

Anti-Semitism Update from the Superintendent

Dear Bedford Public Schools Families,

Introduction

I am writing to update you on the work that the schools undertook this summer and are continuing this fall in the wake of last year's anti-semitism incidents. If your children were in the district last year, you will remember that we experienced a spate of anti-semitic graffiti in our high school's bathrooms and on an outdoor piece of equipment at Lane School. To our dismay, we learned that anti-semitic comments, whether understood or not, were made by some of our younger students, and in the course of responding to this information, we learned from some of our older students that they had experienced a variety of anti-semitic behaviors while growing up. Our public forums yielded additional information about experiences of racial intolerance in the community. The strongest and most consistent message throughout this ordeal, however, was the pride that Bedford schools and community folks feel for a town that has historically embraced diversity and rejected all forms of hate and discrimination. Over 300 citizens came out to one of the public forums to reaffirm these inclusive values. Bedford's clergy began a Love Your Neighbor campaign. And two committees formed: one to work on embracing diversity community-wide (Bedford Embraces Diversity), and the other to support the schools' work in this area (Equity and Diversity Support Group).

A Strong Foundation

The Bedford's schools have a long history of embracing diversity. For well over a decade every new teacher has been required to take an anti-racism training course, and most veteran teachers have voluntarily participated as well. Prior to the anti-semitic incidents, the district's Equity and Diversity committee had planned a full day of district-wide professional development last year to help us better create classrooms that are safe for all students to take intellectual risks and in which difficult conversations about differences can take place in healthy and constructive ways. Each school has for many years sponsored school-wide activities that celebrate diversity. The schools are devoted to closing achievement gaps and have created exciting multi-district programs like the Women in Science Scholarship Competition and the Tenacity Challenge for African-American and Latino Students, and Bedford High School is gaining a reputation as a leader in these areas. Courses such as Global Voices at the high school, comparative religions at JGMS, and widespread individual teacher initiatives infuse our curriculum with multi-cultural content. As well, our core focus on developing independent, complex thinkers takes students a long way towards recognizing and eschewing bias.

More Work To Be Done

However, as we reviewed our practice in the midst of last year's trials, we recognized that our curriculum lacks a coherent, systematic approach, K-12, to equipping students

with anti-bias thinking skills and dispositions, or with the multiplicity of lenses that ensure the development of empathy and understanding, or with a sufficiently multicultural approach to our literature and social studies content. Consequently, we have made improvement in these areas one of our four strategic objectives for the 2014-2015 year, and we are committed to the long term process of strengthening our work in these areas.

Underway

Here are a few of the steps that, beginning this summer, we have taken to address this strategic objective:

- We have begun a district-wide review of all of the literature that we use in all grades- focusing mainly on English and social studies, but to include other subjects as well
- At the beginning of the summer, we convened a meeting of our principals, curriculum leaders and Equity and Diversity Committee members to identify the dispositions, like asking curious questions, that we want to integrate into our students' learning as well as the practices that all teachers should adopt integrate into their teaching to help to teach an appreciation for differences
- We have contracted with Facing History and Ourselves (www.facing.org), a renowned international program that develops educational materials and trains educators to use historical case studies to help students better understand their own identities, the phenomena of group identity, of inclusion, of exclusion, and of making ethical choices
- Davis School is integrating the Teaching Tolerance (www.teachingtolerance.org) curriculum into its Open Circle curriculum, and responding to constructive parent input, will begin to share with parents the weekly topics so that parents can better partner at home
- Lane School had a school-wide summer reading program where all kids and all staff, teachers, custodians, etc., picked from a list of diverse titles and then met in groups this week to explore and discuss their readings
- JGMS teachers spent this summer revising the 6-8 social studies curriculum to integrate a stronger comparative religions unit, to ensure that the world history materials are sufficiently global, and to change the 8th grade curriculum to include a half year of civics and a half year of Facing History and Ourselves
- The high school's peer leadership program will now include a focus on learning how to help peers embrace diversity and have difficult conversations about differences in constructive ways
- The high school leadership team and many of the staff read and discussed a book called *Stereotype Threat*, by Claude Steele, and the School Committee is reading this fall

- The district will hold several forums this year to invite parents and faculty to talk about bias and diversity related issues
- The district has begun to discuss how to teach about religion, for example in history classes, without promoting particular religious or anti-religious beliefs- and how we should best handle the issue of celebrating holidays (and will make this a topic of one of the parent/teacher forums)

How You Can Help

Partner with Us

As we strive to be better communicators, we hope that the information we share with you will provide you with opportunities to support our work in whatever ways make sense to you as parents and guardians. We hope that our students, particularly the younger ones who are more apt to share, will talk with you about what they are doing and learning in their classrooms, their Open Circle sessions at Davis, their daily class meetings at Lane, their advisory sessions at JGMS, and their more subject-based course work across the grades. Please look out for invitations to our parent/faculty forums and join us in these important discussions.

Contribute to the BEF's Facing History Initiative

Because the budget process was already well underway, we were not able to plan for the Facing History and Ourselves costs which, were we to do all of the trainings that our teachers are asking for, would cost about \$28,000 this year. The Bedford Education Foundation generously donated \$5000 in June to kick off our work with Facing History, and we will be able to find some funds in our present budget. But we could really use the community's help.

If interested, please make a contribution to the BEF (Bedford Education Foundation, c/o Bedford Public Schools, 97 McMahon Rd, Bedford, MA 01730) which has agreed to collect contributions for our Facing History and Ourselves contract to facilitate this important work. If you do so, please note on the memo line, "Facing History Initiative" so that your contribution will directly support the district's Facing History staff training and curriculum work.

Sincerely,
Jon

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