

May 24, 2016

A special meeting of the Board of Education of the Oak Park and River Forest High School was held on Tuesday, May 24, 2016, in the Board Room of the high school.

**Call to Order**

President Weissglass called the meeting to order at 6:28 p.m. A roll call indicated the following members were present: Fred Arkin, Jennifer Cassell, Thomas F. Cofsky, Dr. Steve Gevinson, Dr. Jackie Moore, Sara Dixon Spivy, Jeff Weissglass, and Gail Kalmerton, Executive Assistant/Clerk of the Board.

Joining the meeting were Dr. Steven T. Isoye, Superintendent; Tod Altenburg, Chief School Business Official; Philip M. Prale, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum & Instruction; Amy Hill, Director of Assessment and Learning; Dr. Gwen Walker-Qualls, Director of Pupil Support Services; Karin Sullivan, Director of Communications and Community Relations; and Sheila Hardin, Faculty Senate Representative.

**Visitors**

Josh Seldess and Pat Savage-Williams, facilitators; Mary Bird, John Duffy, and Burcey Hines, community members; Jason Dennis and Devon Alexander, OPRFHS faculty, Steven James and other filmmakers.

**Public Comments**

John Duffy, representing Equity and Excellence in Education, called the Board of Education's attention to the Blueprint Report, commissioned by the District, which spoke about OPRFHS being a biracial school that was divided, unequal and separate. The Board of Education is courageous to have a conversation about unpacking bias with regarding to race, class, gender sexual orientation, etc. The conversation has to move into the community. He encouraged the Board of Education to continue to work towards equity in regards to fees, discipline, and an unconscious bias in grading. He suggested that the Board of Education read the 2003 Learning Community Performance Gap Report.

Ms. Bird spoke about her belief in the essential unity of all people; if one person gains, the whole world gains. If one person fails the whole world fails. Many students are falling. She had wanted to see more black colleagues to attend this meeting. She admired the Board of Education for taking on this work. She quoted Mandela, "It always seem impossible until it is done."

Burcy Hines, too, thanked the Board of Education for starting the process. Next, an effort should be made to involve everyone, i.e., African Americans, APPLE, etc. She had no confidence that anything would come from this meeting. She hoped effort would be put forth to hire more African-American teachers so that African-American students could relate to them. This subject has been a long fight, and the community needs to be involved if things are to change.

Wyannetta Johnson, a resident of Oak Park for 46 years, had ideas on how to change things quickly.

**Meeting  
Background and  
Agenda Setting**

The Board of Education's goals for this year include undertaking a Board study of the District's equity policies and practices. The District has been working on racial equity with the Pacific Educational Group (PEG). All faculty and staff will have been trained by PEG by the end of the next school year. The Board of Education will embark on conversations about racial equity and how they, as individuals, define racial equity and identity, and how race is a part of their lives and thinking. This meeting is to introduce the Board of Education to the facilitators that will help them with this work and to engage in goal setting for subsequent conversations. This preliminary discussion will set the landscape for the Board of Education's future work to (1) deepen their understanding of how race affects their decision making; (2) develop a common understanding of equity, and (3) frame the next stage of equity work in the district.

Dr. Moore thanked her fellow Board of Education members, staff, and community for the opportunity to continue their journeys publicly about their feelings about equity. Individual faculty and staff have been participating in this ongoing work for a several years. State law prohibits a closed session for this discussion. The Board of Education is committed to "undertaking a Board study of District's equity policies and practices." But the best way to do this work is to explore their individual biases, histories, and stories to build to trust. She felt that having an audience and a documentarian film the meeting was a testament to the Board of Education's belief as to the importance of this work. The Board of Education had been encouraged to do this work previously so that it can understand the initial steps individuals need in order to understand each other biases and histories and to consider policy and goals in this community and on all levels. The facilitators were charged with helping each of the Board of Education members feel safe, comfortable and to be honest. Each is allowed to listen to each other without feeling judged and to speak without being judged. She quoted Muriel Rutgeiser, "My lifetime listens to yours."

