



TEAM Westport Meeting Minutes Tuesday, March 3, 2020 Westport Town Hall, Room 201, Westport, CT

Attendees: Harold Bailey (Presiding), Bernicestine McLeod, Maggie Mudd, Judy Hamer, Catherine Lewis, Alison Patton, Althea Seaborn, Elaine Daignbault, Catherine Onyemelukwe, Jim Marpe (First Selectman), Zoe Tarrant, and Dolores Paoli

Guests: Danielle Dobin (P&Z Chair), Foti Koskinas (Chief, Westport Police), Sam Arciola (Deputy Chief, Westport Police), Danielle Teplica, Lee Goldstein (Board of Education), Lauren Francese (Westport Schools), Rebecca Marsick (Staples High School), Sereniti Dobson (Sergeant, Westport Police), Jacob Santos (Westport Playhouse), Faith Sweeney (Coleytown Elementary School), Jennifer Tooker (Westport Second Selectman), Youn Su Chao (Board of Education), Candace Banks, David Mann (Sustainable Westport), Robie Spector, Lita Robinson (Parent), David Abbey (Interim Superintendent, Westport Schools), Sonya Jagenberg (Parent), Keri Jockers (Bedford Middle School), and Tausha Bridgeforth (Staples High School)

The meeting was called to order at 8:10 AM.

Introductions

Welcome:

- Harold started by discussing the letter (see Attachment 1) written by a Staples student to *Westport Now* on February 14th that describes racism experienced by the school's students of color – a topic about which we are well aware, particularly after several years of essays submitted via our annual TEAM Westport Essay Contest.
- Harold also reported that he presented a statement (see Attachment 2) to the Board of Education at their meeting last night about long-standing racism and microaggressions in our school system exhibited by hurtful remarks and insensitivity that we as a community need to acknowledge, understand, and address proactively.

Schools/Strategic Planning/Staples/Board of Ed:

- Harold gave a brief history of the letter:
 - Friday, February 14th, the letter came out on the last day of school before the school's Winter Vacation. It appeared in *WestportNow* and was also sent to the head of the NAACP for Connecticut.
 - During vacation week and shortly thereafter, discussions ensued yielding the following:
 - 1) First and foremost, Principal Stafford Thomas was concerned that the student who wrote the letter might receive "blowback" from other students and the community and did not want that to happen.
 - 2) Since November, s
 - 3) tudents at Staples had been planning a program, with the Administration's approval and involvement, to present and to raise awareness about diversity. They were working with the Library and other organizations as well. This is scheduled to take place in March spanning 4 weeks.
 - Monday, February 24th, was the first actionable discussion about the letter since nothing concrete could happen while students, administrators, teachers, and parents were away.
 - Tuesday, February 25th, the heads of the Norwalk NAACP, the Stamford NAACP, and the Fairfield County's Community Foundation (each accompanied by officers and staff members) met with Principal Thomas, Dr. David Abbey, and Harold and Bernicestine (representing TEAM Westport). Each of these external organizations has offered assistance in whatever way helpful. Some have also probed to gain access to the students. Westport cannot and will not facilitate this request. This is not our role because of student/family privacy. However, Westport will follow up on the resources and recommendations offered by this group including speaking with Brien McMahon High School in Norwalk about their group created in response to similar concerns by students.
 - Current situation: The administrators, mainly Principal Thomas, have resumed talking with the students – still planning the March program. The students have also identified what they would like the administrators,



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teachers, and staff to know about their experiences at Staples along with suggestions as to how to improve the environment. There are students who are well integrated into life at Staples; others are not. It has been that way for decades. Principal Thomas expressed in his February 14th letter to the community that he has been working on changing the atmosphere and culture at Staples, but he still has much work to do. The statement about Mr. Thomas in the letter was not actually the way the students in general feel about him. He continues to be concerned about what is right for the students moving forward.

As a follow on, TEAM Westport members will meet with TEAM Staples at one of their upcoming meetings since they are a part of our structure.

