oriented Policing Services

For emergencies dial 9-1-1 to get immediate help. ▼

If you believe you are the victim of a hate crime or believe you witnessed a hate crime:

Step 1: Report the crime to your local police.

Step 2: Quickly follow up this report with a tip to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) by calling 1-800-CALL-FBI or submitting the information at tips.fbi.gov. You may remain anonymous.

Find us, connect with us ▼

www.justice.gov/crs

www.justice.gov/hatecrimes



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