

MINUTES

School District 4J Equity Committee
Education Center Auditorium—200 North Monroe Street
Eugene, Oregon

April 24, 2007
4:30 pm

PRESENT: Marshall Peter, Chair; Sarah Lauer, Gifford Tallmadge, Victor Palma, Caleb Pruzinski, Guadalupe Quinn, Larry Soberman, Surendra Subramani, Jane Waite, members; George Russell, Superintendent; Carmen Urbina, Abrella Luvert, Alan Merrill, Bruce Stiller, Dennis Urso, 4J staff; Justin Boyd, Rita Ratstitz, Neil Van Steenbergen, David Lottier, Charlie Hirsch, Marcy Hellman, guests.

I. Welcome and Introductions

Mr. Peter convened the meeting and welcomed those present. Members and guests introduced themselves.

II. Public Comment

Marcy Hellman, a first grade teacher at River Road Elementary School, spoke to the committee about limitations in how 4J staff could indicate their ethnicity. She said the principal had expressed concern that data did not accurately reflect the ethnicity of his staff, as many were bi- and multi-racial. She said that staff was required to choose one category, even though some people identified with two or more ethnicities.

Ms. Waite commented that the reporting categories were an extension of state requirements, which reflected federal requirements. She noted that some students chose not to identify and those were generally not dominant culture youth; those individuals were reported as "undeclared."

Superintendent Russell said that in order to look at diversity in the district principals were provided data on the diversity of their staff and some felt that the data poorly reflected the actual staff diversity. He said the difficulty was that 4J was required to meet federal reporting requirements and data that deviated from the federal categories could be questioned. He thought that the district had decided to allow students to identify as multi-racial.

Ms. Hellman said the new student form allowed a multi-racial identification, but required the student to choose a primary and secondary ethnicity.

Ms. Waite asked if the district could use the data collection methodology used in the 2000 Census, which allowed selection of multiple categories. Mr. Urso reiterated that the district was forced to use state and federal reporting categories.

The committee discussed the issue of local, internal data collection that would meet the district's needs with respect to examining diversity at the student and staff levels, but would not be reported to the state or federal governments.

Ms. Waite said she was willing to work with other committee members to explore the issue at the state level.

Mr. Urso said he would examine policy issues related to expanded reporting categories at the district level and report back to the committee.

Mr. Peter determined that committee members agreed with Ms. Waite and Mr. Urso exploring other ways to report diversity. He said that Mr. Tallmadge, Ms. Urbina and a representative of the district's Human Resource department would work with Ms. Waite.

Rita Ratstitz, Neil Van Steenbergen, David Lottier, Charlie Hirsch, participated in the City Club's study circles on racism.

Ms. Ratstitz said one of the goals of the study circles was to go beyond talking about racism and take action. She referred to a recent hate incident at Edison Elementary School directed at Native American students. She said her study circle had discussed the incident and decided that it should focus on the education system and examine the staff/student ratio. She said the study circle was interested in how it could help the district achieve the requirements of the Minority Teachers Act and had been directed to the Equity Committee as a resource.

Mr. Van Steenbergen said the study circle was interested in supporting 4J's efforts to hire and retain staff and faculty of color. He said the district's policies were good but there was still a gap between the goal and reality. He asked how the study circle could help.

Mr. Peter explained that the committee had formed smaller groups to study four key issues and invited study circle members to join the personnel recruitment and retention group in its discussions.

Committee members discussed racism in the state and in the community and the need to increase equity education and social justice principles with current district employees to better support students, faculty and staff of color. They also discussed ways to improve outreach to and recruitment of applicants of color for district positions. Committee members thanked those who spoke for their comments and interest in the Equity Committee's work. All agreed there was much work to be done.

III. Tripod Project Update

Ms. Urbina referred to agenda packet materials that described the Tripod Project. She explained that the project was a high school student engagement survey that would be administered the last week of April. She said the survey would document attitudes, perceptions, experiences and practices in today's high school and the goal was to survey every high school student by April 27. She indicated that data would be given to the buildings and the Superintendent's office and technical assistance would be provided to site councils as they analyzed the information.

Ms. Lauer asked how teachers had received the survey. Ms. Urbina said those she had spoken to were very supportive. Superintendent Russell added that the union had raised some concern about the timing and whether the survey was evaluative.

Ms. Lauer observed that survey results could be affected by how teachers presented the survey. Ms. Urbina said there were protocols that each teacher had to follow and administrators were asked to encourage teachers to support the project.

Mr. Palma related that one of his teachers was happy to administer the survey while another felt it was a waste of time and an intrusion on the lesson plan.

Mr. Stiller expressed surprise that gay students were overlooked in the survey, as they were often the targets of harassment. He hoped that students understood how the district planned to use the data to assess interaction with students, curriculum, hiring practices and dealing with complaints and would take the survey seriously. He also hoped there would be feedback from students after they had taken the survey.

Mr. Peter raised concern about students who were not adept at taking written tests and hoped there was a way to accommodate them.

Mr. Pruzinski felt many students perceived the survey as useless because nothing ever changed and he was skeptical that the survey would have much affect on the system. He expressed frustration with the ridiculously slow pace of change. He pointed out that in the past seven months the Equity Committee had listened to reports and reviewed data but not taken any action. He did not think it was necessary to have every detail before acting and urged the committee to take a more aggressive approach to improving the situation for students.

Mr. Palma agreed with Mr. Pruzinski. He said as a 4J student he had not seen any change over the last six years. He used the example of negative opinions of Korean students as a result of the shooting at Virginia Tech. He suggested the committee develop a plan that could be achieved within a year.

Ms. Urbina agreed that the survey was not a perfect tool. She said the results would be given to buildings and there was a commitment to action and change.

Mr. Stiller said that change might happen slowly, but it did happen. He used the changes at Kelly Middle School and River Road Elementary School as examples of change that occurred over a period of years and resulted in a significant improvement when viewed from the perspective of where those schools had started.

Mr. Peter said the model Mr. Pruzinski was proposing was a part of what the Equity Committee was doing. He used suspensions as an example of something that had been meaningfully changed as a result of using data to demonstrate disparity. He said that it took time to gain traction with intractable problems.

Mr. Tallmadge agreed with Mr. Palma and Mr. Pruzinski's remarks and said they spoke the truth.

Ms. Quinn sympathized with the students' sense of urgency, which was at odds with the adults' need to work within the system to affect change.

Mr. Pruzinski asserted that the committee did not need data; the problem was not one of numbers but rather how things worked within the school system. He asked the committee to fight for what was right and then it could not lose.

Mr. Stiller recommended that the committee identify five or six ways to change adult behavior at buildings in concrete ways. He noted that suspensions were more proportionate as a result of data from the Equity Committee.

Mr. Soberman remarked that he loved Mr. Palma and Mr. Pruzinski's idealism, but data was very important to measure whether actions had an affect on the problem. He said change was slow because it involved both individual and organizational behaviors. He emphasized the importance of establishing consistent goals and targets.

Ms. Waite pointed out that many of the principles of equity education were simply best practices and that was how change was initiated. She asked that the committee spend some time discussing equity education best practices.

Mr. Urbina said that survey results would be available by June in the form of a summary report. She said that results from other districts were available on the Tripod website.

Mr. Van Steenbergen commended the committee for including students and the students for having the courage to express their opinions and make their voices heard.

Mr. Lottier thought that Mr. Pruzinski and Mr. Palma were realists, not idealists, and adults had become too entrenched in the bureaucracy and needed to change their attitude about how quickly changes could be made in the system.

Mr. Merrill stated that he grew up in the community and attended 4J schools and there had been many positive changes in the past 25 years. He asked the committee to explore what had worked and what had not worked and move forward with a positive perspective. He said that more voices were now being heard because of past changes. He felt there were things that could be implemented immediately that would make positive changes and that most district employees were willing to make the effort.

Mr. Palma liked the idea of going back to see what had worked in the past. He said that the system did not need to be completely different; it just had to change.

Mr. Urso asked that Mr. Palma and Mr. Pruzinski share their impressions of the survey at the next committee meeting.

Superintendent Russell observed that it had been a good conversation, particularly hearing the voices of the student members of the committee. He said that cultural change was about changing the attitudes, beliefs and values of the people who made up the system or community and that was essential to creating significant and lasting change.

IV. Human Resources Update

Superintendent Russell said he had met with the group working on personnel recruitment and retention and shared some changes he was making in the district's personnel and human resources office. He said one of the changes was establishing a position to provide oversight for the district's human resources, financial and management services. He distributed a copy of the position description and asked Equity Committee members to assist in recruiting applicants.

Mr. Van Steenberg indicated that the next round of study circles on racism would begin in the fall and asked for suggestions on how to involve more educators.

Ms. Luvert said that 4J staff had expressed an interest in organizing study circles.

Superintendent Russell emphasized the importance of involving parents in discussing racism issues.

V. Group Work - Development of Strategies

The committee broke into small groups to develop strategies related to the four key issues: achievement gap, suspension/expulsion/discipline/harassment/bullying/discrimination, welcoming environment/ parent involvement and personnel recruitment and retention.

Ms. Urbina asked the groups to spend 30 to 40 minutes discussing strategies that could be implemented immediately and strategies for implementation in the next school year.

VI. Presentation and Discussion of Strategies

Mr. Peter called the committee back to order and asked the groups to report on their discussions.

Personnel: Recruitment and Retention

Ms. Luvert reported that the group had discussed the following:

- The impact of new standards and changes at the University of Oregon College of Education
- University of Oregon student unions engaging middle school students
- What happened to applicants of color who were not hired and how were they distributed in the applicant pool
- Holding principals accountable to the new cultural competency standards
- Principals holding teachers accountable to the new cultural competency standards
- What is early diversity hiring? Require monthly reports from Human Resources
- Principals should report how they determine who is hired and the pool availability of highly qualified applicants
- Recruitment/retention - reports of new teachers being bullied, discuss staff-to-staff bullying with union
- Mentoring for new teachers during their three-year probation period
- Develop community support for new teachers so they feel connected
- Find ways to get people to value diversity
- Conduct an annual survey of current employees and those who are leaving

Ms. Urbina said that principals had discussed with her the ability of employees who were being laid to transfer to another position in the district. She said principals indicated they would be able to change the culture in their buildings if they had the ability to hire the person they wanted instead of having to accept a transfer who might be an obstruction to that change. She had been asked to bring the issue to the Equity Committee.

Ms. Luvert said that principals should be able to evaluate the ability of a transferred employee to adapt to a building's culture.

Mr. Tallmudge stated that cultural competency could be used effectively with teachers and administrators by implementing a program to focus on the issues the committee had been discussing. He said that effort should include a diversity of voices that had a stake in the community and were not currently being heard. He said that staff would have to be convinced that there would be consequences if attitudes and behaviors did not change. He said that change would not happen unless the district required it. He referred to the earlier remarks by students and said that adults needed to begin speaking on the subject in the same language.

Ms. Quinn said it was critical to be clear about the expectations and accountability, as previously there had been a perception that certain things were a choice and not a requirement.

Ms. Waite commented that the issue was one of performance evaluations for educators.

Suspension/Expulsion/Discipline/Harassment/Bullying/Discrimination and Welcoming Environment/Parent Involvement

Ms. Waite reported that the group discussed the following:

- Look at data that indicated disparity by ethnicity in discipline and achievement
- Determine what interventions already existed at buildings with extreme disparities
- Discuss interventions with those buildings, including equity education for staff and/or students, student racism talking circles, curriculum alignment
- Implement some type of specific research-based anti-bullying program at middle and high school levels
- Ask principals to run data reports that highlighted disproportionalities by specific teachers to pinpoint staff that were the source of significant inequities
- Strategize with principals on how to work with those staff members in a positive, not punitive way
- Teacher evaluations - strategize with the unions on how to implement evaluations by using data to illustrate problems and concerns
- Comprehensive data collection at all sites on harassment and bullying

Mr. Peter said the group was concerned that there was no meaningful feedback loops between parents, teachers and students. He said it was a collective bargaining issue and the union objected to collecting that data. He thought that as community members the committee could discuss with the union the shared value of culturally competent teachers who were responsive to students and parents and how that could be accomplished while still protecting the interests of the union's members.

