



## TEAM Westport Meeting Minutes Tuesday, September 10, 2019 Westport Town Hall, Room 309, Westport, CT

**Attendees:** Ramin Ganeshram, Zoe Tarrant, Maggie Mudd, Judy Hamer, Alison Patton, Catherine Onyemelukwe, Catherine Lewis, Susan Ellis, Steve Daniels, Elaine D'Aignault, Althea Seaborn, Lauren Francese (Westport Schools), Rebecca Marsick (Staples High School)

**Guests:** Keri Jockers (Bedford Middle School), Dr. David Abbey (Interim Superintendent, Westport Schools), Carol Martin (Westport Housing Authority), Jacob Santos (Westport Country Playhouse), Ann Palmer, Brett Aronow, Ted Gilman

The meeting was called to order at 8:03AM.

**Approval of Minutes:** Catherine Onyemelukwe moved that the minutes from our July 2<sup>nd</sup> meeting be approved. Ramin seconded the motion. The vote was unanimous; the minutes were approved and will be posted accordingly.

Harold welcomed everyone to this first meeting after the summer break.

### Schools/ Strategic Planning / Staples/ Board of Education

Dr. Abbey spoke in general about professional development teacher information sessions with respect to race held within the school system just before school opened. Plans are being formulated for similar sessions for administrators this year.

- He also said that soon we would have news about the process for selecting a new superintendent. Normally the board hires a search firm and gathers information from the community via surveys and focus groups. TEAM Westport would like to have some part in that process.
- Dr. Abbey corrected his statement at the last meeting that there are 34 teachers of color in the Westport Schools. Some were double recorded. We have about 30 instead and still have work to do. For the first time, we have an African American male teacher in one of the elementary schools. He is pleased with the eagerness of principals to make more progress.

**Action:** Dr. Abbey will give us a breakdown of the numbers by school (teachers and administrators).

- Catherine Lewis asked, "How do we retain?" Dr. Abbey replied that 1) if we do a good job with making individuals feel supported, they'll want to stay; 2) if enrollment is declining, it's a different situation since we have to cut. We can take a variety of factors into account including diversity when making decisions about cutting. Some factors have to do with the negotiated agreement and tenure.
- Question: Contracts and processes we can touch and feel, but how do you take microaggressions into account? If students are experiencing it, teachers of color are experiencing it. Are there exit interviews, for example, to see how teachers feel when they leave or are cut? The district does not do exit interviews now, but that may be a good idea. When people of color are interviewed, they are enthusiastic about coming in and think the district has a good reputation and want to be here. However, when they come, things can happen. We need sources for feedback about experiences while we are working on other fronts to minimize issues.

### **Lauren reported the following:**

- Connections (small groups of students with a teacher and counselors meeting twice a week) was launched at Staples. Rebecca is coordinating professional development at Staples now and so looks at what happens with team building, building rapport, and the curriculum.
- Rebecca circulated books at the meeting that she is using at Staples to raise awareness and knowledge about diversity. They also include several of the professional development texts recommended by Lauren to Social Studies teachers. (See list at end of these minutes.)



## TEAM Westport Meeting Minutes Tuesday, September 10, 2019 Westport Town Hall, Room 309, Westport, CT

- Just before school opened, the ADL (Marji Lipshez-Shapiro and Darlene Alvarez Maddern) provided case study-based information sessions for teachers for 3 hours using content about actual situations at Staples with respect to race and ethnicity. This was a beginning. The sessions evoked conversations about how to handle issues that come up. The teachers were open and were informed that the term “safe space” may not work for students from marginalized groups who may not feel safe. The talk now is to use the term “brave spaces”. The teachers discussed strategies and different approaches from a position of positive reinforcement of good things to do – not overly emphasizing the negativity of situations. Now they will work with the administrative team to see what the next steps will be including some sessions for the administrators. The middle school, thus far, has had no sessions for teachers. We can now think about sessions for our middle school teachers as well.
- Equity access book clubs are starting for Social Studies teachers – grades 6-12. These groups were formed to allow dialog and discussion recognizing that teachers have input over their own professional development. A student recently presented curriculum work on LGBTQ issues to great effect as teachers proactively listened and absorbed.
- There is a new state mandate for the teaching of African American, Puerto Rican, and LatinX history courses in CT high schools. We’ll need a plan, budget, and resources for those courses and will need consulting in the district to do so in a thoughtful way.
- Some of the panels from the *Remembered* exhibit will be installed at Staples.
- In addition, a “teaching gallery” is to be installed with art from the Westport Art Collection whose themes match curriculum topics. For example, pieces by Tracy Sugarman will be available so that students can make connections with the Civil Rights movement. Maggie offered that for the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 1619 project, teachers are using outside materials. Property documents can be scanned from the Remembered exhibit by Ramin and given to Lauren for use.
- At the high school, the 10<sup>th</sup> grade social studies curriculum is being reviewed. Also, Michele Cerino (Literacy Coordinator for PreK-5) is now reviewing that social studies curriculum. Zoe expressed a concern that work is primarily being done at the high school where kids are more empowered. Several members around the table agreed that work needs to be done with the younger children and that teachers need to be equipped to handle whatever needs to be done.

Action: Lauren will speak with Dr. Buono about professional development time for the middle school teachers given the added complexity currently due to the combined middle school and the fact that much of the available professional development time was front-loaded this year.

- Judy asked if there is an opportunity for the teachers to meet on an ad hoc basis to talk about what they are hearing and how they are handling situations in order to arrive at best practices. Principal Thomas and Lauren will review the feedback from the current sessions with the teachers and commit to continue to get feedback from the staff and the community.
- Brett mentioned sessions provided at The Center for Racial Justice on the elementary school level. She recommended that a budget line item should exist since it is so important to do have everyone understand true history every year. People have not had the history.

### **TEAM Westport Book Club / PTA Micro-Aggressions / PTA Parent Updates**

- Ultimately the community must work with the Board of Education to reinforce community needs and desires. TEAM Westport can facilitate that process. Currently, we are trying to increase the consciousness of what’s happening in the schools with respect to race. That, however, is very difficult since, in general, we as a community do not see or acknowledge that there may be problems. The PTA Council has agreed to support by designating PTA reps at each school who will come to meetings and work collectively on TEAM Westport’s mission with respect to the schools. Other



## TEAM Westport Meeting Minutes Tuesday, September 10, 2019 Westport Town Hall, Room 309, Westport, CT

areas of focus have active parents, so why not TEAM Westport. This suggestion came from a parent at one of the parent sessions Zoe and Catherine L. are conducting. This working subcommittee for the schools comprised of the PTA reps, TEAM Westport members, school representatives, and other interested parties will meet to talk about school issues – allowing more granularity and more leverage. The reports will come through our monthly TEAM Westport meeting. This is a very encouraging step.

- The next parent meeting will most likely take place in October.
- TEAM Westport is referenced (but not by name) in the book The Person YOU Mean to Be by Dolly Chugh.
- Alison mentioned Brene Brown's work as an anti-racist trainer. She is a professor at the University of Houston and some of her books are Dare to Lead: Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts. and Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone.

### **Westport Historical Society:**

Ramin announced all the state and national awards the WHS has received – one most recently in Philadelphia – for *Remembered: The History of African Americans in Westport* that closed on June 30<sup>th</sup>. The current exhibit is: *Taking the Cure: Public Health 1880-1960* which talks about sanitoriums and mentions how marginalized people have been used for experimentation. Another exhibit, *Becoming Westport*, is also opening in September.

- If the TEAM Westport Book club needs a space, the WHS can still be used.
- The WHS board now has three board members of color including the Treasurer.
- The WHS Benefit event will be held on September 28<sup>th</sup>.

**Policing:** The department hired three officers who were sworn in on August 22<sup>nd</sup> – Shawn Booth, Jamar Edwards, and Hon Luong. We are excited about their coming to Westport. Note: Two of the officers are 'of color'.

- This coming Thursday Ken Barone, who keeps track of police stops in the state, will meet with Chief Koskinas.

### **Housing Authority:**

Carol Martin stated that most of the affluent suburbs are wrestling with the same things with respect to affordable housing. Affordable housing does help push diversity. Meanwhile, the disparity between median income and housing costs is getting worse. However, we can fix it and it takes a village to do so. We can't give up.

- Carol met with a group including Jim Marpe, Elaine D'Aignault, Harold Bailey, Jeff Weiser and others after the July TEAM Westport meeting. A representative from the P&Z (Planning and Zoning) was there as well. Although Westport has met the 830G moratorium goals, we should realize that there is still a dire need for affordable housing. Land costs and land use regulations block our ability, however, to supply more units.
- One viable option is to look at state or town-controlled properties that may have some possibility.
- The Connecticut Housing Authority is now the Affordable Housing Coalition and Carol is the President. They will be meeting next Thursday, September 19<sup>th</sup> at 10 or 10:30AM, and we are invited to attend. Gov. Lamont will be there in the AM. There will be further conversations about how essential affordable housing is.
- Alison stated that the Open Communities Alliance wants to buy land in Fairfield County to use for affordable housing and to not be dependent upon private owners or public land.
- Carol stated that there are also attempts to remove a restriction where families who have housing vouchers must stay in the communities where the vouchers are issued. This may not help Westport since the gap between HUDs cap and fair market rent here is still a problem. Overt discrimination is still a barrier across the region; however, the voucher gap is used to couch discrimination since "the numbers do not match".
- Elaine mentioned the Fair Housing Center (Gail Kelley is our newly named agent) where housing complaints can be reported. Free legal representation is available.



