

May 13, 2021

Dear Policy Committee Members,

I greatly appreciate all of the effort that has gone into crafting the diversity and equity policy and think it is an extremely valuable policy for us to pursue. In the last Policy Committee meeting, I offered some feedback on the draft of the diversity policy. This feedback included avoiding politically charged terminology and keeping the policy focused on broad diversity-related issues rather than focusing on specific issues such as institutional racism. I want to share more on my rationale for this and offer some other things for us to consider regarding what we want our Beecher community to look like.

Personal Context

First, I want to give some personal context as it's relevant to my perspective on this. I'm a Black man who was born in Camden, NJ where I spent most of my childhood. Camden is a predominantly Black and Latino city with high-poverty and crime and for years had the unfortunate distinction of being the most dangerous city in the country. I'm a graduate of Morehouse College, an Historically Black College/University (HBCU) and I've been through numerous predominantly white institutions. I attended a New Jersey Quaker school for nearly all of my primary and secondary education and my graduate school tenure began at Stony Brook University and ended at UC Berkeley. At both institutions, I have served on diversity committees, often in leadership roles and at Berkeley I taught African American Psychology. Now at Yale School of Medicine, part of my work involves understanding social psychological contributors to racial achievement gaps and I often work with schools to improve educational practice.

Additionally, I'm familiar with the tenets of structural racism, white supremacy, antiracism, microaggressions, "white fragility", and other related concepts. Finally, I am a father of a young Black and Latino boy, and I worry about the world he will inherit as a young man. I say all these things not because I believe my background says anything important about my racial authenticity or authority to speak to racial issues (I don't think it does), but to communicate that I understand these issues personally and intellectually.

Rationale

While I understand the inclination to prioritize and call out race and racism during these times, I don't see a strong reason for doing so for our diversity policy. In fact, in most cases, I don't see a good reason to prioritize any form of discrimination or bigotry because I don't think that we should signal that we prioritize the concerns of some identity groups over others. If we're going to take the concept of inclusion seriously, that means that we should consider the multitude of ways in which members of our community can feel excluded and the various ways in which inequity manifests. The drivers of what makes one feel included, excluded, or mistreated in our community are complex, multifaceted, and interactive, so we need a policy to reflect this.

At its core, a policy like the one we're writing comes down to establishing values and policies about (1) how we want to relate to each other as a diverse community, (2) how we should address disparities, and (3) what we want to teach students about diversity. Dealing with specific demographic gaps in services and outcomes and addressing specific forms of bias, prejudice, and discrimination are all special cases of the three core concepts I mentioned. By focusing on core concepts, it allows us to think broadly about the entire community, but also allows us to act proactively and reactively to specific diversity-related issues.

What do/should we want?

An important focus of policies like these is to outline how we will identify and address inequities or disparities (core concept #2), which the policy rightfully speaks to. However, one thing that I often find underemphasized in such documents is what we want our community to look like and what we want to

impart to our students (core concepts #1 and 3). In other words, what would this policy look like in terms of the lessons and values we teach to our students? Below are some lessons that come to mind for me from the global perspective I've proposed. I frame some of these in terms of characteristics related to being a good citizen and being a good thinker.

1. People being different from you in how they look, think, and/or behave does not mean that they are inferior to how you look, think, and/or behave.
2. There is often something to be learned from people who are very different from you. Take the time to genuinely listen to them and look for the lessons.
3. Disagreements can be very uncomfortable, but they are also opportunities for us to grow in understanding, knowledge, and communication skills. Capitalize on these opportunities.
4. When having a disagreement, focus on the ideas of the disagreement rather than the person, and try to find common ground by seeking out and acknowledging the best parts of their position.
5. Our brains are designed to make assumptions about the world and the people within it to help us process the enormous amount of information it receives. But many times, these assumptions are wrong, so part of being a good thinker and citizen involves being guided by reason rather than assumptions.
6. At times, people may try to label or mistreat you based on some personal or group characteristic of yours. Do not allow their characterization of you to define you. Claim your right to define yourself on your own terms and take the time to figure out what those terms are.
7. It is a big world out there full of beauty that you can benefit from experiencing. Also, our society is more dependent than ever on relationships that span national and cultural boundaries. So do not limit yourself to experiences and ideas that are comfortable and/or familiar.
8. History and current events are full of examples of people mistreating individuals and groups. It is important for us to learn about these events so that we can avoid them in the future, personally and collectively.
9. There is a lot to be learned from the history and literature of cultures different from our own. Doing so helps us develop a more wholistic and accurate perspective of the world and our place within it.
10. There are many people who are far less fortunate than us due to no fault of their own. Likewise, much of our good fortune is due to no effort of our own. Remembering this helps us be humble and fosters empathy and respect for others. To be a good citizen, we should find ways of using our good fortune to help those who are far less fortunate than us.

I look forward to having additional conversations on this and appreciate being part of a community that takes these issues seriously and is willing to have honest conversations.

With Respect,
Mike Strambler

The following is a recommended new policy.

