



Pearl River School District

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A View of the Work

The PRSD Equity Task Force is Opening New Doors & Conversations

Dear Pearl River School Community,

If you've visited our district website in recent months, you may have noticed a DEI in Education (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusivity) tab on the upper navigation (right between Calendar and Departments). The content of this tab represents the background and work-to-date of the Equity Task Force, which is functioning in a consultative role to the district's administrative leadership on practices and policies to promote diversity, prevent discrimination, and assure equitable access to high quality education. I encourage you to engage with the materials that the committee has utilized to date; they are thought-provoking and do a great job of introducing us to this issue in a manner that promotes non-judgmental dialogue and expanded awareness.

These materials- as good as they are- don't really speak to the work that is actually being conducted, nor do they recognize that our teachers, administrators, and students are already very involved in activities that reflect our commitment to equity. So, I thought it best to share with you my perspectives as both a member of the Equity Task Force and as your Superintendent, because I'm so proud of the efforts of our community to think, talk, and act in a positive manner about these issues.

As of this writing, the Equity Task Force, facilitated by Dr. Lisa Brady, the retired Dobbs Ferry superintendent who has been immersed in this work for some time, has met seven times. We have progressed from whole group meetings to subcommittees. One of the wonderful things that Dr. Brady has stressed is that we all must leave our preconceptions about the issues at the door- and primary among these is the notion that there is some type of 'set' agenda or doctrine for the equity, diversity, and inclusion matters. Dr. Brady has focused the group on active listening, on experiencing and acknowledging discomfort, on being non-judgmental about agreement and disagreement, and so many other positive methods for sharing and learning from one another.

I was particularly inspired by the Danger of a Single Story talk given by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a celebrated author and MacArthur Genius Grant recipient. (You can find a link to it in the October 26 Task Force minutes on our website). What Chimamanda talks about is how easy it is for all of us -herself included, which she references in her own experience- to simply accept only one way of seeing 'things' that we might have little or no experience with; important 'things,' like people and cultures that are not our own. It is both a sharp-edged, yet compassionate way of asking ourselves to allow more perspectives, and less judgment, to enter our thinking.

Beyond the effort to acclimate ourselves to better, more open dialogue, the Task Force is ultimately focused on providing written counsel on how we may, as a school community, reach higher. To that end, the group has been organized into five subcommittees as follows:

- Student Support
- Curriculum Materials
- Professional Development and Staff Support
- Community Education
- Athletics and Extracurricular Activities

Rather than jumping to prescriptive suggestions, each subcommittee is currently focused on envisioning 'outcomes' associated with their category of focus. For example, an outcome associated with Professional Development and Staff Support might have to do with envisioning a more consistent training effort on evolving equity issues. From here, each subcommittee will present their outcomes to the larger group for discussion.

As an educator, I will tell you that having our community work in this manner is both energizing and inspiring. For those who will recall, it feels a bit like the Socratic method at work, as we stimulate each other to think deeply. But it is more than that, because this isn't simply an exercise in logic with an inevitable conclusion; it is a combination of learning, accepting non-closure, and working to be better with one another, and to be better as an institution of learning.

We understand, then, that this means the work is always underway. While the Equity Task Force does the deeper dive, our school community continues to be involved in DEI efforts that, at their core, simply focus on the acceptance and embrace of one another in a non-judgmental manner and make the climate of our school environments as welcoming as possible. The elementary schools set the tone for their students and staff by choosing the theme of “belonging” as their North Star this year. Each school has supported the theme of belonging with special activities and learning experiences. At all schools, curricular efforts have focused on ensuring our book collections, and literature selections, reflect a wider range of ethnic diversities and cultural backgrounds. Support staff are developing new re-entry plans for students who are suspended for incidents involving bullying, harassment, and intimidation to create an effective educational component to mitigate future infractions. In addition, each Pearl River school now has a staff team trained with a goal of understanding the value of emotions, building the skills of emotional intelligence, and creating and maintaining positive emotional climates in our schools.

Direct student and family experiences are plentiful. Beginning in September, PRMS students across grades 5, 6, and 7 had their first "Advisory Day," where students were asked to generate ideas on how we can make everyone feel accepted, with teachers facilitating these discussions in teams of two students who generated ideas that have been posted in classrooms. In October, PRHS Principal Dr. Robert Zegarelli met with the student council to gather their thoughts on the graduation gown. Students were presented with options and voted to select one graduation gown that all students will wear, regardless of gender identity. That same month, the first group of high school students visited the Holocaust Museum & Center for Tolerance and Education. All will do so this year. We have continued to work with “Better Together,” a partnership between Andrea Winograd of the Center for Tolerance and Education, and Virginia Norfleet of the Haverstraw African American Connection, for in-school presentations on acknowledging and celebrating the richness of cultural and racial diversity.

I believe it is without dispute that conversations in our country in recent years on very important issues have suffered for lack of civility, lack of open-mindedness, and the distortions that social media and partisan traditional media have imposed on reasonable dialogue. We must be better than this! I'm proud to say that the Pearl River school community is doing its part in our schools every day, and efforts like our Equity Task Force demonstrate that we will continue to evolve and grow as long as respect and openness to the experiences of others guides our thinking.

Sincerely,

Dr. Marco Pochintesta