



**ALL MEANS ALL – TWO DISTRICTS EMBARK ON THE**

# Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Journey

---

By Kim M. Smithgall

When asked to define or explain “diversity, equity, and inclusion,” Duaneburg Central School District superintendent James Niedermeier said, “I go back to our school district’s mission statement – making sure that all students are able to fulfill their dreams and aspirations. And then what I emphasize is: all means all. Every single one of our students should feel comfortable in school so that they can achieve to the best of their ability, so they can have all of the doors open to them that they want open to them when they graduate.”

It’s deceptively simple: All. Means. All.

**THE ROAD TO DEI**

Deceptively simple concepts, however, are often the most difficult to integrate into the complexities of daily life, especially if they involve shifting mindsets and changing the status quo.

Small shifts related to DEI were beginning to emerge in 2018 with the discussions in education circles around culturally responsive practices and the board of regents’ adoption in 2018 of the culturally responsive-sustaining education framework. Building on this foundation, the board released the draft framework on diversity, equity, and inclusion in New York’s schools: a call to action in April 2021, followed by its policy on diversity, equity, and inclusion in May 2021.

These latest DEI documents were a direct response to the long-standing inequities that were exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic and a renewed wave of discrimination, hate speech, and violence toward people of color. They urge school districts to create and adopt inclusive, student-centered DEI policies and procedures — policies that “consider the entirety of the schooling process.”

It’s a tall order for districts, as the board of regents suggest that the new approaches should cover the following areas:

- governance;
- teaching and learning;
- family and community engagement;
- workforce diversity;
- diverse schools and learning opportunities; and
- student supports, discipline and wellness.

It’s now up to districts to decide how to interpret the call to action for their school communities.

**TWO PATHS/SAME DESTINATION**

For Plainview-Old Bethpage Central School District, a large suburban district in Nassau County, and Duanesburg Central School District, a small rural district in Schenectady County, the beginning steps in the DEI journey have differed. There are innumerable

insights education leaders can glean from both districts’ experiences.

In Duanesburg, data was one of the DEI entry points. “We started looking at data in the district and identified some areas where we felt that students weren’t achieving at the level that their peers were achieving, despite some supports we had in place,” said Niedermeier. “The groups that we identified specifically were students with disabilities and students who qualified for free and reduced-price lunches. We saw this as we drilled down in the data from the subgroups. We also looked at student survey data and saw some troubling trends. We noticed that female students were saying that they felt like they didn’t belong at much higher rates than male students. Students also felt that their peers were getting picked on because of their sexual identity. We also noticed that, even though we have a small number of non-white students, only about half felt that things were going okay for them.”

In response to the surveys, Duanesburg created some programs for students related to identity. “Many of the surrounding rural schools were having similar issues, so we put together a small summit where kids could listen to speakers talk about the ways that different parts of people’s identities intersect with each other,” Niedermeier said. “There was discussion of what identity means and the differences you might notice in classmates. And then a discussion of how we can not just tolerate them, but accept them. That difference between tolerating and acceptance can be a big hurdle. People have been taught for a long time that we should just be looking for tolerance. And it has to go beyond that for people to feel comfortable in your school. People have to do more than tolerate you. They have to accept you for who you are.”

The district has also been holding DEI-related workshops for staff members to help employees understand DEI concepts. “The trainings were all very well received because they gave people an opportunity to talk about how they felt within the system. And it wasn’t just race or sexual identity topics that people were discussing;

**DEFINING THE TERMS**

In its “Framework on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion,” the board of regents provides the following DEI definitions:

**di·ver·si·ty**  
/dəˈvɜrsədə, dɪˈvɜrsədə/

Includes but is not limited to race, color, ethnicity, nationality, religion, socioeconomic status, veteran status, education, marital status, language, age, gender, gender expression, gender identity, sexual orientation, mental or physical ability, genetic information, and learning styles.

