

INCLUSIVITY & BELONGING PROGRAM REVIEW

Executive Summary

Rose Tree Media School District

*Prepared by Delaware County Intermediate Unit
February 2022*

February 24, 2022

To the Rose Tree Media School District:

The program review team at Delaware County Intermediate Unit (DCIU) would like to thank all students, parents/guardians, staff, administrators, and board members who participated in this Dignity and Belonging Program Review process. We appreciated the open, positive, and professional dialogue and support displayed by all members of the community. Stakeholders' willingness to meaningfully engage in discussion around the district's programs and practices – both strengths and challenges – allowed us to collect valuable perspectives and information about the lived experiences of individuals and groups at Rose Tree Media School District. Over the course of 211 individual interviews, focus groups, and classroom walkthroughs conducted across each school in the district, the team collected data from a variety of areas related to the district's ongoing work to support dignity and belonging for all.

We are honored to play a role in your reflection around dignity and belonging efforts at Rose Tree Media School District and wish you continued success in supporting all students effectively. As you continue your process, please know that the Delaware County Intermediate Unit is available to provide partnership, support, and professional development for your ongoing efforts.

Sincerely,

Dr. Joyce A. Mundy, Assistant to the Executive Director for Teaching and Learning

Inclusivity & Belonging Program Review
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Project Overview

The Rose Tree Media School District initiated this program review to evaluate the impact of equity initiatives currently in place. District and building level equity teams have continuously met and implemented the goals from the Strategic Plan and *Inclusivity and Belonging Framework*. As with many strategic initiatives, reflection can guide continuous improvement.

The administration seeks to further include the voice, perspective, and experiences of all stakeholder groups. The goal is not only to understand successes, but to find meaningful opportunities to strengthen the impact for all. The district initiated the Youth Truth Survey in the fall of 2021, and the Inclusivity and Belonging Program Review Report provides additional data. This review provides insights into what has worked well and what strategic actions would support equitable, accessible, and inclusive programs for the Rose Tree Media School District community.

This executive summary is respectfully submitted to the Rose Tree Media School District Board of Directors. This companion document provides an overview of the detailed program review report. Key themes and findings are discussed throughout the executive summary. The full report provides much greater detail regarding the supporting data.

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“Students are the focus of the Rose Tree Media School District learning community. All students will reach their intellectual, emotional, social, and physical potential in a safe environment that celebrates diversity, individual talents and efforts, and promotes collaboration, caring, respect, and leadership. Students will be well prepared to create meaningful and productive lives in a global society”.

-Rose Tree Media School District website homepage

Background of Ongoing Work

Rose Tree Media School District’s (RTMSD) 2018-2024 Comprehensive Plan includes a goal to “establish a system that ensures that all students have equitable access to all programs in our schools” ([District Level Plan, p. 27](#)). In support of this goal, Rose Tree Media School District has undertaken noteworthy work since 2018 to define, set goals for, and pursue strategies related to equity in the context of Rose Tree Media School District.

Rose Tree Media School District’s Framework

Rose Tree Media School District connects ongoing district goals and priorities to ensure belonging, dignity, and inclusion. The Inclusivity and Belonging section of the Rose Tree Media School District website states: “The Rose Tree Media School District cultivates and supports an inclusive culture where everyone belongs and each person’s inherent dignity is honored” ([Inclusivity and Belonging](#)). The district has developed a Venn diagram of the components to support this culture within Rose Tree Media School District.



Objectives:

- Ensure all students have equitable access to programs in our schools
- Encourage and support culturally responsive teaching
- Ensure that beliefs, mindset, and practices are grounded in principles of equity
- Sustain a healthy, respectful, caring, safe and inviting learning environment to foster a sense of belongingness for all students ([Addressing Equity & Inclusion](#)).

Strategies:

- Provide staff with professional development to increase awareness and offer strategies to promote equity and inclusion for all students
- Fully implement a Multi-tiered System of Support (MTSS) model K-12
- Engage staff and community in supporting district- and building-wide equity work ([Addressing Equity & Inclusion](#)).

Past and Ongoing Work:

Training in 2019-2020 and 2020-2021

- District Equity Team Leadership Training
- Workshops through the Delaware Valley Consortium for Excellence and Equity (DVCEE)
- Turnaround training provided by building-level equity teams
- Flex professional development workshops (Increasing Equitable Instructional Resources and Equity During Flexible Learning)
- Many staff members have engaged in commonly reading *Belonging through a Culture of Dignity* by Floyd Cobb and John Krownapple

Established systems

- Formation of building- and district-level equity teams comprised of volunteer representatives
- Expansion of the Family Alliance for Respect and Equity (FARE), a family-school partnership group, connected to every school in Rose Tree Media School District
- Development of a Social Emotional and Ethical (SEE) learning curriculum for students that is included in scheduled time across all levels
- Designation of a Rose Tree Media School District School Board Ad Hoc Committee to review and support the adoption of district policies with a connection to equity practices

Student involvement

- Middle and high school students were able to participate in DVCEE Student Leadership Institutes in 2019-2020
- Students at the high school were trained in facilitating restorative circles
- Surveys for feedback (Sense of Belongingness Survey in the 2019-2020 and the Youth Truth Survey in November 2021)
- Related clubs available to students (Penncrest Lions Inclusivity and Awareness, Worldwide Pride Group, Gay Straight Alliance, Women's Empowerment, and Human Relations Club)

It is important to note that the amount of professional development available and feasible in 2020-21 and 2021-22 was impacted by not only the COVID-19 closure but staffing needs once in-person instruction resumed. Our team was made aware during this review of many additional professional development topics that have been planned to support the needs in this report. While district-wide time was set for professional development, this year has focused on providing teachers time and support to meet the unique needs of students post-pandemic.

