



**TEAM Westport Meeting Minutes**  
**Thursday, October 21, 2021 at 8AM**  
**Via Zoom**



**Attendees:** Harold Bailey, Jr. (Presiding), Maggie Mudd, Bernicestine McLeod, Zoe Tarrant, Jim Marpe (First Selectman), Catherine Lewis, Ramin Ganeshram (Westport Museum), Stephane Kirven, Judith Hamer, Catherine Onyemelukwe, Lee Goldstein (Westport Board of Education), and Rev. Alison Patton (Saugatuck Congregational Church)

**Guests:** Jenny Nelson (Westport Playhouse), Lynn Scully (Interim Operations Manager, Westport), Tom Scarice (Superintendent, Westport Schools), Brett Aronow, Liz Falk, Kevin Christie, Harris Falk (RTM), Lauren Francese (Curriculum Coordinator Social Studies 6-12, Westport Schools), Abby Gordon-Tolan, Joan Gillman (Staples PTA DEI), Deputy Chief Sam Arciola (Westport Police), Darcy Hicks, Chief Foti Koskinas (Westport Police), Alex Giannini (Westport Library), Faith Sweeney (Coleytown Elementary School), Jill Nadel, Patra Kanchanagom (PTA DEI Co-Chair), Bethany Gugliemino (Westport Playhouse), Rebecca Martin, Trammi Nguyen (Staples PTA DEI Co-Chair), Youn Su Chao (Westport Board of Education), Liz Heyer (Westport Board of Education), Kris Hamlin (RTM), Matt Heiser, Anne Alcyone, Rebecca Marsick (Literacy Coach, Staples High School), Zack Alcyone, Danielle Teplica (Volunteer Director, Friends of TEAM Westport), Thane Grauel, Brian McGunagle (Westport Pride), and Fern Fergus

The meeting was called to order at 8:05AM.

**Welcome – Harold Bailey, Jr.:**

On October 13<sup>th</sup>, the Board of Selectmen (Jim Marpe, First Selectman; Jen Tooker, Second Selectwoman; and Melissa Kane, Third Selectwoman) (BOS) unanimously approved a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) statement for the Town based on actions that have been in process over the past few years. There was nothing included that wasn't already underway in town. This DEI statement is not an aspirational commitment since we've already been doing a lot of this. The central point of this statement is "othering". The important thing is for us to have a whole cloth mentality about "othering" and what needs to happen. We are attacking here any template that is the antithesis of welcoming.

Those who have opposite views don't think we should take any time to discuss anything about DEI because there are "no real incidents". What this Town statement takes on is an environment where the steady drip, drip is always there. We are not assuming everything is bad, but we do need to talk about it.

We now hear of situations in the media where people are coming up with an alternative Holocaust, an alternative Newtown, etc. and saying they did not happen. Instead of enslaved people we have "workers". These same mis-narratives apply to our Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) neighbors. We have to face our environments to move forward which means that everyone should be aware of what-is in order for us to talk through ways to move forward.

Our Essay Contests have been extremely important because they open the door to what our children see that others, including parents, did not know. There are no existing guidelines where TEAM Westport counsels those students entering the contest to write a certain viewpoint. We do get a variety of views that are fact-based. For anyone to say that we are paying kids to write a certain view and that we pay kids to push the view that something needs to be done with respect to DEI is just not the case – NOT the case. Our essays have spanned all topics. Children go through that effort of writing an essay and they each take a chance on voicing their opinions. Just making any accusation as to why they are entering the contest is beyond intimidating and bullying. We will be continuing to support the Essay Contest well into the future. It is wrong to criticize the kids. To say that any essay was not accepted because the entrant went against the grain is incorrect. Some alternative views have won. The important thing re: the essays is the message.



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Messages came through the essays starting in 2017. There is and has been a longstanding problem in our schools and in the “bubble” called Westport. We had dozens of Staples alumni of all backgrounds who came back and told us in individual testimonials about their lack of preparedness to deal with people once they were outside the “bubble”. They were adamant that this needed to be addressed. Superintendent Scarice came in after that. We applaud the rigor that he’s providing around critical thinking and the way we educate our students. We are not just talking about a handful of essays. This is fundamental across the board. It is exciting that over 60 responses from the alumni were not a form letter. In other towns a form letter was circulated that students signed and submitted. Here we received individual testimonies by students about their own experiences. Thank you to Tom for joining us. We are locked at the hip in this work. We championed this work for some time before Tom arrived and are delighted to see that it is going on. Bringing the Futurists to speak, Tom, is a great step forward. There is a lot happening with respect to our schools.