**eq·ui·ty**  
/ˈɛkwədē/

The guarantee of fair treatment, access, opportunity, and advancement for all while striving to identify and eliminate barriers that have prevented the full participation of all groups.

**in·clu·sion**  
/inˈklōʒHən/

Authentically bringing traditionally excluded individuals and/or groups into processes, activities, and decision-/policy-making in a way that shares power and ensure equal access to opportunities and resources.

different class things came into play, as well.” Niedermeier said. “I sat in on the training with the cleaning staff and they identified that there were times when community members were condescending to them during school events — that there were class disparities.”

Meanwhile, at the administrative level, Duanesburg leaders worked with an outside organization (Generation Ready) to look at any biases that might be in play related to the subgroups of students (those with disabilities and those facing poverty). Administrators were also reading, *Case Studies on*



*Diversity and Social Justice Education* by Paul C. Gorski and Seema G. Pothini.

“We started each of our cabinet meetings by reading a case study from the book and discussing it,” Niedermeier explained. “The case studies are a quick read – around a page and a half – but a good starting point for DEI discussions.”

Through this introspection, Duanesburg leaders were able to identify some areas of bias in the district and begin planning structural changes to address those biases. For example, leaders realized that challenging upper-level classes tended not to have students with disabilities enrolled even though many of the disabilities would not preclude them from succeeding in the classes. Also, in other classes, students with disabilities were not being asked the challenging questions.

“In response, one thing we’re really focused on lately is making sure all of our students, regardless of where they are, are challenged appropriately,” Niedermeier commented. “We’re encouraging staff to challenge all students and providing extra supports if needed for the upper-level classes. We’re not watering down the content, but we’re providing supports. Also, we’re taking away the gatekeeping elements – things like needing teacher recommendations for students to take upper-level classes. These recommendations can sometimes be subjective, so instead, we’re replacing that with actual achievement data – not necessarily homework stuff, but actual measurements of what kids know. Basically, we’re taking away

those things that might prevent students from taking an AP or honors course or upper-level math or science classes and raising the level of cognitive interest and rigor for everyone.”

Niedermeier and his team are even putting a DEI lens on such things as school supplies and field trips. For instance, when putting together a supply list, requiring a \$150 calculator might prevent students from opting to take a class. “And, our business manager has been dogged in identifying field trips and supplies that are an essential part of our educational program,” Niedermeier said. “If it’s an essential part of the program, we want to make sure all students can participate.”

In other words: All means all.

#### PLAINVIEW-OLD BETHPAGE DEI LANDSCAPE

In the Plainview-Old Bethpage (POB) Central School District, Dorothy Drexel has been leading many of the DEI efforts. She is currently assistant principal at the district’s middle school, but also has many years of experience in English as a New Language (ENL) positions and as a cultural responsiveness trainer. This background has helped as she was establishing an equity committee in the district – a committee that will certainly be the foundation for all of the district’s DEI activities.

“We started conversations about culturally responsive practices back in 2018, so the district had a long tradition in this area,” Drexel commented. “When we got to the 2020-2021 school year, I started with the required professional development for ENL teachers and then in January 2021, we really opened things up to everyone in the district with the creation of an equity committee. It was an open invitation

to join the committee and we weren’t sure who would show up because the meeting was virtual.”

Drexel didn’t have to worry about lack of interest. Around 75 people showed up for that first meeting, including district staff, community members and students. And she maintained a similar level of interest and participation throughout subsequent meetings – success that can be attributed to Drexel being very intentional about how the meetings are structured and the results they should yield.

“The first phase of our process was about building awareness,” Drexel explained. “And because I’m not an expert on all segments of the population, I understood that I needed to bring in experts. So, for the first five or six meetings, we had experts from different walks of life talk about what equity means in their world. The experts would speak for 45 minutes followed by 15 minutes of questions and answers. Then we would go into four different breakout rooms and the participants would use a Google doc to tackle the same assignment: List two things that stood out to you from the presentation and list two ways we can apply what we learned in our district.”

