

TEAM Westport Meeting Minutes
February 8, 2011, 7:30 AM
Room 309
Westport Town Hall, Westport, CT

Attendees: Catherine Onyemelukwe, Harold Bailey (Presiding), Bernicestine McLeod, Dolores Paoli, Patricia Wei, Brian Fagan, Steve Daniels

Guest: Elaine Schwartz, Head of Guidance at Staples High School

Our February 1st meeting was rescheduled to today because of adverse weather conditions.

The meeting was called to order at 7:35 AM.

New Business

1. Harold introduced Elaine Schwartz and explained our plans for a panel discussion to be held on April 6th at the Westport Public Library on the topic of whether Westport students are prepared for college from the viewpoint of experiencing diversity.

Elaine had done some groundwork by asking the colleges what they are seeing in their students. Her findings suggest that:

- a. There is ongoing diversity training on college campuses.
- b. It is the opinion of some of the colleges that high school seniors would not fully engage in classes on diversity, so that any programming should be left to the colleges.

Discussion:

Harold stated that we are talking about a more systemic approach all the way up through the grades (K-12) to prepare students for college life after Westport, not just a class or two. The intent would be to expose students to diversity, since the more exposed they are to diversity, the better their college experience should be. Because of the composition of Westport, it is extremely important for students to experience diversity in a positive light although students do not, for the most part, realize what they might be missing. We are searching for ways to change this and to track progress.

Even Staples alumni have stated that not having experienced diversity before college was an issue for them once they reached college. We all are concentrating very heavily on making sure our students are academically prepared. We should just also concentrate on ensuring that they are prepared from a diversity point of view. This objective is very much in line with the 21st Century Skills goals outlined by the Board of Education in 2009. The Social Studies curriculum is in the process of being modified to represent and incorporate a more diverse perspective.

Elaine stated that Westport students go into all areas of the world where there is poverty, building homes and teaching English (e.g., Builders without Borders). These types of activities provide some measure of diversity exposure. Catherine pointed out that students, in general, here know more about other areas of the world than they do about communities within Fairfield County or the United States that might be less affluent. It behooves us all to provide more role models that are local.

Bottom line, we are glad that all the colleges say they are addressing diversity and that they consider it an issue in preparing their students for adult life. We, however, do not think this should

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happen for the first time in college and that Westport should programmatically do something instead of waiting for freshman year of college.

We would like for Ms. Schwartz to help us think this through influenced by what she sees day-to-day from being with the students and observing any issues they might confront. They are aware of what's going on. It's important for the bigger group (parents and the community) to discuss this as an educational goal. We agree that this is important, but are trying to determine how best to do it. Given that opportunities present themselves on college campuses, we're very interested in making sure students can take better advantage of these opportunities once they arrive there. Elaine is in the position to help make a change and to interject elements that enforce better preparation.

Some recommendations:

- a. Ask former students of color to come back and tell their experiences in this school system.
- b. Hold the April 6th panel discussion.
- c. This should be a community effort.
- d. The administration can help in the effort.
- e. Have conversations with the students to find out what they think.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:00AM.

The next meeting is scheduled to be held on March 1, 2011, at 7:30 AM.

Respectfully submitted,

Bernicestine McLeod
Secretary