

Schools consider equity plans

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In recent years, equity has become a term used with increasing frequency as school districts adopt plans and policies affirming their commitment to creating fair, inclusive and accessible learning environments for all students.

And while equity encompasses more than race and ethnicity, the need to ensure that schools are serving BIPOC communities has been of particular focus as Vermont's predominantly white population becomes more diverse.

According to current Agency of Education data, a little over 11% of Vermont's K-12 student population is nonwhite — up from about 7.5% a decade ago — making it more diverse than Vermont as whole, which is around 94% white.

Jodie Stewart-Ruck is principal at Shrewsbury Mountain School and serves as the equity coordinator for the Mill River Unified Union School District.

She said the district has been working on equity issues for several years.

“When we look at (equity) within the systems and structures of schooling, we really think about all of the historically marginalized groups that make up a piece of our system, and how systemic inequities might have negatively affected them or negatively affect them right now and what we can do to mitigate that,” she said.

Stewart-Ruck said in addition to race and ethnicity, the work must address potential inequities related to gender, sexuality, socioeconomic class, culture, religion, and intellectual and physical disability.

Last summer, MRUUSD began to explicitly outline next steps in its process in the form of a three-year equity action plan.

The plan is broken down into several areas, including professional development, curriculum and content, systems and structures, representation, and the student experience.

“We tried to really take a step back and look at where we could make careful financially responsible and morally responsible decisions around making sure that all of our students feel represented and supported in our schools,” she said.

In doing that work, she stressed the need to engage with and listen to people from historically marginalized groups. To that end, Stewart-Ruck said the district has contracted with Dr. Luvelle Brown, a nationally

recognized equity leader, to provide professional development to district staff, leadership and the School Board.

Stewart-Ruck acknowledged that the country is in the midst of a cultural moment where conversations about equity are inevitable and ubiquitous.

“Our children are growing up in a time and place where the media is showing all of the inequities that have existed for a long time and our children are making meaning of that. We need to have a respectful and thoughtful system that really is going to support every child’s growth.”

On the other side of Rutland County, the Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union is in the process of adopting its own equity policy.

Superintendent Jeanne Collins said RNESU started an internal equity committee last year and has recently been seeking more involvement from the broader community.

Collins, too, stressed that equity is a big tent concept.

“When people hear equity, often, they only hear race. And what I find in Vermont is people are quick to discount race because we’re largely white,” she said.

But Collins said that overwhelming whiteness is exactly why talking about equity is critical.

“It’s important that our students have an opportunity to learn and open their eyes beyond what they’re just exposed to in their everyday life because they’re part of a global society,” she said. “The more we can expand our kids’ thinking and awareness, then the better informed citizens they will be as adults.”

Yet equity plans have been met with resistance as some school board members question both their efficacy and goals.

Otter Valley Unified Union School Board member Kevin Thornton voiced his objection to his district’s proposed equity policy during the board’s April 7 meeting.

The board is one of three within RNESU currently considering equity policies.

“The proposed RNESU Equity Policy is deeply problematic and should not be approved. It’s emphasis on ‘culturally and historically marginalized’ groups is uselessly vague and historically blind. Worse, it is highly likely to be divisive,” he said in a statement he read at the meeting. “This policy unknowingly echoes a

distorted, wrong-headed and divisive ideology rooted in the idea that the essential basis of our society is racism.”

He went on to express concerns that adopting the policy could have the adverse effect of making the district's already small minority student population feel more singled out.

Thornton's comments set off a lengthy discussion during which a number of community members criticized his position.

Thornton responded with a follow-up statement he submitted to the board in which he characterized those criticisms as “manufactured indignation based on the deliberately false presumption that anyone who questions ‘anti-racist’ ideology must be denying the existence of racism.”

He added: “‘Anti-racism’ is a Trojan horse. What it shows on the outside and what crawls out when no one is looking are very, very different. I am against ‘anti-racist education’ because I am opposed to the intellectual bullying of children.”

Mia Schultz, president of the Rutland Area NAACP, said she does not understand Thornton's opposition.

“What does it hurt him to have an equity statement?” she asked.

Schultz said she has “stacks of complaints” from people around the region who have experienced racism in workplaces, schools and the community.

“At the end of the day, (Thornton's) not an expert on what it's like to be Black or brown in Vermont,” she said.

Collins said she appreciated the process the OV board has gone through and maintained that all voices should be heard.

Still, she stood by the intentions of the policy.

“We're not talking about teaching kids particular ideology or indoctrinating anybody. We're talking about basic human decency and inclusion and preparing our students to be successful, contributing adults,” she said.

Conversations around equity have been met with similar resistance on the Rutland City Board of School Commissioners, where freshman Commissioner Tricia O'Connor has raised her own concerns.

At a board meeting on April 13, Rutland Middle School Principal Pati Beaumont discussed how the school was continuing to address issues of racism, describing work and trainings staff had undergone to develop more culturally responsive practices.

The presentation prompted O'Connor to question the degree to which racism exists at all in city schools, saying that, despite having children in the district, she hasn't heard about racism being a common issue.

"I'm curious if, with all the racial training and whatnot that you've had, if there may be a correlation. Perhaps it's causing friction within the school system," she said, adding that she believed issues should be dealt with on an individual basis and the district should not be mounting an "umbrella reaction."

Beaumont responded that in her time at RMS, things have occurred that "would qualify as racist."

Schultz called O'Connor's comments a "dog whistle."

"The evidence is there. The people are telling you this happens and you are making a choice not to listen," said Schultz. "She sees it. She knows it's there. She just choosing not to because it makes her feel uncomfortable."

O'Connor again took issue with the use of the term equity during a Policy Committee meeting on May 25 when members reviewed proposed changes to language in the Personnel Relations section of Board Conduct Policy 1345, which stated that the board will, "Support employment of the best-qualified individuals with a lens toward equity."

O'Connor asked for clarification of how the term was being applied in this context.

Commissioner Cathy Solsaa explained that she understood it as having "our teachers and staff reflect what our student body looks like."

O'Connor said it sounded like they were talking about a "racial situation."

Assistant Superintendent Rob Bliss provided a broader definition of equity, providing the example that the district currently lacks male teachers in grades K-6 and male special educators across all grade levels.

"While that's not a point of ethnicity, it is a point of equity," he said.

O'Connor countered that she thought the committee's definition was open-ended and subjective, stating she was "not comfortable with it."

She also contended that hiring decisions should be based on merit alone.

“As far as anything that would leave race in there, I don’t feel is appropriate or necessary,” she said.

The matter was ultimately tabled, however, Committee Chair Kevin Kiefaber suggested revising language to include a clear definition of equity.

In addressing pushback to equity policies and language, Stewart-Ruck said it’s important to be transparent and respectfully listen to what people are saying.

And while Schultz supports the push for equity statements and policies happening across the state, she said it’s “the bare minimum” and the beginning of a longer process.

“You have to keep pushing. You have to keep having conversations that are, frankly, very difficult for people to have, but need to be had. But the more and more we have these difficult conversations, they’re no longer difficult.”