Mr. Seldess is the OPRFHS History Division Head and a trained member of the Pacific Educational Group. Ms. Savage Wilson and he co-facilitated SEEKing Equity and Diversity in Education program. Mr. Seldess and Ms. Savage Wilson have the courage to speak about the dynamics of race and gender in co-facilitations. He has learned from her that he cannot position himself as an expert on racism that he has never experienced himself. He felt that White people should and can lead equity because it is not fair for only African-Americans to do so. Mr. Seldess has also helped with co-facilitation of the Learning Strands which Ms. Hardin and Mr. Alexander lead.

Ms. Savage Wilson spoke more about the work that she and Mr. Seldess did with SEEK and the trust that they had eventually developed. She too was Pacific Education Group trained and is on the SEE National staff and trains facilitators

across the country through two weeks of intensive work. She emphasized that it takes a deep dive and intense self-reflection for everyone no matter what their personal experience and one's face. She had some discomfort about the filming of this meeting because one needs to feel comfortable to take risks. Mistakes are made by participants and facilitators. She is also the president of the Board of Education at Evanston Township High School. The reason she ran for the school board because of the equity work it is doing. It has been hard work, and they took on the changing of the culture of the community. It takes much time, and one has to be vulnerable to make things happen. It is a work in progress. Major changes to the culture have been made but much work is yet to be done. This meeting speaks to the dedication of this community regarding equity. Even though there are times when the Board of Education members will want to pull away, she encouraged them not to do so. She asked them to think about the culture and how they would like to impact it.

This process will include a workshop scheduled for September 24 which will be linked to the Board of Education's larger goals.

The Board of Education members were asked to share how they came to this place of discussion. A couple of members stated that it had been through goal setting.

Ms. Savage Wilson asked everyone to write a couple of sentences about their paths and share them with the group. The responses were:

Mr. Cofsky ran for the Board of Education at the same time as Dr. Moore and had no hopes or intent that he would have a big imprint on this challenge because he did not feel he had a lot to offer. He recognized it was an issue, two schools within a school, achievement issues, etc. As a white male, he did not know what his perspective would offer. He struggles with economic equity as part of racial equity. He lives in Oak Park because there are positives and challenges and the decision as to whether to face those challenges of the "real world" or the white suburbs. He decided to live here so that his family would be respectful of all humankind. His work takes him to Mississippi and George and his company tries to be open and non-prejudicial through policy and tone, but in the real world, it is white and black, and the challenges here go to the next level. Families are trying to survive, try to make a living, yet the gaps continue. The gaps he sees carry over into life, so that gives him energy.

Ms. Cassell was elected to Board of Education last April because she wanted to volunteer and serve the community. Personally, as an African-American parent who was informed, she had to advocate for her daughter as an incoming freshman, about tracking and being placed in honors classes as she had the ability to achieve. Today she is a rising senior and did well in honors-level classes. That experience opened her eyes. Parents who are savvy and have an understanding,

advocate for their students, and they do well. Parents who do not think their children have the ability, do not have their students held to the same level of expectations. Students should all be held to the same level of expectations with or without parental advocacy.

Dr. Moore felt uncomfortable as a Black person taking charge because it could challenge the conversation in ways that would inhibit others from thinking about themselves and thinking about herself. Her family had moved to Oak Park 21 years ago because it was a safe community and a community with desirable public schools where her children would get the benefits of a good education and some diversity. She saw other Black faces in Oak Park. She had lived in an all-black, working class community in Ohio and in the 7th grade went to a college prep class across town: it was very wealthy and white. She lived in two worlds, and it was not until she went to college that she explored what it meant to be proud and black. Moving to Oak Park was not about being “best buddies,” but having a sense of belongingness and comfort and the whole notion of safety in numbers and school. Much has been said about persistence, confounded by a resource-rich community. Part of that is the reason to take this conversation to the policy level. It is also the issue of Oak Park. She has heard from family and friends who are white that this is Oak Park. Does that mean racial diversity? She sees how students hang out together, the challenges of being adolescent and figuring out who they are. At the same time, they have to explain their race or something that is perceived as different. This event occurs every year. Her children will be OK, because they have parents who are not afraid to advocate and say things that are uncomfortable. The same issues have been brought to the school for at least 2 or 3 decades. The school has the right mix of individuals to address expectations and excellence. She added that this being Oak Park meant a zero sum tolerance if something was going to be taken away. She too would do what is best for her children. The Board of Education has to be ready to address this and ask itself if it felt right or good.

