

rutland northeast supervisory union

RNESU schools work to foster more equitable climate

10-07-2021, Rutland Herald, by Jim Sabataseo

BRANDON — Susannah White knows there aren't any magic wands when it comes to equity work.

White is the equity and engagement coach at Rutland Northeast Supervisory Union, a newly created administrative position designed to foster a more equitable climate across its five schools.

A former history teacher hailing from Massachusetts, White is quick to point out she's a small part of the equity puzzle for the district.

"It's all hands on deck," she said, noting a broad commitment throughout supervisory union to ensure its learning communities are effectively serving all students.

Superintendent Jeanne Collins said White will work with stakeholders throughout the five schools, including faculty, staff, students and families.

"This position ... allows us to have a person who's really got that focus for engaging our staff and ensuring equitable access — who can support the work that's happening in the schools and support our students themselves," said Collins.

The position, Collins said, is funded through federal Early and Secondary School Emergency Relief grant money, which is designated, in part, for student reengagement related to the pandemic. She hopes the position will be sustained in the future using local funding reallocated from a similar coaching position that was eliminated last year.

While students are back in school fulltime after a year of hybrid learning, Collins and White noted the ongoing need to address the pandemic's social and emotional impacts, as well as the educational inequities it revealed.

"Like all school districts, we're looking at our data and at our policies and saying, 'Are we unintentionally preventing students from being successful?'" Collins said.

She explained that such work requires examining policies and practices surrounding everything from student discipline to enrollment in upper-level classes.

Collins said, in the coming months, the district will undergo an equity audit to look at those policies and practices in depth.

“Schools have a history of over 150 years of practices that, sometimes, we need to look at,” she said.

Collins also stressed the need to remove barriers in order to increase student engagement, such as creating affinity groups so the voices of different stakeholders within Rutland Northeast can be heard and supported.

White said she is still in the process of gathering information and meeting with stakeholders across the community to get a full understanding of what the needs are.

She said meaningfully engaging students is critical to creating equitable learning environments. Educators, she explained, recognize that students know themselves best. She underscored the importance of listening to students in ways that make them feel heard.

“If we center them, we will serve them as best as we possibly can,” she said.

White said teachers, meanwhile, are eager to take part in equity and engagement work because they understand student-centered, equitable learning environments are most conducive to teaching.

“(They’re) looking for tools, resources, strategies to embed in their curriculum, to make their curriculum more engaging, more universally designed for all learners, more representative of the students that they teach and, generally, just exciting for their kids,” she said.

White added that teachers also want to make sure equity work sticks on all levels, from the classroom to the central office.

“There is a desire and a need for this work to be ongoing and not simply a one off, but that it’s something that’s embedded and woven into the structure so that we can continue this work and make it sustainable,” she said.

Over the past year, the term “equity” has become a lightning rod as political conservatives have attacked efforts to address issues of racism and inclusion in schools.

While White acknowledged the term has become “nebulous,” its meaning is clear to her: “Equity is about who we are and meeting the needs of all folks.”

She pointed to a definition of educational equity coined by Luvelle Brown, a nationally recognized educational equity leader, which she paraphrased as “reducing the predictability of who succeeds and who fails,

interrupting reproductive practices that negatively impact diverse students in school settings, and cultivating the unique gifts and talents of every student.”

“It’s really about responding to who’s in your classroom, who’s in your school, and are we making sure that they can succeed?” she said.