**TEAM Westport Meeting Minutes**  
**Tuesday, September 10, 2019**  
**Westport Town Hall, Room 309, Westport, CT**

**Library Partnership / Coming Events:** Professor Ibram X. Kendi's appearance on August 27<sup>th</sup> (one of his first stops on his tour for his new book How to Be an Anti-Racist) was postponed because of a conflict with the Levitt Pavilion's fundraiser featuring Pat Benatar. We share the same parking areas. We are working on rescheduling – most likely in the spring – when Dr. Kendi's book with Jason Reynolds for young adults should be available.

- The 2<sup>nd</sup> annual Saugatuck Story Fest is being held on September 26<sup>th</sup>, 27<sup>th</sup>, and 28<sup>th</sup>. Over 60 authors will be here and most of the programming is free. A student planning committee for Story Fest included Staples as well as Bassick and Harding High Schools in Bridgeport.
- David Blight, Director of the Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition at Yale University and author of Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom, will appear at the Library on December 5<sup>th</sup>.
- The Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. celebration will be held on January 19<sup>th</sup>, 2020 at the Playhouse. Carol Anderson, professor of African American Studies at Emory University and author of White Rage and One Person, No Vote and co-author with Tonya Bolden of a Young Adult book entitled We are Not Yet Equal: Understanding Our Racial Divide, will be our keynote speaker. Since 2019 is also the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Women's Suffrage, Professor Anderson's appearance here will be co-sponsored by a number of other groups in Town beyond the traditional MLK event sponsors. Her scholarship is particularly meaningful since in 2019 we are still seeing evidence of voter suppression as we approach our 2020 election cycle.
- The Equity Lab is coming. We are looking at Project Implicit as a potential tool to benchmark individual attitudes about race and to monitor results.
- On October 17<sup>th</sup>, Elaine Weiss, author of The Woman's Hour, will be here. She is appearing in observance of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment (women's suffrage). That struggle was prominent. We hope she will also talk about the race divide within the movement and how black women lost out.

**Playhouse:** Michael Barker had hoped to be here at this meeting, but the Playhouse gala is this coming Saturday night.

- Jacob Santos, Michael's assistant for the next year and a managing director fellow at the Playhouse through the Newman's Own Foundation 2019-2020 Fellowship Program, reported that Lynn Nottage (the playwright for *Mlima's Tale* and a two-time Pulitzer Prize winner) will be appearing in an interview with Mark Lamos on September 29<sup>th</sup> at 4PM at the Playhouse. *Mlima's Tale* will run from October 1<sup>st</sup> thru the 19<sup>th</sup>. Mark Lamos is directing this magical play.
- *The Little Mermaid* (a Broadway Method Academy production) just ended at the Playhouse. The production, featuring a Mermaid who was of-color, did extremely well. Kids attending the performance were dressed as Ariel. Other productions will be coming. This is important for children to see.
- Jacob's presence at the Playhouse fits in with their stated strategy of having a more diverse workforce and, thus, a more diverse future.

**Interfaith Council / Clergy / MLK (see Library Partnership above for MLK):** Alison reported the following –

- Andrew Young will be in town on October 15<sup>th</sup> at 7:30PM at Temple Israel.
- On December 7<sup>th</sup>, an Interfaith Concert will feature Billy Jones who is committed to composing 12 songs in 12 months about equity, inclusion, and peace. This concert will be in place of the Interfaith Thanksgiving this year.
- A theology class is being held every Tuesday from 11AM-12 noon on an ongoing basis. Alison was involved earlier this year in classes on how theology and racism overlap.

**Other Business:**

**The Essay Contest.** We discussed some possibilities for topics. Any suggestions should be sent to Susan Ellis. Rana Hafiz has produced an excellent podcast featuring this year's Essay Contest winners. Susan highly recommends it to all.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:43AM.



**TEAM Westport Meeting Minutes**  
**Tuesday, September 10, 2019**  
**Westport Town Hall, Room 309, Westport, CT**

The next meeting will be held on Tuesday, October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019 in Room 201 of Town Hall.

Respectfully submitted,

Bernicestine E. McLeod  
Secretary

---

**Recommended Book List from Rebecca Marsick:**

- How To Be An Anti-Racist by Ibram X. Kendi
- So You Want To Talk About Race by Ijeoma Oluo
- We Are Not Yet Equal by Carol Anderson
- I Was Their American Dream by Malaka Gharib
- Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz
- Queer: A Graphic History by Meg-John Barker and Julia Scheele