- Interim Superintendent David Abbey emphasized:

- 1) how important it is to have a community organization with which to work such as TEAM Westport.
- 2) He talked a bit more about having to be careful about who can come into the schools to talk to students and in a case such as this, parents and guardians must be involved. During the fall swastika incident, external groups did not come into the schools. He is not equating that issue with this one – other than to give an example of a situation where students might have been interviewed by outside groups.
- 3) It is so important that we have a principal who has hit the ground running. Yesterday Principal Thomas spoke with the faculty about implicit bias and microaggressions which, to our knowledge, had never been done before. He is committed and has the talent to do this, but he needs community support while seizing the opportunity to move things forward.
- 4) We have to figure out a way to gauge progress and cannot have dueling narratives. We must gather info systematically by speaking with students, faculty, and parents. A climate study was conducted last year and will be again in May. It was calibrated on a district wide basis (grades 3-12). We have info for all of the questions with respect to racial groups. The suggestion is that we take a look at the results and determine from those how we make progress going forward. We should know where we are now, how to gauge progress, and in what areas.
- 5) TEAM Westport has come up with a framework for making progress. Dr. Abbey stated that he may not agree with all of the suggestions and the school system may have some of their own to contribute. However, the framework is good.
- 6) Dr. Abbey is following up on the suggestions of the NAACP and is meeting with Juanita James from Fairfield County's Community Foundation. Principal Thomas has spoken with Brien McMahon as recommended. A caveat: it is important to keep up the dialog and Lauren and Rebecca are doing so on a continuing basis. Dr. Abbey does not want to undermine anyone in the District. [Catherine L. to Dr. Abbey: your voice is important to say that there is a problem and that there is a lot of work to be done.]
- 7) When asked about the Middle School, Dr. Abbey has spoken to Lauren and to Dr. Buono about that curriculum pointing out that things must change. The Superintendent focuses more on the high school, but we do need to look at K-8. For example, there is no systematic approach to Black History Month now. Many teachers are afraid to confront race. We are not color blind. TEAM Westport has proposed that there be someone responsible for "diversity" at the top and a team in each building.
- 8) There have been incidents at the elementary level, but the schools have stepped up with a session: *Raising Race Conscious Children* to help address issues young children are facing even at the age of 3. It is important to name issues and narrate them. We have to ask ourselves if we are looking at all perspectives when we are thinking about issues or even while reading. We need more diverse books available to our students. A month is not long enough; however, there is no coordinated effort now.
- 9) We need years of ongoing training for our teachers. Discussions are now taking place between the students and teachers via Connections. We are not defending that everything is under control. We do need



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training; however, we need to hire teachers that are of color. Last spring, we hired an African American male at the elementary level. His involvement has already prompted positive discussion with the students. In January, Westport joined a State Department of Education committee looking at increasing the numbers of teachers with color by developing a Workforce Diversity Plan. Other communities include Ellington, Groton, and Hartford. John Bayers is coming to our April TEAM Westport meeting to talk about this work. The Connecticut Education Association is also working on the problem. We need to change the framework and make it work. For example, we need to look at the “Last Hired First Fired” policy. Training is a direct result. - Jim Marpe observed that Westport is not even approaching the goal line of seeing change manifested and that this is a commitment for administrations for a long time to come for a problem that won’t go away with short term initiatives. For many, it is a change of mind-set and culture. An Asian American man was harassed at the beach because of the Coronavirus indicating that this is a town-wide problem that is not confined to the schools; but the schools are the best place to address this. He is personally committed. We need to work and double-down and be creative. He thanks TEAM Westport. It’s an ongoing challenge, but we are not giving up.

- [Danielle D. recommended that future training in the schools involve nurses and front-office staff – in fact, everyone in the building. She recounted a troubling incident she witnessed in one of the schools where a parent was addressed and treated as if she were a caregiver for her child and not her child’s mother.]

- [Judy: Climate surveys are fabulous but what you do with them is important. Also, people have to be held responsible, so it has to be included in their review and their paycheck. Try to get as many people as possible to take the survey. It is critical to gather information that is beyond anecdotal to be able to chart needs. This survey goes to parents, but it does not disaggregate parents on an ethnic basis.]

