



TEAM Westport Meeting Minutes
March 7, 2017 8:00 AM
Room 309, Westport Town Hall, Westport, CT

Attendees: Harold Bailey (Presiding), Ramin Ganeshram, Catherine Onyemelukwe, Sarah Heath, Susan Ellis, Maggie Mudd, Bernicestine McLeod, Steve Daniels, Judy Hamer, Zoe Tarrant, Althea Seaborn, and Stephane Kirven

Guests: Bill Harmer (Westport Library Director), Dr. Colleen Palmer (Superintendent, Westport Public Schools), Savitri Horrigan, Candace Banks, Anne Spencer, Jaina Shaw, Jennifer Keller, Catherine Lewis, Karen Kleine, Dave Matlow (Westportnow.com), and Aryan Shayegani

The meeting was called to order at 8:06 AM.

Attendees introduced themselves.

Approval of Minutes: Catherine O. moved that we approve the minutes of our February 7, 2017 meeting as amended. Judy seconded the motion. The motion passed and the minutes will be posted.

Education:

Superintendent Colleen Palmer reinforced Westport's educational goals: 1) to be purposeful in ensuring that our students see the global world and 2) to have a healthy learning environment for students and staff. There is a natural intersection for us to work together.

Challenges related to TEAM Westport's mission were discussed:

It is difficult for students to have role models within Westport who are of color. We are addressing the fact that we have so few staff and faculty members of color. Our messaging has changed and we are communicating more strongly that we are an inclusive work place and a place of learning.

There is an overall shortage of teachers in the state of CT. Even urban districts struggle. The job of teaching can be grueling and isolating. Our district is reaching out more to our teachers to provide support.

Question: When issues of race come up, how do we ensure that parents and teachers are all on the same page? There is concern that we are operating from a base of "color blindness" when, in fact, we all do see color and should acknowledge that we do.

Response: Give teachers tools as to how to have that conversation. If we do not talk about race we can do more harm than good. However, we tend not to say anything. We would like to think some teachers have those conversations, but not all do. We may never have student diversity, but we can reach out to have relationships with students of different backgrounds in other communities. When we do philanthropic deeds, we always do it for minorities. There's nothing wrong with that, but what if we had a partnership academically so we can see that kids in other communities are as smart as we are?

Question: Is there a person on staff who is responsible for diversity?

Response: Diversity is everyone's business and should be that of anyone who deals with people. There is some professional development with that in mind, but it is limited. Most private schools have a lead person to inform the curriculum and staff about diversity. It would help to have a lead person; however, we have to be creative and innovative in light of budget cuts. A suggestion might be to designate a representative from each school who might want to be involved.

Question: How can TEAM Westport help with that strategy?



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Response: We should elicit thoughts and suggestions via a focus group with answers to the questions: 1) what are we not doing, 2) what do you want to expand, 3) what do you want to get rid of?

Observations: Judy stated that teachers of color in an environment like Westport face barriers in getting together with each other and thus potentially are not able to obtain true support. There is no support network for teachers who are of color so the clear message is that you are not expected to be here. If there are 1 or 2 such teachers in a large group, they try to figure out how to function. If they are unable to figure things out, they leave. Susan said that 20 or 30 years ago the state played a role in training mentors for new teachers. However, that has changed.

Reaction: Overall, teachers leave and it's more and more difficult to recruit new teachers particularly in a place like Westport. Teachers can't afford to live here so they live far away and have to commute. People are not going into education. 1/3 of our teachers are retiring in the next 10 years. Teaching is not respected in our society as in Finland. Locally, we do take good care of people. However, in light of budget cuts, we'll continue to see the trends we are seeing now. We have to be creative and tap all resources at hand. We are conducting exit interviews to get a handle on what our teachers who are leaving have experienced.

During the conversation with Superintendent Palmer, Savitri shared some of her work at the UConn School of Social Work where she is a student and will email that to those interested. Aryan shared a program – to be hosted by the Building Bridges Club of Staples on April 1st – to help in understanding the world as global citizens should. A video was created highlighting similarities between our community and those in the Middle East.

Programming:

- 1. Essay contest:** Harold gave a recap of the past month: we have received all of the essays for the Teen Diversity Essay Contest – a record number. Essays will be emailed to the judges. We are still looking for sponsors. We have support from many town institutions and organizations. Harold appeared on Michael Smerconish's show on CNN on Saturday, February 11th, in addition to other media coverage to discuss the essay contest.
- 2. The Westport Library Partnership:** We welcomed Director of the Westport Library, Bill Harmer. He spent several minutes outlining Library-TEAM Westport partnership history and potential. Overall, he reaffirmed his intent to move forward with an even stronger bond into the future. The Library has been a proud partner of the Essay Contest since its inception. Also, it is the place where we have hosted conversations involving the community. Bill and the Library staff are currently gearing up for hosting our April 3rd essay contest awards ceremony as in the past. It will be a nice event and invitations will be sent out to our guest list including officials and institutions within town. We are planning for press attendance, as well.

Other TEAM Westport programming at the Library:

We have reserved dates at the Westport Library at intervals of every 6 weeks for frequent conversations about current topics. Expected topics are political correctness, color blindness, and micro-aggression. Maggie and Althea are coordinating these. The next one is tentatively scheduled for April 23rd or May 26th.



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The book group follow-on to our January 22nd session at the Library (“What Do We Tell Our Children about Race”) will be held on March 25th at the Library. Zoe and Catherine L. are coordinating these sessions. The book being discussed this time is: The New Jim Crow by Michelle Alexander.

3. **Playhouse:** *The Pianist at Willesden Lane* will be performed at the Playhouse April 5th – April 9th. On March 29th at 7PM, a survivor of the Kindertransport will speak at the Playhouse hosted by ADL. TEAM Westport is a co-sponsor of this event.
4. **ADL:** “Confessions of a Skinhead” featuring a former member of the Skinheads will be held tomorrow evening March 8th at The Conservative Synagogue, \$18 per person. Attendance is anticipated to be strong. TEAM Westport is a co-sponsor of this event.
5. **Conversation: What Do We Tell Our Children?:** Catherine L. and Zoe presented to the PTA Council on March 1st. It was a very productive session that reached parents directly. A great discussion took place.
6. **New Events:**
 - Aryan gave additional details re: event. The Building Bridges Club of Staples will hold a fundraiser on April 1st. A video will be shown and a panel will present. The purpose is to provide knowledge about the Middle East to Westporters. It was recommended that this club should communicate with the TEAM Staples group.
 - We should consider co-hosting discussions in other towns/cities via joint programs.
 - Jeff Pegues will participate in a program on June 8th with Chief Koskinas.

The meeting was adjourned at 10AM.

The next meeting will be held on Tuesday, April 4th at 8AM in Room 309 at Westport Town Hall.

Respectfully submitted,

Bernicestine McLeod
Secretary