A housekeeping note: we are operating via rules that will allow people from the public to participate. We’ll proceed with TEAM Westport committee members and agenda participants and then open up to public comments at the end of the agenda. We want to make sure we get through the agenda first, since we only have some of our participants for a limited time at the beginning.

**Superintendent / Board of Ed / Staples – Tom Scarice;**

- With respect to communications, school systems partner with their communities all the time. There is no specific playbook for this arena since each community has different areas of focus. The Chief of Police is one of the partners in keeping us moving forward and I appreciate his partnership. Recommendations were presented to me. My responsibility is to make recommendations for the system with the Board and to move forward. I have tried to address the circulation of information on all levels (national, state, and local). This is my job to the Westport schools and community. I wrote a statement to the school community about the term that is being used – Critical Race Theory (CRT) – and defined some of the questions. Angles from these questions come from a national debate – there is a lot of misinformation, but some people are confused. I tried to frame a simple message to define what we are doing on the local level as well as a more extended message. I will be talking with Dan Woog in a podcast that will be posted on Dan’s website. Dan’s questions will try to localize the conversation in order to break through the national conversation. I don’t believe one message will help, but it will clarify. Although we will still disagree, we want to have clarity on what is true and what is not, especially since our school system is being targeted.
- With respect to the Futurists, we have lots of good feedback about Mitchell Weiss, an international thought leader from the Harvard Business School. We here are in the think-tank stage. What is the world now? How insufficient is our thinking for the future? We have moved from an industrial economy to an information economy. Mitchell talks about how public institutions function and how we are moving from situational government to possibility government. The private sector informs public sector development. The military even influences the private sector. How then should we prepare children? When we look at the concept of diversity as in any other discipline, skills and capacities develop when you are problem solving. Diversity is exponential to solving problems versus the “echo chambers” we often find ourselves in. Diversity across demographics and thought is so helpful. We shall continue to explore this arena. Another futurist will visit on Nov 10<sup>th</sup>.
- We’ve held the last day of the Equity Study focusing on Professional Development, Data Systems, and Teaching and Learning. All of this will be folded into the Board of Education (BOE) strategic plan to be voted on and vetted. The report will be made public, possibly at the November 15<sup>th</sup> BOE meeting.

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- The course on African American, Latinx American, and Puerto Rican History has received very positive feedback. I will need to visit it. This class is mandated and was adopted by a State statute. Lauren is involved very much with Social Studies curricula at the national level. Social Studies changed years ago — now incorporating historical thinking skills. My experience was that history is a repository of facts. Now we focus more on iterative thinking skills and HOW to think. This concept transcends the years we have our kids in the system to educate them and is an exciting point.
- Buses still occupy our day discussions, though. To use a trite metaphor, let's compare the system to jumping. In jumping you need to descend first and then leap up. So, in our complex system, we descended before we leapt. We took a step back and lots of stuff happened before and as we were moving forward, including a pandemic and societal changes.

Lauren: The mandate is for local school districts within Connecticut to offer this course. We are piloting along with other towns and cities including Norwalk and Darien. We are also working with leaders in Fairfield County. Possibly over 100 experts have weighed in on the curriculum. It has been a fun adventure to work with Kathy Schager, Rebecca, and Dan in implementing it locally. We are talking to other districts about best practices and what the kids need. This has been a unique experience since our curriculum has not been characteristically developed in this way. We will be presenting information about the class to teachers during Professional Development sessions. The Westport Museum is involved through their black history walking tour of Westport. Students are excited about the history. There is a ton of content and a lot of history; so, it is good that it is a full-year course. At the State level, we'll see other courses in the K-12 curriculum. We'll talk more about those as they are rolled out.

Harold. We have talked about people who have "lived experience" coming to speak with the students. If you are interested in doing so, please reach out to Rebecca.