The speakers were varied – from an expert on inclusive language to disability advocates who spoke about navigating the world as little people. The discussions afterward were engaging, thoughtful and powerful, providing the district with actionable DEI-related ideas.

**“We’re encouraging staff to challenge all students and providing extra supports if needed for the upper-level classes. We’re not watering down the content, but we’re providing supports.”**

Early in the process, the committee also created a survey as a starting point for activities. “The idea was to determine what people’s understanding of equity was,” Drexel explained. “We had about 100 respondents and at one of our spring meetings, we really an-

alyzed what people were struggling with. We found that people needed more of an equity lexicon; they needed to understand the words used in equity circles.”

By the last equity committee meeting of the school year, Drexel was handing out a glossary of equity terms and an array of articles for committee members to read over the summer if they chose. To put the equity issue in context, the group also watched the documentary, “Little Rock Central: 50 Years Later.”

**IMPORTANT BUT FRAGILE WORK**

Perhaps one of the biggest takeaways with the DEI activities in Plainview-Old Bethpage is the district’s unwavering commitment to the work, including the welcoming of assistance from outside experts. “Being able to tap the knowledge of outside experts, consultants from Eastern Suffolk BOCES and trainers who worked with our leadership team and staff, has been so important. It has made the conversations even deeper in our district,” Drexel said.

Drexel’s focus on those conver-

sations – especially within the equity committee meetings – is another valuable takeaway. “This is very important work, but it’s also fragile work,” Drexel stressed. “So, we knew we needed to go slowly so we didn’t alienate anyone and so everyone understood the importance of the work.”

To this end, Drexel integrates the philosophies described in Glenn E. Singleton’s *Courageous Conversations* books into her approaches. In fact, every equity committee meeting began with a review of four overarching tenets for the meeting – tenets adapted from *Courageous Conversations about Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools* by Glenn E. Singleton and Curtis Linton:

- Stay engaged: remaining morally, emotionally, intellectually, and socially involved in the dialogue.
- Experience discomfort: acknowledges that discomfort is inevitable, especially in dialogue about [equity], and that participants make a commitment to bring issues into the open.
- Expect and accept nonclosure:

agreement asks participants to “hang out in uncertainty” and not rush to quick solutions, especially in relation to racial understanding, which requires ongoing dialogue.

“Listening courageously means you just sit in open-mindedness where you’re not trying to predict what a person is going to say next,” Drexel said. “It’s a difficult thing to do – to turn off your filter because in many cases, the filter can be a barrier we use to protect ourselves. But to truly listen to someone else, you have to drop your guard and be okay knowing that you might be uncomfortable for a while.”

And with that discomfort will come a level understanding and acceptance that will help ensure every single student feels comfortable in school so they can achieve to the best of their ability. It will ensure that DEI doesn’t become another forgotten morale imperative in our schools and the broader community.

KIM M. SMITHGALL is an award-winning communications specialist and freelance writer, designer, and photographer.

## DEI resources

**Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Framework and Policy Statement**

<http://www.nysed.gov/diversity-equity-inclusion/diversity-equity-and-inclusion-framework-and-policy-statement>

**Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework**

<http://www.nysed.gov/crs/framework>

**Case Studies on Diversity and Social Justice Education**

by Paul C. Gorski and Seema G. Pothini

**Courageous Conversations About Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools**

by Glenn E. Singleton

**Courageous Conversations about Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools**

by Glenn E. Singleton and Curtis Linton

**Schooltalk: Rethinking What We Say About and To Students Every Day**

by Mica Pollock

**Belonging Through a Culture of Dignity: The Keys to Successful Equity Implementation**

by Floyd Cobb and John Krownapple

**Documentary: “Little Rock Central: 50 Years Later”**

**BOCES of New York State DEI Repository**

in development, this repository will provide resources for K-12 educators and education leaders to support DEI efforts. Link: <https://www.boces.org/diversity-equity-and-inclusion/>