- [Zoe: How can we complete the equity analysis for the school system? The conversation is ongoing. We hope to have a new superintendent who is committed to getting this accomplished as well as the Board of Education (BOE). This is an equity-informed school climate survey. This requires curriculum time for data collection from a lot of people including outside resources such as, possibly, the REE center out of Hartford. Also, a certain amount of funding needs to be earmarked.]

- [Keri: Training is needed for every teacher and all of the adults in the system including paraprofessionals and bus drivers. The TEAM Westport essays were shared with the Language Arts teachers last year.]

- [Catherine L: As white people, we have a lot of work to do. Even though we think we’re “woke”, we’re not. We are not trying to shame anyone, but to enable people to support and to become better allies. On March 28th, there is a panel in Stamford “So You Want to Talk About Race”.

- [Tausha substantiated the reports outlined in the letter and stated that she hears from the students of color frequently. She personally talks to children in tears who are being treated badly by their peers. Microaggressions abound. There is no real outlet or person to listen to them and to hear them.]

- [General comment: The way Open Choice is presented in the schools, “majority” students are not prohibited from saying negative stuff about the program and they get away with it. However, comments trickle down to the students from the teachers. It is difficult for white teachers to teach about the program and its participants, so we need to get input and have it presented correctly to the school community.]

- [Alison: Training IS necessary; however, professional help is also available. The clergy can be a support to those who are on the front lines and carrying the torch.]

PTA Micro-Aggressions/PTA Parent Updates/TW Book Club

- Lauren reported that since the course to cover African American/Latinx history is being written by the State Educational Resource Center (SERC), she would like to form focus groups to provide input as the course proceeds. Lauren presented to the Teaching & Learning Committee of the Board of Education in January



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about the requirement to go to global training. This course will be a non-leveled course like the Area Studies program that is currently offered.

- Jen Tooker, who is still involved with SERC, stated that the core of the work of that group is to build out approaches and that, if we need anything, to contact her.
 - A TEAM Westport parent meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, March 10th at 7pm at the Library.
- Essay Contest:** We received 32 essays. The announcement ceremony with the winners is scheduled for April 2nd in the Forum at the Library. This should be a tremendous event as we gather in our new venue.

Policing: We shall get an update at our next meeting.

MLK/Clergy: We are still working on a trip for members of our community to Montgomery, AL, and The Equal Justice Initiative – currently scheduled to take place from October 17th-21st. The details and our publicity plan are being worked out, but we are most likely targeting 50 or so participants. Additional trips can be created in the future if we are over-subscribed. Stay tuned for the announcements.

Westport Library: On Tuesday, March 17th at 7pm, Judy and Bernicestine will have a conversation in Brooke Place (at the Library) with Maisy Card about her novel, These Ghosts are Family.

Westport Museum: We shall have a report next time.

Playhouse:

- Jacob has shared that the letter written by the Staples student describes what he went through when he was in high school. In college, he and other students of color organized a group to address these issues. Jacob, on behalf of this group, has offered support to the students at Staples if desired.
- On March 28th, the Playhouse kicks off its season with an “Open House” event including an after party from 5-7pm. *Next to Normal* is the first production and it will have a cast that is of-color. *Aint Misbehaving* and *Under an Alabama Sky* follow. This season has of-color cast members in just about every production except *Tiny House*. Also, color-conscious casting has become more standard.
- The Playhouse just conducted a diversity training session for Board members.

Affordable Housing: The letter to the State DOT Commissioner inquiring about possible use of a specific site of state-owned land in Westport for affordable housing received a ‘No’ response. Another plot was suggested as a possible alternative; however, the Town would rather not use this area since it conflicts with the Governor’s task force’s directive to put affordable housing near transportation. We shall continue to pursue, though, preferably by meeting in person.

