

Pandemic and Postpandemic Pursuits of Equity and Inclusion



By Sunshine Miller

The pandemic brought about many paradigm shifts for schools across the country and around the world. Newfield Central School District has experienced a plethora of challenges since March 13, 2020. A brand-new administrative team in July and August, a massive shift to a 1:1 initiative, a dismal fiscal outlook, and a reckoning for the district spurred by the *Black Lives Matter* movement, students, and community members all focused on our learning community's antibiased and antiracist future.

The district was not unfamiliar with antiracist work. Just before Covid-19 closed the doors of the district last March, Dr. Nia Nunn, associate professor in the department of education at Ithaca College, visited and spent time with the district staff discussing topics like *Black Lives Matter* and white fragility. The pandemic brought our work with Dr. Nunn to a pause, but the students in the district did not lose sight of the want to make our culture and climate more accepting of diversity. Recent graduates and other current students presented at a board of education meeting, and other BIPOC students have spoken out about their experiences in the district. A parent expressed concerns surrounding the growing diversity of the student population given the gentrification of nearby Ithaca and the district's need to be supportive of the increasing population of black and brown students and their families. As a point of reference, our rural school, just seven miles from Ithaca, is the poorest school district in the county and the second most diverse. The small town is a food desert, a digital desert (65 percent of our families do not have broadband access), and void of the culturally diverse dynamic that exists just a few miles away. The impact of rural isolation can be an added stress for diverse families who relocate to the bedroom communities of Ithaca. The new administration, board of education, faculty, and staff recognize the impact that isolation can have on a learner, especially those from marginalized populations, and are deeply committed to creating a learning community that is accepting and inclusive.

Below are a few ways the district has worked with a wide variety of partners to pursue equity and inclusion.

THE CENTER FOR CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING AND LEARNING

The entire district has participated in training with Dr. Sharroky Hollie, founder of the Center for Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning. The district devoted five hours to virtual training and then met with

Dr. Hollie to discuss a plan and path forward. We continue to work with Dr. Hollie and have plans for board of education training as well as offering additional training to faculty and staff. The district superintendent, Eric Hartz, has become involved in Dr. Hollie's race challenge and is working closely with other administrators from four states. It is our hope to include more opportunities for our entire district to continue working with Dr. Hollie in the coming months. We know this work is a journey, not a race, and are devoted to carrying forward the work long-term.

ANTIRACISM, EQUITY AND INCLUSION COMMITTEE

District faculty created an anti-racism, equity, and inclusion committee that has representation from the many partners in the district and community. The committee meets regularly to discuss how the district can best support our students and families and has begun to create subcommittees focused on antibiased, antiracist curriculum and instruction, mental health, community outreach, and student empowerment. The committee is currently working on creating a family-school relationship survey that will guide our work in creating a strategic plan with goals, evaluation, and assessment measures. Over time, we will endeavor to bring the teaching and learning community together with our community at large to work together to continually assess and refine our work.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

The district has incorporated standards and goals for professional learning.

These standards were adapted from multiple sources and include three touchstones:

- Teaching and learning are designed to address structural racism, bias, and oppression.
- Teaching and learning are informed by the ways that racism, bias, and other forms of oppression negatively affect people from marginalized groups.
- Members of the learning

community apply antiracist and antibias principles to their work.

Goals for our standards include supporting learning, well-being, justice, and joy for our students through a focus on identity, intellectualism, and criticality.

The standards are listed in our district professional learning catalog and connected to a wide variety of professional learning opportunities including a book study on Claude Steele's *Whistling Vivaldi*, aimed at shining a light on stereotype threat and its impact on identity and learning. Other opportunities involve listening and responding to podcasts by notable experts in the field (including Chris Emdin, Robin DiAngelo, Tim Wise, and Valerie Jarrett) and trauma-informed and culturally affirming and responsive webinars. We look forward to connecting with more experts in person and inviting speakers and guests to the districts as Covid restrictions begin to ease. We also plan to utilize the arm of our antiracism, equity, and inclusion committee to create future offerings for our faculty and staff.

CURRICULUM AUDITS

One of the professional learning opportunities for spring 2021 centers on the book *A More Beautiful Question* by Warren Berger. It is our hope that working through modes and methods of inquiry will help our faculty and staff focus on self-inquiry and connect that to their curricular and instructional choices and methods. We also want our educators to take reflective inquiry a step further and ask students to engage with critical inquiry connected to the curriculum they are exposed to. The overarching goal is to create a way for students and staff to judge whether a text incorporates authenticity, awareness, and a call to action. We developed two text audit tools for teachers and students and devised posters to support curricular text inquiry from both teacher and student perspectives. These supports were developed with help from Barry Derfel, a local retired social studies teacher, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, and antiracist educator, and the

NYSED Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Framework.

One of the silver linings of the pandemic is the incredible opportunity to leverage the watershed moment and paradigm shift to build back better. We are keenly aware of the challenges that being disconnected from the outside world and living in a rural community can bring. In addition to our work around curriculum and professional learning, the district has plans to help families access programs and benefits that will ease the impact of rural isolation. We will focus on connecting our community to the emergency broadband benefit utilizing

student liaisons to develop programs and assist families with accessing this service to help address digital inequity. The wellness committee and our school lunch program are also working with local partners to close the equity gap that takes up residence in rural communities with regard to food, desserts, and fresh food scarcity.

We know that there will be discomfort and struggle. But we are impressed every day with our teaching staff and district employee commitment to creating equity and justice, and our community's willingness to walk with us as we continue on our journey toward a more culturally responsive and af-

firming district. Our small rural school knows that we are not alone in the work and are eternally grateful to the many individuals and partner organizations that have stepped up to help us be the change we want to see in the world, beginning with the change we want to see in ourselves and our community.

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