



## Equity & Inclusion Update

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By Amy Clouter

Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum, Instruction & Assessment

### I Summary

*Life's most persistent and urgent question is, "What are you doing for others?"*

~Dr. Martin Luther King

There have been several inquiries as to the progress made this year, both within and outside the district, in regards to the engagement of the community in district equity and inclusion efforts. This report is designed to provide information about the action steps taken by Shrewsbury Public Schools since Dr. Sawyer outlined an initial plan of action in June, 2020.

### II Three Drivers, One Goal

*"We have a powerful potential in our youth, and we must have the courage to change old ideas and practices so that we may direct their power towards good ends."*

~Mary McLeod Bethune

A plan is an opportunity to make visible a hope for the future. When the leadership team, in concert with School Councils and other stakeholder groups, developed the goals that would guide our work from 2018 to 2022, we recognized that there was a gap between the collective aspirations captured in our [Portrait of a Shrewsbury Graduate](#) and the realities that many of our students experience in our community. Together we wondered how we could make our school communities more inclusive. The result was a [Five-Year Strategic Priorities & Goals](#) statement that named the need for a systemic approach to ensuring equitable access and opportunities for learning within the strategic priority of creating "learning environments where everyone's success matters."

In addition to building a common understanding of the goals, the strategic planning process resulted in an examination of district policies, procedures and practices. We contracted with the Assabet Valley Collaborative to conduct an "equity audit" for our

school district. The [report](#) that followed added specific recommendations to the district's goals. For example, the district was encouraged to seek additional feedback and input from students, families and staff as one way to prioritize action steps. The findings also suggested that additional emphasis be placed on seeking diverse candidates as part of our hiring processes.

Lastly, the murder of George Floyd last May and the growing awareness about the impact of race in America added a heightened sense of urgency to our efforts. Dr. Sawyer's [Initial Plan of Action](#) effectively illustrates the district's ongoing commitment to advancing equity in Shrewsbury's public schools.

### III Iterative Progress

*"Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced."*

~ James Baldwin

#### First, Listening

As Dr. Sawyer made clear in his message to the community, our efforts to advance equity and inclusion necessitate a cyclical approach to improvement.



This work is ongoing by design, so that our approach is continuously informed by feedback. Why is community feedback so important? As was stated in the Equity Audit report, "Renowned author, Zaretta Hammond, tells participants in her classes on culturally responsive teaching to "go slow to go deep." She also talks about the importance of "assessing current reality" and developing "equity fluency" of school staff as first steps in a slow, deep response." Accordingly, we began last summer with the commitment to start by listening to the diverse voices of our community. In June of

2020, the district surveyed staff. Although initial plans called for a survey of students, families, alumni, and community members, consultants engaged by the district to assist in the effort urged caution regarding the potential unintended consequences of surveying marginalized students and families. After researching ways to best engage our students and families regarding issues related to equity, the district recently engaged with a firm whose research-based survey product was designed for this purpose. [Panorama](#) is a local technology company with a national reach that has developed a survey tool that is nationally normed, so that Shrewsbury responses can be compared to a national sample. Panorama's survey, which will be administered to all students in grades 3-12 by early June, will enable us to ask students and families questions from two question sets, Social Emotional Learning and Equity. The results will help us establish a baseline for the extent students feel they belong in and are supported by their school communities.

The Shrewsbury Public Schools Coalition for Equity and Anti-Racism, made up of students, parents, community, and staff, was convened by Dr. Sawyer and charged with developing essential questions and a related vision to guide the district. Since its formation in August, the Coalition has met five times. This coalition, which includes a large number of SPS administrators, has not met as frequently as originally intended, primarily due to the extraordinary demands that have been placed upon the district as a result of the pandemic and the budget crisis we faced. In an attempt to determine how to best utilize a coalition like this, most recently the group hosted Dr. Darnisa Amante-Jackson, a nationally-known racial equity strategist who has been providing professional development for SPS staff (see below). Dr. Amante-Jackson facilitated a meeting for the purpose of clarifying terms and building common understanding of the professional learning about diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging that has taken place in Shrewsbury, and responded to the question of how the ongoing SHS mascot issue is affecting community perceptions.