The goal is to create living places for families – not single apartments – (3 bedrooms that are close to transportation and accessible). The Affordable Housing subcommittee of the P&Z has met 12 times and has accomplished a lot despite the NIMBYs. P&Z has made available offsite affordable housing so that all the units built in a complex, for example, can be affordable versus only a percentage. P&Z has also derestricted small houses to be used for affordable housing.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:50AM.

The next meeting will be held on Tuesday, April 7, 2020, in Room 201 at Westport Town Hall.

Respectfully submitted,

Bernicestine McLeod
Secretary



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Attachment 1

Westport Now

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 14, 2020

Letter: Racism at Staples

To the Editor:

I am Niah Michel. I am a senior at Staples High School in Westport. I am emailing you on behalf of the black community of Staples High School and racial issues that occur at this high school.

We as a community feel as if we are nothing to this school. We are treated poorly from the rest of the students, and we are reminded everyday that we are not white. Not only does the black community feel like this but so does the Latino community of Staples.

We have expressed how we felt to many adults in the building but yet we haven't had any answers. The district hired Stafford Thomas as our principal for the Images, meaning he was only really out there to show that Staples looks diverse.

Our school only has one colored male teacher, a colored female Social Studies concierge and black principal. The black people at Staples only make up 2%.

Although some black people live in Westport, we are always asked "if we live in Bridgeport," "If this is our real hair," "If we can give out the Ni**a or Ni**er" pass.

Several guidance counselors have told the Hispanics females at school "they couldn't wear the same outfits as the white girls because we had too much to show."

Not once this month has it been mentioned that it's black history month over the morning announcements.

In the year of 2019, Principal D'Amico stripped away all our chairs and tables in the lobby so we wouldn't sit there anymore.

We've tried every way to voice our opinions on how we are being treated at this school. Some of us feel like we're being "held in prison for punishment." No one listens to us and we want change.

Please help us voice our opinions and seek awareness to this situation.

Niah Michel (17)
Westport



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Attachment 2

Statement from TEAM Westport Chair to the Westport Board of Education
March 2, 2020

The school environment reflected in the student letter published on February 14 in WestportNow.com entitled “Racism at Staples” is in synch with the environment described by Westport children of families of color over the past few decades including my own. More recently, the description was corroborated in the Teen Diversity Essays submitted in 2017 and 2019 as well as the Staples student podcast recognized by NPR last year. Specifically, from Diversity Essays to incidents to inputs from students and parents over decades, we have a common problem described which spans race, ethnicity, religion and LGBTQ.

That is a problem that we share with our state and the nation. However, the fact that similar problems exist in school systems with Westport’s demographics statewide and nationwide is neither comfort nor excuse. An environment which enables racial or other slights of this type for any of its students is wholly unacceptable and certainly antithetical to the values of this Town.

Effective Global Citizenship demands an ability to navigate the world with genuine respect for people and cultures that are different from one’s own. While our primary focus must be the students on the receiving end of the aforementioned aggressions, we cannot lose sight of the damage extended to all other students and faculty (whether perpetrator or bystander, intentional or unintentional) who come to see such environments as normal and acceptable.

In that sense, addressing these issues will positively affect every educator in teaching and student in learning effective Global Citizenship.

For the past year and a half, TW has worked with the Westport Schools on developing a framework including Training, Hiring, Curriculum and Staffing which would obviate the potential for such racist, religious and homophobic damage to all students from K through 12.

In his work since coming on board last July, Principal Thomas has developed a vision for Staples which if effectively implemented will address these issues at the high school level. That work has been very positively supported by Interim Superintendent Abbey and the leadership of this Board.

TEAM Westport commits our continued support of the work underway. We will continue to work with students, teachers, administrators and parents within the School System as well as the Town of Westport at large. At the same time, we ask this Board and the Town to designate this work a priority and as such set aside appropriate funding for the new Superintendent to move forward on it expeditiously. This problem must be addressed effectively and addressed swept under the rug. I do **not** want to hear my grandchildren relating the same stories I heard from my children.

Harold Bailey, Jr.
TEAM Westport
March 2, 2020