

The Novice Guide to

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Work



By Sarah Infante

Last year a student posed a question, “How come there is no Black history information around the high school during Black history month?” The only answer to honestly give was... “I do not know.” This was the most eye-opening question from a student. She was right! There was nothing to acknowledge this month but a small display in the middle school that made mention of Black history and some key individuals who shaped history.

From that moment on it was decided we would start having these conversations because in all honesty neither the adult nor student was entirely sure how to do that. This was a vulnerable, humbling moment that in many ways is not shared with our students, but should be. These conversations were not only about race but gender, sexuality, disability status, and religious beliefs. It was eye opening to consider the multitude of perspectives there truly are not only in the world, but in the three point eight square miles that the Tonawanda City School District makes up.

In tandem, we — the district and building level administrative team at Tonawanda — began to educate ourselves about the varying topics associated with diversity, equity, and inclusion. This included participating in conferences, book studies, and bias surveys, and simply starting these conversations. Dozens of professional conferences were participated in. After each conference, a team member was bringing back thought-provoking conversations amongst the team and how we conduct ourselves as leaders. The team did a book study using the *Leader's Guide to Unconscious Bias* by Pamela Fuller and Mark Murphy. However, the most eye-opening moment was completing the Harvard bias survey. Each member of the team learned something about themselves that was surprising to them and a real opportunity to learn and grow.

From these varied moments throughout the remainder of 2021 our diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work was only in its infancy. It began to weave into the fabric of who we are at Tonawanda; we as a district have always been a caring, nurturing district like no other I have ever worked in. Our intentionality to support students and families was nothing short of Nordstrom's customer service mindset.

Essentially, because this was already woven into the administrative team, we were prepared to make the most important step. We wholeheartedly were committed to the journey of understanding our students, staff, parents, and community members through the lens of diversity, equity, and inclusion. To any novice looking

for insight or inspiration, it is there; the district must take that step. It will not look perfect but as educators, we can pride ourselves on the fact that we are learning just as we ask our students to do on a daily basis. This work is not for the faint of heart.

During the summer of 2021, the Tonawanda City School District began to organize a diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) Committee to begin to have this conversation in a whole. In September 2021 we held our first meeting with 18 members present. The members of the committee consisted of board members, parents, teachers, students, support staff, and administrative team members. There were stories shared, biases uncovered, and most importantly a community of people who wanted to grow and learn from others.

All of the meetings have been the same format, a shared agenda that begins with a community-building activity and then topics of education or action. The community-building piece has been one of the most critical pieces to the success of the committee. If we are not prepared to be vulnerable within this community, how can we as a committee feel confident to have the conversations with others as they relate to diversity, equity, and inclusion?

The committee agreed on ground rules to provide a safe environment for all who wished to go on this journey with us. The rules are reviewed at each meeting as a reminder of the critical, and sometimes difficult, work we are doing.

The ground rules our committee operates by are as follows:

1. Encourage active participation that allows everyone a chance to contribute to the conversation;
2. Create a safe environment for discussion and learning;
3. Provide confidentiality for information shared (stories) at the meetings;
4. Extend courtesy to others;
5. Listen without judging others;
6. Share challenges openly so that we can learn together and develop better ways of working as a group;

7. Be present in the moment.

The above-mentioned ground rules have allowed us to navigate several community-building activities. They include activities such as "I am, but I am not," which one of our members facilitated. This activity broke down misconceptions and stereotypes by allowing individuals to share how they identify themselves. Another activity was called "the birthmap," where each member was asked where they were born and a map was constructed connecting us all here in Tonawanda, New York. Examples of where our members were born include Jamaica, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Connecticut, and the city of Tonawanda. How would we have ever known this had we not taken the time to learn about one another? It was amazing to see how even though our journeys began differently, we as a committee are all here together. Other activities included conducting interviews with a woman with a disability and learning how her day-to-day is impacted by being a quadriplegic. Another informative activity was when our school attorney presented about protected classes. The most wonderful moment of that was when he continued to come to our meetings to support and be a pro bono part of the district's journey.

Our work continues to naturally unfold. After several months of meeting and learning more about the community we live or work in, we began committee work. The team used a survey conducted earlier in the year to identify the priorities for the committee. This allowed us to further develop our purpose. We found that our purpose was to learn, grow, and create opportunities for awareness for every member of the Tonawanda community. In delving further, the team felt our priorities should be school events and community outreach to create awareness and provide education. Our priorities should also include a strong website as a means to communicate our purpose.

For each priority area, there was a leader who volunteered. This is where our work continues and will for quite some time. Another key will be supporting the work in that area and growing our commitment to not

just the key members. This, for all of the readers, is where Tonawanda can no longer offer words of wisdom. We are working through the same difficult conversations, assumptions, and frustrations you will one day be having if you have not begun this work in your district.

What I can say is our story continues but it is clear: The Tonawanda City School District is deeply committed to learning, growing, understanding, and creating opportunities for awareness for all of the staff, students, and community members of the city of Tonawanda. We are putting much thought, purpose, and meaning into how diversity, equity, and inclusion impact each member of our district. In short, start the journey.

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