Following the receipt of a letter and a petition requesting that the Shrewsbury High School "Colonial" mascot be changed, a second group, the [SHS Mascot Ad Hoc study group](#) was formed. Led by Dr. Sawyer and SHS Principal Todd Bazydlo, the mascot study group was tasked with researching the origins of the mascot and considering a variety of perspectives on the issue with a report to the community and a

recommendation to the School Committee expected in June 2021. The addition of a second group, while critically important, extended the timeline for the Coalition's work. The Coalition reviewed the Equity audit report and related recommendations and is continuing work to develop and formalize a specific plan. Going forward, the Coalition will focus on different aspects of school life and organization, including: Curriculum, Instruction, & Assessment; School Culture & Climate; Policies & Practices; Adult Learning; Hiring & Employment Practices; and Community Engagement. This work will help to frame future action steps. The survey data from Panorama (see above) will also help inform the work of the Coalition.

In addition to the work begun within our school district, It's also important to note that both Ms. Barb Malone, Executive Director of Human Resources, and I have had multiple meetings with subcommittees of the Town of Shrewsbury's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Committee in order to provide information regarding our efforts regarding equity and to consider how our joint efforts might overlap.

### Learning Together

As a school district, what is prioritized for staff's limited professional development time sends a strong message regarding what the district values. Despite all of the challenges faced this year, SPS took steps to ensure that all staff had the opportunity for learning regarding the topics of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging. Our plans for this year included two specific required district professional development events.

On Friday, October 9, all Shrewsbury Public Schools staff, including administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals and administrative support staff, participated in two webinars, the first hosted by [Dr. Irvin Leon Scott](#) and the second by [Dr. Darnisa Amante-Jackson](#). Hearing from these noted experts helped set a tone and expectation that reinforced the district's strategic priority to create and maintain "learning environments where everyone's success matters" in Shrewsbury's schools.



Dr. Scott began the day by speaking about why work around equity and inclusion is so critical in schools today. His experience and perspective comes from 20 years working in the "trenches" as a teacher, principal, assistant superintendent, and ultimately as the

Chief Academic Officer for Boston Public Schools. Dr. Scott spent five years as the deputy director for K-12 education at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Today, he is a faculty member of the Harvard Graduate School of Education where he concentrates on educational leadership.

Dr. Amante-Jackson is a race and equity strategist. She works with organizations and schools to embed organizational cultures that deepen diversity, elevate equity, bolster belonging, and increase inclusion. She helps establish cultures built on a common foundation of respect, accountability, and value. Her webinar focused on helping Shrewsbury educators and staff think about how we do this important work in our own schools. The influence of her equity and racial inclusion work is significant, as she has devised strategic interventions for Boston public schools, the New York City Department of Education, and Harvard University Programs in Professional Education.

Both webinars included time for break-out sessions where staff could reflect on what they had heard, engage in peer-to-peer discussion and collaborate on next steps. Both speakers emphasized that, done well, the work of advancing equity and anti-racism is ongoing. For this reason, Dr. Amante-Jackson returned to the district in January to address professional educators in order to deepen their understanding of these topics.

Additionally, this year school district leaders spent considerable time with professional learning regarding equity and anti-racism. Central Office administrators and principals dedicated much of their summer leadership meetings to a workshop led by Belicia Smith and Elizabeth Borneman, who teach an online course in educational equity for the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) EdX online program. During the school year, the full District Leadership Team (all who have supervisory or curriculum leadership roles) were able to take part in a self-paced course titled *Becoming a More Equitable Educator* created by Ms. Smith and Ms. Borneman based on their MIT EdX course. Our goal is to provide this course, with any modifications based on the leadership team's experience, to staff more widely as part of next year's professional development program.

In addition to this more formal professional development, there were also a variety of smaller-scale professional development offerings focused on inclusion, like Co-Teaching and staff-led discussions and book studies on culturally proficient practices. The inclusion of formal bias training in our annual compliance effort helped

to affirm our core values. Finally, the emphasis of culturally responsive teaching practices in our orientation of new educators to the district, coupled with the expansion of the mentoring program from one year to three years enabled more in-depth discussions about how to serve all students.