Rebecca: We are two white women teaching the class, so we want authentic voices. We've had our students talking to the guidance counselors about the course so that they have a good sense of the course and can advise other students accurately. We do want student voices out there.

Lee Goldstein and Liz Heyer when asked for comment: We support what the leadership is doing.

**First Selectman / Messaging Update – Jim Marpe:**

Harold: This is the end of the Marpe era. It was great working with him. We had major achievements and breakthroughs in understanding. We hope to get one more TEAM Westport meeting in before.

Jim: Although we may not get another meeting in before November 15<sup>th</sup>, I intend to attend in the future. Reflecting upon the past, personally, hearing about the essay contests reminds me that was a big part of my personal development. The essays have had an influence on what we have come from to where we are heading. Also, the BOS passed a statement to denounce efforts to divide. That came as a result of moving and passionate statements that came out during our session last week. That brought me back to the essay contests and how our children see things. I think it was the microaggressions topic that was an ah-hah moment for me. There is value in hearing the voices of young people (unprompted). These are words that need to be supported by action. I am proud that in working with all of our town committees that we move forward with equity perspective. I went to the Board of Finance (BOF) meeting last night. A lot of the discussion was on how to advance equity – not in one specific area but how people generally benefit from it. I've spent time with Human Resources. We have a focus on diversity in our hiring practices and we are better preparing ourselves to reach out to those who might not respond to a job posting. I listened to the first part of the Mitchell Weiss presentation and was taken by governmental possibilities to make a difference. Having spent my real career in the private sector, I found myself talking about this at the BOF. It



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is a natural progression to look at the possibilities of success and to take an entrepreneurial approach regarding the Town and the Schools. I thank Harold and the TEAM Westport core group. This tells me something about the community. We are dedicated to action. Its about everything we do. I am grateful that we've expanded our reach and impact. Now we are leaping forward. Thank you for your support and for including me and allowing me to learn a lot. Harold: Thanks again, Jim. We still must schedule our ceremony around the new plaques in Town.

**Policing – Chief Foti Koskinas:**

- Thank you for assistance in recruiting for the force. These are difficult times. What we are seeing at the national level is at the local, too, for recruitment and employment. We have found people and thought we were giving them an opportunity, but it has not panned out.
- We have more Food Drives soon to benefit Homes With Hope here and with the NAACP in Norwalk.
- At noon today, we are presenting a webinar along with public health exploring over-policing within minority groups. Charles T. Brown is the main speaker. We are hoping to learn from it.
- We've worked with the RTM to codify through ordinance whether we should have a Civilian Review Board or a Civilian Review Panel. This will most likely wait for the new RTM. I can't emphasize the importance of TEAM Westport to continue. We want to continue to work with you.

**Affordable Housing – Danielle Dobin:** No Update

**Interfaith Clergy – Rev. Alison Patton:**

- On Tuesday, November 9<sup>th</sup> (7-8p), Kristallnacht will be held at Saugatuck Church. Rabbis Michael Friedman and Jeremy Wiederhorn initiated this program for their youth. We are inviting attendees from the synagogues and other youth and the public. Rabbi Wiederhorn just confirmed recently and we will have the details later.
  - The Interfaith Clergy has been in conversation in support of the Equity Study and the ongoing work and outcome of the Equity Study. We discussed how to provide spaces for thoughtful conversation for those who are wrestling with the implications or who have not been doing this work all along.
- Harold: It's all of us together looking at the overall pattern of inclusion. If there is someone who does not understand the pain, why don't they? We have to enter into discussions in a good faith way. We need to arrive at the terms and define what we mean. The tools and rules of engagement for dialog need to be in place. We want to be able to discuss without going off into vague polemics and name calling about general categories. A specific topic at hand is addressing the intersection of racism and anti-Semitism – how they intersect and how to address and navigate them.
- We will most likely announce our program for our January Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. celebration at our next TEAM Westport meeting. We are working on bringing everything into place.