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Philosophy-Goals-General Objectives

Equity and Diversity

Purpose

The Woodbridge School District welcomes, respects, and values the diversity of its students, parents, staff, and the broader community. The diversity of our student body, our community, and our staff is a strength of this District that should be fostered. Educational equity benefits all students and our entire community.

The District is committed to advancing optimum participation in, contribution to, benefit from, and enjoyment of learning and work experiences by diverse students, parents, staff, and community.

Every student deserves a respectful learning environment in which their diversity, including their cultural, racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity, is valued and contributes to successful academic outcomes. The Woodbridge School District is committed to identifying and correcting addressing practices and policies that perpetuate racial-disparities and institutional racism in all forms in order to provide all of its students with the opportunity to succeed. Learning and work environments are enriched and improved by the contributions, perspectives, and very presence of diverse participants. The Woodbridge School District is committed to the success of every student in each of our schools and to our mission and vision statements.

The Board of Education believes that the responsibility for student success is broadly shared by District staff, families, our community, and our students' own efforts. Persistent Large achievement and opportunity gaps are unacceptable if we are to meet our mission and vision statements and our moral obligations to our students, their families, and our community as a whole. These gaps are contrary to our belief that all children can learn and succeed as well as our commitment to our students, their families, and our community as whole. While there may be many causes for such gaps, we should do our part to ensure that our school is not one of them. Accordingly, A adult behaviors should must not contribute to achievement gaps or create barriers to success. Adult behaviors must be concentrated on the elimination of narrowing gaps, particularly those that are predicated on a student's race, ethnicity, home language, personal characteristics, or culture, and on assurance of educational equity between students. The Board, Superintendent, and staff commit to conducting an equity and diversity impact assessment on all future policies that have a significant impact on student learning and resource allocation. This commitment also includes conducting assessments on policies that are periodically reviewed and updated through the policy development process that have a significant impact on student learning and resources allocation.

~~The diversity of our student body, our community, and our staff is a strength of this District that should be fostered. Educational equity benefits all students and our entire community.~~

The purpose of this policy is to establish a framework for educational equity for all students to prevent ensure the elimination of bias from, particularly institutional racism and cultural bias, as factors affecting student achievement and learning experiences, and to promote teaching and learning and work environments that welcome, respect, and value strength in diversity. Further,

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Commented [SM1]: I think it's unrealistic to expect schools to eliminate gaps. Schools have limited ability to do this. And there will always be some differences between groups even if equal opportunity were entirely achieved.

Commented [SM2]: What does this look like? A formal or informal assessment?

Commented [SM3]: Eliminating bias is unrealistic (especially implicit bias), but I agree with trying to prevent it from impacting students' achievement.

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the purpose is to establish particular actions that the District shall take to address disparities in educational opportunity and achievement.

Definitions

For the purposes of this policy the following terms shall have these meanings:

- A. **“Diversity”** includes characteristics of persons including, but not limited to, race, culture, color, language, creed or religion, national origin, gender, mental and physical ability, age, marital status, family structure, citizenship status, sexual orientation, sexual expression or identity, economic status, veteran status, and any other protected class in conformance with federal, state, and local laws.
- B. **“District staff”** includes all employees, consultants and contractors of the Woodbridge School District.
- C. **“Educational equity”** means raising the achievement of all students while (1) narrowing the gaps between the lowest and highest performing students, and (2) eliminating the racial or cultural predictability and disproportionality of which student groups occupy the highest and lowest achievement categories including rates of graduation.

Commented [SM4]: One of the ongoing debates around this term is whether the end goal is equality of outcome or equality of opportunity, which have very different implications. It is worth discussing where we stand on this.

Commented [SM5]: Again, "eliminating" is too strong.

~~“Institutional racism” means the collective failure of a public or private organization, implicitly or explicitly, to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their race, color, culture, ethnic origin, or language which can be seen or detected in practices, processes, systems, attitudes, and behavior. It looks beyond individual acts of prejudice to the systemic biases that may be built into institutions. These systemic biases discriminate against and disadvantage people of color through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness, or racial stereotyping while maintaining the privilege of others.~~

- A. The District is committed to promoting and providing equitable distribution of resources, opportunities, facilities, and supports, even when this means differentiating resource allocations on the basis of student needs. Resource allocation shall support the definition of educational equity adopted in this policy while complying with state and federal funding mandates.
- B. The District shall employ staffing processes that support and engender racial, gender, and language diversity in its staff through recruitment, employment, training, and retention of employees. It is important that children of all races, cultures, and backgrounds are provided with familiar role models in schools. The recruitment of diverse teachers and staff provides all students with a better chance of seeing themselves as part of the education system. Diversity in education provides all children with the opportunity to learn from others with dissimilar backgrounds and recognizes the value of diversity in all learning environments. The District is committed to increasing the recruitment and retention of highly qualified diverse staff. The District is committed to fostering a learning environment where diversity is encouraged and to recruiting and retaining a workforce that reflects the diversity of our students and community. The Board is committed to hiring the best employees of all racial and ethnic backgrounds who will bring their unique talents and skills into the school system.
- C. The District shall offer opportunities for all staff to improve its cultural competencies in serving a diverse student body and community. The District staff shall work together to

Commented [SM6]: I'm okay with calling out these dimensions of diversity in this context.