Ms. Dixon Spivy has been a Cook County public defender for 13 years. She attended schools that were private and white. She had not known how racially segregated the criminal justice was: 95% are African-American males. Her clients made bad choices such as murder, rape, etc., but after having contact with them she understands how they could have made those choices, i.e., incest, parents are addicted to drugs, etc. While she cannot do anything about those situations, she wants to catch students before the first offense is made. She currently chairs the former PTAC, now Culture, Climate, and Behavior Committee, which looks at discipline in the school. The hope is to have a more fair, just system that represents the student body in place by May of 2017. It is an evolution.

Mr. Arkin was elected in April 2015, and he wanted to be part of this big conversation at the high school. He was born in Oak Park and raised in River Forest, which is a much different community. He has seen an evolution in the

community, and he has been involved in that evolution. He worked with youth sports all of his adult life and had seen the inequities, i.e., social, economic, and academic. Having worked with some very young children, he knew that even at the age of 5 and 6, there is an achievement gap. He worked to bring students from Maywood, Berwyn, Melrose Park, etc. to be on teams and build up their confidence. When they went to high school, he would find out that they were involved in drugs, gangs, guns, etc. He recounted one incident where a child was born during the competition season. His mom brought him as an infant, and he was a gym rat for 16 years. At 17 years old, he was shot and killed. Students are vulnerable. What can be done through the educational process to steer them in the right direction? That is why he ran for the Board of Education.

Dr. Gevinson liked the goals for this work as they deepen the understanding.

- (1) Deepen their understanding of how race affects their decision making;
- (2) Develop a common understanding of equity, and
- (3) Frame the next stage of equity work in the district.

He asked if Ms. Savage Wilson had done this work with her own Board of Education. She responded that it had done and continued to do much equity work. Dr. Gevinson was comfortable with this portion of the meeting but was unsure what it would be when it comes to the personal side of things because of the cameras and a public meeting. He did not think this was a good setting for this kind of conversation. The work to be done for people to understand him as he would want them to do would take time. He was eager to see where this process would go, and nothing that had been identified was more important than a deeper understanding or a better way to deal with inequities in the district, in the students. He witnessed much change over the years, and he has seen it from different perspectives. He spoke about OPRFHS's involvement in the creation of the Minority Student Achievement Network.

Mr. Weissglass was elected in 2013. Because of his experience working on diversity and race relations, he ran for the Board of Education. He worked with Project Unity, as a National Coalition Institute Facilitator and professional development work in community development to help minority businesses. Dr. Moore, Dr. Gevinson, Mr. Cofsky and he ran with high hopes, but their energy was sucked away because of the District's large fund balance, trust building with the community, and then the pool, all of which are important. Race is a more than a one-generational issue; this is the heart of a 200-year history. OPRFHS has been working with the Pacific Education Group since 2010 and has a learning strand about racial equity. Questions have arisen about it. People involved in make it seem like the centerpiece of the school's equity work, and the racial conscious work feels like it is the school equity theory, and when talking about programmatic questions, that is not adaptive, transformational. He felt it was not transformational work. He needed to understand racial consciousness work and how that fit in with this. How does this make a difference in the lives of the

students and teachers on a day to day basis? He felt the Board of Education needed to understand tracking and ability grouping, what it means, and what changing it would mean. From personal perspectives, one of the pieces that he works on the outside of the Board of Education work is through an organization in DC which is working on transforming entire educational systems and how that relates to having grown up to understand equity work. It thinks that in that work, racial equity can grow out of it, but much more differently. In the next decade, he felt changes would be made and would be driven by technology, brain science, skills and dispositions critical to learning, etc.

The Board of Education members were asked to consider the following questions.

- 1) What is understood as to the school board's role in racial equity in the district?
- 2) How does it fit in? What is required, etc.?
- 4) What is racial consciousness and how often does one think about race?
- 5) Does a racial dynamic play out in every context?
- 6) Does one understand what his/her race means to another race?
- 7) Am I open to hearing how someone else's experience can inform my understanding?

Ms. Savage Wilson appreciated everyone's willingness to share. What is the role of the Board of Education? What is the engagement of staff? What does that mean for policymakers, as it might be awkward to talk at a meeting as a Board of Education member? How would does the Board of Education proceed as its members share their experiences? What does it mean for them individually? What is their racial consciousness and how does one take that on in this setting? A couple of them were hesitant to have this meeting because it was so public. Race work is not a 12-step program to get from Point A to Point B as the end place.

Goals:

- 1) Need to understand the meaning of equity and the various inequities and other forms of diversity?
- 2) Review policies that are part of the community. What policies might be perpetuating some of those disparities?
- 3) What are the goals for the Board of Education and the community?
- 4) About the achievement gap, research tracking, both the pros and cons.
- 5) Determine how much time does the Board of Education would like to devote to this subject.

The conversation is the vehicle. What are the parameters, rules and guidelines needed to make the conversations constructive?

One member felt the Board of Education needed to set action items that showed/established its commitment to this important work. Much meeting time and energy has been spent on the pool, garage, parking, the money to pay for it, etc. and all of that has detracted from what a school is supposed to be regarding quality instruction and helping students to have the best lives they can. Equity work and the achievement gap have to move up earlier on agendas. Will the next Board of Education goals be the same? Mr. Seldess noted that transformational goals have to do with shifts in the culture of the organization which meets the individuals that it serves. Transformation lies within the structure of the school, which is policy.

When asked what things were in place that feeds the instability of equity, Ms. Savage Wilson stated that the Board of Education should establish norms that it was not looking at blame, shame, or guilt when doing its workshops. If looking at race, then look at how policies are impacting students of color. Are they helpful or hurtful?

One member stated that so much time had been spent on the pool because of strong advocacy. The public comments about race and equity have been few compared to the comments on the pool. Another member felt that three of the new Board of Education members ran on equity in the election, so this member felt there had been a public outcry. Another member felt that when the Board of Education sets its goals and agendas, it is not about how many people come for public comments. The Board of Education should decide what is important to OPRFHS and how something should be dealt with, as opposed to squeaky wheel syndrome. The Board of Education has to advocate; this is not linear. Another member stated that the Board of Education's role is to provide a safe and nurturing environment for students. Policies affect the environment and the culture of the school. The Board of Education gets down in the minutiae of the agenda items, including the pool. Another member assumed that the Board has a strong, effective role but perhaps because of the distractions it has not had the focus or leadership on it. Dr. Moore was appreciated for her perseverance and being the defacto leader. The Board of Education's commitment to this subject will help determine who is hired. This member noted that the Board of Education was committed and wanted to work through the questions, but the member also did not know if this was going personal. Dr. Gevinson had wanted strategies for teachers that would change their behaviors, i.e., concrete things, etc., and was frustrated with Pacific Education Group's philosophy.

The facilitators encouraged the Board of Education members to look at their racial consciousness and make a commitment to change before looking at the policies. Other districts around the country are doing this same thing, and there may be groups of educators who can be resources for this school. It is important to bring in the voices that are not heard, including the engagement of African-American students, and that takes creative effort and work so that relationships are earned in the social context of racism. One Board of Education member

noted building relationships of trust with elected officials is very low at this time throughout the nation. Achievement disparity issues are bandied about as a tool in the arguments around the pool, and that serves to break down trust even further. Rebuilding community is so enormous, so much a larger societal issue, that it is almost a daunting experience.

## **Next Steps**

It was suggested that the Board of Education members' personal next steps be that of the readings of books, articles, attending workshops, professional development in the community, and talking with other people in other districts, i.e., board members, administrators, etc. to find out what their next steps have been and to have a consciousness when addressing policies and the achievement gap.

Some PD workshops were called to mind, i.e., PEG's Beyond Diversity Conference, a Columbia Teachers College workshop on racial equity in the classroom and what are the current research, practices, and successes. Dr. Moore's personal goal was about having certain questions or checkpoints in her head so that she could feel comfortable that all aspects of a question had been considered and she knew which lens they were being looked at, i.e., technology, etc. The administration prepares information for the Board of Education but at times because of her lack of understanding and background, conversations have been hindered. There was not the same level of language or reference points in the discipline study, which is important to make interactions more meaningful.

One member asked for an inventory of the work that has been done that the Board of Education does not know about within the District and align that with the Strategic Plan and determine how it relates to the community, as two other districts are beginning to starting to do work.

Another member felt that reading more books on equity in education would be useful and for PEG to present to the Board of Education on its work and provide it with a roadmap for the work it can do to help in its decision making and deciding where it should put its efforts.

Dr. Gevinson summarized the big things to tackle: 1) tracking, site visit to Evanston Township High School; 2) changing culture through the work started in the Culture, Climate and Behavior Committee and then continue it long-term; 3) look at student experience in classrooms; and 4) and take care of personal issues personally.

A facilitator stated that as the District dives into conversations about equity and PD, it is important for the Board of Education to know, participate, and understand the work it is doing. Dr. Moore stated that this had to do with transparency and communication, and she felt there was a fear of acknowledging or documenting all of the things that address issues of equity. The full Board of



Education is not aware of things that are occurring happening now, and maybe the first step would be to know everything relating to this which would have to do with its commitment and the statement of what it is going to make in its purpose of wanting to know. Being declarative about what the Board of Education is doing or plans to do with the information is critical to building trust because there is so much information to be shared. Sometimes by the time things are communicated to teachers, it is not what the Board of Education intended. Bureaucracy has gotten in the way of hearing all voices.

One member asked the facilitators to distill ideas on how to move forward, i.e., personal work versus organizational work, how long that should take before moving to the organizational work, etc. One facilitator stated that it was important for personal work to precede the workshop. However, it never stops. Be curious about race, what does race have to do it with can be asked about any topic. Help each other as well. Hold to agreements and get used to holding conversations about pool from the racial lens. It becomes a part of the way things work.

The Board of Education considered next steps because it was urgent to keep the conversations about race and equity at the forefront of its work.

- 1) Personal work is the commitment to do the personal work and not an option for any Board of Education members. Guidelines about personal narratives and props to get and about which to think or write.
- 2) Attend workshops
- 3) Schedule the next focused conversation as a group. Consider: Is it about sharing individual work together or whether having a public meeting is challenging, and what are next steps around prioritizing and focusing on some of the other goals discussed, i.e., policies, tracking, and classroom experiences, etc.
- 4) Re-introduce the Board of Education, a town hall dialogue, not an anecdotal session but as a discussion of how the community can come together and determine the community engagement issues.
- 5) Have shared experiences. What specific Board of Education work can be queued up?

Note the Village of Oak Park has a dialogue about race and it has been interested in working with District 200 and implementing a larger conversation.

Ms. Savage Wilson noted that the rewards of the conversation are tremendous with students especially, as it is important to pave the way for a different world as they go through life. As a Board of Education, this is one of the most important things it could address.

**Adjournment**

At 9:00 p.m., Ms. Spivy moved to adjourn the Special Board Meeting; seconded by Mr. Arkin. A voice vote resulted in all motion carried.

John Weissglass  
President

Sara Dixon Spivy  
Secretary

Submitted by  
Gail Kalmerton  
Clerk of the Board