Finally, leaders in other districts shared resources that have furthered our efforts. We added numerous titles to our Media Centers following collaborations with outside organizations. We are considering materials that help teachers facilitate discussions about race and ethnicity in the classroom.

### A Data-Informed Approach

In addition to formal survey tools and anecdotal stakeholder feedback, information about student progress continued to inform instructional decision making. The use of data related to academic performance and other indicators of success helped to identify existing gaps among populations and to determine and implement action plans. One outcome of this shared focus on data was the adoption of the [Star assessment system](#), a universal screening tool used for the first time in Grades K-8 this year. Student data was particularly important as the district piloted social emotional learning (SEL) curriculum this year. Going forward, information on the achievement opportunity gap will remain a shared focus at the district and school level. To that end, Shrewsbury Public Schools has contracted with two experts to learn more about how best to support student subgroups:

- Dr. Nwadike Akuoma was hired to conduct an analysis of student achievement data, and
- Mrs. Maureen Manning, a consultant specializing in English Language Education, supported Director Kathleen Lange-Madden in conducting a program review.

These two reports are not yet finalized, but we expect they will provide information that will help us determine what actions to prioritize to advance our goals. As we anticipate a return to relative normalcy, data will help our educators review and adapt curriculum and refine instructional planning to help students gain the knowledge and skills necessary to become empowered learners and ethical, empathetic, informed citizens that contribute to the community.

Just as student achievement helps educators and district leaders to identify effective student supports, staffing data has been instrumental to identifying improvements in hiring and recruitment procedures. Although SPS job postings include [affirmative action language](#) and our search processes adhere to strict [guidelines](#) that direct district leaders to recruit from a diverse applicant pool, Shrewsbury's workforce is majority White. Why is that? Barb Malone, the Executive Director of Human Resources, began looking for root causes in 2018, when she first trained the district leadership team on [confirmation bias](#). In the time since, the Human Resources team has also expanded their efforts to become increasingly proactive.

Data pulled from School Spring, the online database we use to attract job candidates, made clear that our application pools attract very few diverse candidates. In seeking to refine recruitment efforts to attract educators that align with our student demographics, Ms. Malone researched alternative approaches and proposed a two pronged approach, namely that the district should:

- build on identified strengths by increasing efforts in areas where we are finding diverse candidates for available positions, and
- target new approaches

One area slated for expansion has to do with our substitute positions. Specifically, our day to day sub pool includes more diverse candidates than other employee groups. Accordingly, supporting educators in this group in acquiring Massachusetts licensure seemed like a logical first step. As an aside, considering licensure as a factor in the process is critical, because the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education will not grant hardship waivers to hire unlicensed applicants unless districts demonstrate why licensed candidates were not qualified. Starting with substitutes and then paraprofessionals, Ms. Malone began individually coaching educators in these groups that were eligible for Massachusetts licensure. The next step is considering how best to reach diverse candidates for professional educator and administrative positions. In this area too we have already made some gains.

In April, Ms. Malone began piloting use of the IMDiversity website with plans to post ten positions this year. More recent postings have included both Assistant Principal positions at SHS as well as professional educator positions in the Science department and postings for Extended Day Site Coordinator positions for the 2021-2022 school year. Ms. Malone anticipates additional postings in the near future to include district Nurse positions as well as Instructional Coach and Curriculum Coordinator positions.

#### **IV Conclusion**

*“You may encounter many defeats, but you must not be defeated. In fact, it may be necessary to encounter the defeats, so you can know who you are, what you can rise from, and how you can still come out of it.”*

~Maya Angelou

This has been an extraordinary year for educators, students and families everywhere. The circumstances of the pandemic, while imposing constraints on time and resources, also enabled extraordinary collaboration among and between districts and between the district and various stakeholder groups. Although the list of what we hoped to accomplish this year exceeded the time we had to organize our efforts, we are hopeful that the partnerships established in each of our school communities will serve us well in the long term.