The following is a recommended new policy.

increase their individual and collective capacity to effectively teach a culturally, racially, and ethnically diverse student population and serve culturally, racially, and ethnically diverse families and communities. The District shall offer opportunities for all staff to improve culturally responsive instructional practices, curriculum, and assessments competencies in serving our diverse student body and community and to increase individual and collective capacity to effectively teach our diverse student population and serve diverse families. Practices, procedures, and programs that result in over- or under- representation of any group of students compared to peers shall be subject to close review to assure that such results are due to meeting student legitimate educational, social, or emotional needs. Practices that do not meet this close review shall be modified or eliminated. Teachers, administrators, and district staff shall collaborate to establish and implement research-based culturally responsive instructional practices, curriculum and assessments.

Commented [SM7]: What about class? Language diversity?

- D. The District shall promote the diversification of its vendor and supplier corps in accordance with law and District policy.
- E. The District shall provide professional development to staff specifically designed to strengthen employees' knowledge and skills for eliminating opportunity and achievement gaps between groups of students.
- F. The District shall seek partnerships with outside agencies, organizations, and persons who have demonstrated culturally specific expertise to assist the District in meeting its equitable education and business goals, including, but not limited to: (1) government agencies, (2) non-profit organizations, (3) businesses, and (4) other community groups that support educational equity and cultural competencies.

Responsibility

- A. The Board shall consider the values stated in this policy in conducting its business and in exercising its responsibilities to the people of this community.
- B. The Superintendent shall establish in accordance with this policy such plans and procedures as may be necessary and appropriate to accomplish its purpose and intent. Plans and procedures established shall include clear accountability for actions and oversight.
- C. The Superintendent may promulgate regulations for the implementation of this policy as deemed necessary.
- D. The Board and Superintendent may establish specific goals to implement this policy as permitted by law and deemed necessary.
- E. The Superintendent shall annually report to the Board and the community regarding District performance goals on academic achievement and progress toward meeting these goals and closing the achievement gap. The report will also highlight discrepancies between the targets set and actual performance when applicable. This annual public report shall include an equity and diversity impact assessment that demonstrates policies with the least disparate impact have been adopted by the District.
- F. District staff shall within the parameters of their various duties and responsibilities comply with and execute such plans as are designed to address the values and directions included in

Commented [SM8]: I'm not sure what this means. Sounds like we only want the superintendent to bring us good news.

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this policy. District staff is further responsible to make such suggestions to the appropriate authority to improve the ability of the District to reduce the achievement and opportunity gaps that exist.

- G. Families are partners with the District in its effort to address achievement and opportunity gaps.
- H. Students are partners in their academic achievement. School attendance and engagement are essential to reduce achievement and opportunity gaps that exist.
- I. The Board, Superintendent, and employees will work with students and families to identify barriers to achievement and opportunities for academic success.

Legal References: Connecticut General Statutes

[46a](#) 60 Discriminatory employment practices prohibited.

[10-15c](#) Discrimination in public schools prohibited. School attendance by five-year olds. (Amended by P.A. 97-247 to include “sexual orientation” and P.A. 11-55 to include “gender identity or expression”)

[10-153](#) Discrimination on account of marital status.

[17a-101](#) Protection of children from abuse.

Connecticut State Board of Education “Position Statement on Culturally Responsive Education,” adopted May 4, 2011

Title VII, Civil Rights Act, 42 U.S.C. 2000e, et seq.

29 CFR 1604.11, EEOC Guidelines on Sex Discrimination.

Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972, 20 U.S.C. 1681 et seq.

34 CFR Section 106.8(b), OCR Guidelines for Title IX.

Definitions, OCR Guidelines on Sexual Harassment, Fed. Reg. Vol 62, #49, 29 CFR Sec. 1606.8 (a) 62 Fed Reg. 12033 (March 13, 1997) and 66 Fed. Reg. 5512 (January 19, 2001)

Section 8525, ESEA as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act

Meritor Savings Bank. FSB v. Vinson, 477 U.S. 57 (1986)

Faragher v. City of Boca Raton, No. 97-282 (U.S. Supreme Court, June 26,1998)

Gebbs v. Lago Vista Indiana School District, No. 99-1866, (U.S. Supreme Court, June 26,1998)

Davis v. Monroe County Board of Education, No. 97-843, (U.S. Supreme Court, May 24, 1999.)

The Vietnam Era Veterans’ Readjustment Act of 1974, as amended, 38 U.S.C. §4212

Title II of the Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act of 2008

The Americans with Disabilities Act as amended by the ADA Amendments Act of 2008
Public Law 111-256

Meacham v. Knolls Atomic Power Laboratory 128 S.Ct. 2395, 76 U.S.L.W. 4488 (2008)

Federal Express Corporation v. Holowecki 128 S.Ct. 1147, 76 U.S.L.W. 4110 (2008)

Kentucky Retirement Systems v. EEOC 128 S.Ct. 2361, 76 U.S.L.W. 4503 (2008)

Sprint/United Management Co. v. Mendelsohn 128 S.Ct. 1140, 76 U.S.L.W. 4107 (2008)

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Policy adopted:

