



**Connecticut Association of Boards of Education, Inc.**

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### **What a Thought-Provoking Juxtaposition!**

by Robert Rader, Executive Director, CABE

We watched *Hamilton* over the July 4<sup>th</sup> holiday weekend. While we watched, protests against racism and police brutality continued across the country. There were attempts, to destroy some statues of our “Founding Fathers,” including Jefferson and Washington, who had “owned” humans.\*

It was an especially poignant in that most actors in the play are of color, including the multi-talented Lin-Manuel Miranda, who played Alexander Hamilton, Leslie Odom Jr., who played Aaron Burr, Daveed Diggs (Lafayette and Jefferson) and Christopher Jackson (George Washington).

Of the 55 delegates to the Constitutional Convention, 25 “owned” people. Their sensitivities (or lack of them) led to the compromise built into the Constitution: the “notorious three-fifths clause—which counted three-fifths of a state’s [slave] population in apportioning representation—gave the South extra representation in the House of Representatives and extra votes in the Electoral College.” And, the trade in humans could not even be discussed for 20 years.\*\*

If you haven’t seen it, *Hamilton* is one of the most meaningful examples of how immigrants “get the job done” as the Revolutionary War and the beginnings of our nation. I know some people were hesitant to watch because some of the music is hip-hop and/or rap, but, don’t let that stop you from watching. The music is incredible.

Now, 230 years after the founding of the United States, after 618,000 deaths in the Civil War, after the gains from the civil rights movement. after the outlawing of segregation (and separate but equal), and the first Black American president, the perspective of some that people of color are inferior to whites still lingers.

### **Our Job Now**

So how do we, as leaders in helping our students develop character and values that truly represent the belief that “all men [and women] are created equal”?

Looking at the most critical issue which districts are now facing, reopening in the Fall, the COVID crisis gives school boards certain flexibility in how we do this. *Adapt, Advance, Achieve: Connecticut’s Plan and Grow Together* makes equity one of the State’s priorities so “we are not blind to discrimination, inequity, racism, implicit bias and white privilege.”

The night before Juneteenth, I had the opportunity to watch a Zoom presentation, one of five, presented by the State Education Resource Center (SERC). The third, this time on *Distance Learning and Family Engagement: The Perspective of Communities of Color*, was particularly

insightful.

I left this workshop after learning how some “best practices” can lessen both the inequities and trauma facing students from Middletown Superintendent Dr. Michael Conner. He stated that,

--When the COVID crisis closed down schools, Middletown moved first to ensure students and their families had food and other resources, including Chromebooks, they needed to keep learning;

--The district made sure students had "access points" for staying in touch with all students. The district ensured that teachers had daily contact with all students and "meeting them where they are":

--The district is recognizing that racism is a health crisis for students. As a result, it has begun changing its policies and procedures. Its onboarding of new staff will include training on expectations as to how to deal with racial issues and these lessons are also provided on an ongoing basis for more experienced staff; and,

--the district is also looking at the effect of trauma on students and staff.

According to Dr. Conner, Middletown is engaging in real, systemic change, even as they prepare to return to school. He stated that districts must look at all policies and procedures, aiming at building a “racism-free environment” and that includes building students' social-emotional skills and mental health by focusing on personalization, especially with EL and others. As another practice, Middletown now has equity coaches in all of its schools.

In Superintendent Conner's words, "this is necessary work--now work."

Weeks later, I asked Dr. Conner again about lessons that school board members and superintendents should learn from what is occurring.

He stated that, “board members need to hear about trauma work with an anti-racism focus. We have focused so much on SEL with regards to COVID, but there needs to be an emphasis on the impact racism and what we have seen during the pandemic. With the rise of racial tension across the country, strong movements to dismantle institutional structures for equity (e.g., strategic plans and policy), and changing mindsets/pedagogy in classrooms, racial trauma work has to be underpinned in all districts.”

As an illustration of how listening to a new perspective on an issue might lead to a different result in a decision made in the schools: “SRO in schools. Have we truly listened to student voices on the impact of police presence in schools?”

Working on these issues should be among the most important responsibilities of school leadership. Despite the devastating pandemic (which has been so much more deadly to people of color than whites), board members have a responsibility to become conversant with the language of SEL, including the type of training developed by the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, as publicized by Dr. Marc Brackett in *Permission to Feel*. His and Scott Levy’s discussion of these issues for us at the beginning of April can be found at <https://youtu.be/SUs-rYUUj8M>.

As Dr. Brackett has told us, you must understand your own emotions (and label them) in order to understand SEL. To truly understand issues through an equity lens, one needs to learn the language of equity: implicit and explicit bias, white privilege and other terms.

If you want to start better understand some of the issues facing our students and staff of color, I interviewed CBE Consultant Dr. Martha Brackeen-Harris back in June. It is accessible at <https://youtu.be/AnXTVP9j2R8>. We plan more workshops and professional development as other districts examine SEL and equity as part of their reopening plans. We hope to highlight some of them as well.

*Hamilton* proved that ingenious writing, great music and a riveting story can lead to history coming alive. Let's use the creativity of our students, our staff and our communities to ensure equity for all of our children.

*\* In an attempt to humanize slaves as real human beings, I did not use the much more common noun, "slaves". This is in keeping with granting these individuals an identity as people rather than using a term to describe their position in society. "We carry them forward as people, not the property that they were [considered] in that time." See <https://andilit.com/2011/10/12/slaves-vs-enslaved-people-the-subtle-strong-power-of-words/#:~:text=Today%2C%20most%20historians%20speak%20of,it%20is%20oh%20so%20powerful>.*

*\*\* See <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/teaching-resource/historical-context-constitution-and-slavery>.*

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Sidebar:

At one of the SERC workshops, Deputy Commissioner of Education Charlene Russell-Tucker also spoke about how important it is to pair the work districts are doing on SEL with equity considerations. She started her discussion with setting out some facts about our State:

- Even Black students from more affluent families do less well than poor whites in our schools;
- There are much higher suspension and expulsion rates of Black students than white students;
- Connecticut has one of the greatest racial gaps in student achievement.

None of these points should be a surprise to Connecticut school board members or superintendents. However, as Russell-Tucker stated, "knowledge of these factors has not led to urgent action."