Mr. Merrill observed that the union's job was to protect its members and that position did not necessarily reflect personal attitudes or beliefs. He said the committee and district would need to provide leadership, demonstrate the positive impact of such an approach and invite the union to join the discussion.

Mr. Tallmadge suggested identifying the most important core issues and engaging the union on those instead of trying to conduct a wide-ranging discussion. He said the union needed to be convinced it was in their best interests to participate.

Achievement Gap

Ms. Quinn reported that the group discussed the following:

- Obtain the results of the State's audit of the district's ELL program
- Determine the status of the TAG program, how it was distributed through the district, how it was implemented
- How are students who are no longer in the ELL program being supported, particularly Latino students
- Obtain data on reading and math levels for ELL students
- High proportion of Latino students identified as learning disabled - how is that determination made

Ms. Waite commented that sometimes students were identified as learning disabled just because a teacher did not want them in the class.

The committee discussed concerns that students were identified as learning disabled when the real issue was language transition, learning style or cultural orientation. That had resulted in a disproportionate number of minority students being clustered in the special education categories of learning disability or speech (academic language).

Mr. Merrill expressed frustration with districts or schools that did not report data on minority students because there were too few of them. He felt that information should be provided regardless of how many minority students it represented.

Ms. Waite said it became a confidentiality issue where the data was on a small number of students.

Mr. Peter asked for volunteers to chair the work groups in order to accomplish tasks between committee meetings.

Mr. Merrill suggested that three to five items from each group be merged into a list of things the committee believed it was important to work on immediately.

Mr. Stiller suggested that the May meeting produce some specific recommendations for the school board.

Mr. Peter determined there was general agreement with Mr. Merrill and Mr. Stiller's suggestions.

Ms. Luvert volunteered to chair the group on personnel recruitment and retention.

The committee discussed the importance of having all members fully participate in committee activities in order to present recommendations as a strong, cohesive group. The difficulty of finding people who were

willing and able to make the necessary commitment of time was acknowledged, as well as the difficulty of trying to coordinate meeting dates with many different schedules. The efforts of those who attended all or most of the meetings were recognized. The committee agreed it was important to continue to move forward with its work even when all members could not be present.

VII. Other Updates

Study Circles - North Eugene High School

Ms. Luvert said that study circles were already being discussed before the incident with Roosevelt High School. She said students at the first meeting suggested ways to get more students involved and there was a rich conversation. She said there was a desire to have a yearlong class on racism and that idea was being explored.

Ms. Waite said there had been a suggestion to conduct equity classes in all of the high schools and connect those classes to the Equity Committee so there were students participating on a rotating basis.

Response Team

Ms. Urbina reported that the response team created by the district as a result of the incident with Roosevelt High Schools was looking at a broader spectrum of issues. She said there would be a joint meeting with Churchill, North Eugene and Roosevelt high school students at Chemeketa Community College in Salem. She expected about 50 participants. She said that what the principals of those schools said about the incident was very different from what was reported in the media.

Ms. Waite remarked that only North and Churchill were participating, but the process should include South and Sheldon. She felt the district was sending a bad message by allowing South and Sheldon to opt out.

Education Trust Workshop - Parent Involvement

Ms. Luvert distributed a flyer for a workshop for parents to be held on May 1. She said the focus of the workshop was helping parents understand No Child Left Behind and the adequate yearly progress (AYP) requirements and data.

The next meeting was scheduled for May 22, with a presentation to the school board tentatively scheduled for June 6.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:10 p.m.

(Recorded by Lynn Taylor)