**TW Parent Updates / Community – Catherine Lewis and Zoe Tarrant:**

- Our next parent workgroup meeting will be held on Tuesday, October 26<sup>th</sup> from 7-8:30p. We'll use real life examples about how we talk with our children about difficult conversations. We keep encouraging dialog and how to have hard conversations and we talk about what is happening in our society to prepare them for our global environment.
- From 7-8:30p on November 16<sup>th</sup> and December 14<sup>th</sup>, we'll start a book discussion of The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together by Heather McGhee. We are developing our thinking and our understanding of history. She is an amazing writer and brings together the concept of us being a fairer society for all people when we talk about equity. We hope to see as many as possible in October and in November/December.



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**Westport Museum of History and Culture – Ramin Ganeshram:**

- We are continuing to do the work. We have hosted 2 classes from Staples for the walking tour.
- The Museum is now open, but you have to book a time slot due to Covid. Masks are required. The exhibits reflect the research we do. We're not separately addressing equity but are treating it holistically. So, everyone who was there during a particular time period is included.
- We will do private walking tours in the winter for groups if anyone is interested. However, regularly scheduled tours end this month for the season.
- Next month is Indigenous Peoples month at the Museum. We tie everything to the tribes who were here and their unceded land.
- We are conducting our Ghost Tour (Lantern Tour). You'll discover a diversity of experiences. As always, we are willing to support the schools and Town entities. We are happy to highlight Kristallnacht. We have an exhibit on Sigrid Schulz who wrote a firsthand account about it in 1938.

**Westport Playhouse – Jenny Nelson:**

We are thrilled to be back in the Playhouse after 2 years. *Doubt* runs from November 6-21<sup>st</sup>. Previews start on the 2<sup>nd</sup>. We are now doing a land acknowledgement at the beginning of each performance. Behind the scenes, we are working on being inclusive in light of the Broadway BIPOC demands and offering pronoun buttons that people can wear if they choose. Come join us in person including socially distanced performances or via streaming. We observe strict COVID-19 guidelines – masking and proof of vaccination are required.

**Westport Library – Alex Giannini:**

- We are hosting an Environmental debate by our selectmen candidates tonight sponsored by Sustainable Westport and Earth Place. Our Town goal is to be net zero by 2050.
- The 25<sup>th</sup> annual Mental health breakfast will be held on October 26<sup>th</sup> from 8-10a. This breakfast addresses the intersection of youth, drugs, and alcohol/substance abuse.
- On Tuesday, November 9<sup>th</sup>, we have Mondiant Dogon, the author of *Those We Throw Away Are Diamonds: A Refugee's Search for Home*. A recording will be available on the Library website.
- Story Fest is Halloween weekend. It is mostly virtual, but there are some in-person events. One diverse author is Steven Graham Jones (*The Only Good Indians*), who is Native American, at 7PM on October 30<sup>th</sup> in-person. Story Fest is pared down this year; all events will be hybrid. We'll always stream and will record if the speaker allows. A maximum of 120 or so are in the Forum – socially distant.

**Westport Pride – Brian McGunagle:**

- A partnership has been formed within the Westport Public Schools called the Pride Coalition led by Kayla Iannetta, a biology teacher at Staples. The Coalition is active at the middle and high schools.
- For National Coming Out Day (October 11<sup>th</sup>), we hosted a Fireside Chat entitled *When Did you Know* featuring community members ranging from high school to retired persons. 50 attended. There were 100 views after the event – a large success.
- We are continuing to educate the community. We are partnering with the Unitarian Church and their Our Whole Lives (OWL) program, their youth, gender, and sexuality group.
- We are also partnering with the Methodist Church for their Trunk Halloween next weekend.
- In November, we'll start our 2022 planning including a big June celebration again.
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- provide resources and help. If you know someone who is interested, please email me at: [westportctpride@gmail.com](mailto:westportctpride@gmail.com).

Harold: I listened to the Fireside Chat video. It's incredible and transformative and I highly recommend it. It can be viewed at [www.Westportpride.com](http://www.Westportpride.com) and also on Dan Woog's blog.

Public Commentary was received prior to the Westport Pride presentation.

Ramin moved to adjourn the meeting. Catherine and Alex seconded the motion.  
The meeting was adjourned at 9:45AM.

Respectfully submitted,

Bernicestine McLeod  
Secretary