Without a doubt, Rose Tree Media School District has assumed an unequivocal commitment to student dignity and belonging and invested time and resources to match that commitment over the last several years. This program review seeks to complement that work by providing insights into what has worked well and what strategic actions can allow the current and future work to be even more effective.

Process and Scope of Review

Between December and February 2022, a team from Delaware County Intermediate Unit conducted a thorough review and evaluation of the ongoing work around dignity and belonging at Rose Tree Media School District. The team reviewed district documents, researched literature and best practices, and conducted focus groups and interviews of district stakeholders. This report presents the findings of our research and recommendations for future considerations.

The following components comprised the preparation and services that were part of this comprehensive special education audit:

1. Full-day site visits to each school building
2. Focus groups with building administrators, equity teams, teachers, school staff, students, and parents/guardians
3. Individual interviews with district administrators and representative school board directors
4. Youth Truth Survey results provided by the district to DCIU

Current Research

In Pennsylvania, equity has been defined as “every student having access to the educational resources and rigor they need at the right moment in their education across race, gender, ethnicity, language, disability, sexual orientation, family background, and/or family income” ([PDE Equitable Practices Hub](#)).

Inclusion, Belonging, and Dignity

Much of Rose Tree Media School District’s focus on equity and access for all has been grounded in the work of Floyd Cobb and John Krownapple’s (2019) *Belonging through a Culture of Dignity*. Cobb and Krownapple’s book is a respected and widely used resource among school and district teams focused on student dignity and belonging. The book defines several “keys” for success in this work, which are detailed further in the full program review report. This section focuses on the areas of inclusion, belonging, and dignity.

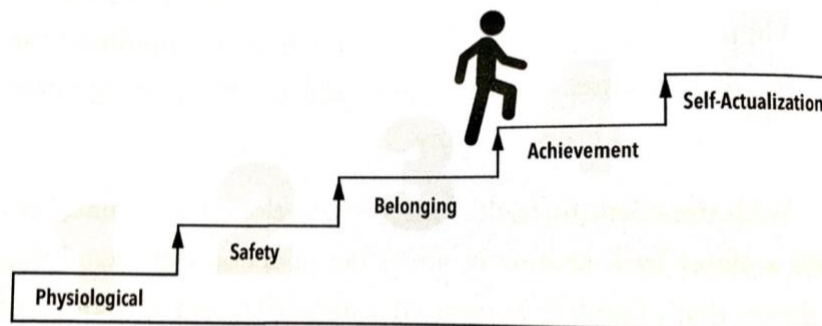
- *Beyond Diversity: Inclusion*

To move beyond diversity and to inclusion, Cobb and Krownapple (2019) argue that schools must move beyond stating what they are against (e.g., *against* bias, *against* racism, *against* homophobia) and instead clearly articulate a positive vision for what they want to see. They state, “To put it simply, for positive results we need a positive vision. Instead of remaining fixated on the reality we want to leave behind, we need to co-create the future we want to step into” (Cobb and Krownapple, 2019, p. 25). This is related to diversity and inclusion because *diversity* itself is a demographic statistic rather than something to aspire to. *Diversity* fails to offer a vision or articulate a goal to work toward. *Inclusion*, on the other hand, is about the response to diversity in all its forms. When we embrace inclusion as a goal, it means a commitment to “change our culture to ensure all people feel that they belong, not in spite of their differences but because of them” (Cobb and Krownapple, 2019, p. 30).

- *Beyond Access: Belonging*

Cobb and Krownapple (2019) also refer to *belonging* as a missing focus in many schools because of a pressure to prioritize access to content for achievement on standardized tests. They argue: “belonging has been neglected in the name of achievement, which is an environment where only the achieving belong.” (p. 41). Belonging – “the extent to which people feel appreciated, validated, accepted, and treated fairly within an environment (e.g., school, classroom, or work)” – is essential for students to experience at school (Cobb and Krownapple, 2019, p. 43). It is a component of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs as something that is necessary before achievement (noted in Figure 3.1). Cobb and Krownapple note, “achievement is built upon belonging. Once people belong, only then can they without distraction focus on achieving or fulfilling their unique potential, which Maslow referred to as self-actualization” (p. 46). They further argue that educators must apply this theory to the school environment because prioritizing achievement over belonging damages students’ health, relationships, and sense of community.

Figure 3.1 Stairs to Fulfilling Potential



- *Beyond Respect: Dignity*

Cobb and Krownapple (2019) embrace Donna Hicks’ (2011) definition of *dignity* as “equal human value and worth” as well as “an internal state of peace that comes from the recognition and

acceptance of the value and vulnerability of all living things” (p. 96). Recognizing the dignity of every student is central to equity work because it helps answer *why* the work is important. Cobb and Krownapple (2019) offer four states of being that can help us to recognize the presence or absence of dignity: appreciation, validation, acceptance, and being treated fairly.

Relevant Curriculum

One of the goals within Rose Tree Media School District’s Venn diagram framework for supporting dignity, belonging, and inclusion focuses on Relevant Curriculum. This is also a component of classroom, schoolwide, and district practices. Paul Gorski (2012) offers the following iterative categories that schools may consider in their process toward seeking a relevant curriculum reflective of a variety of student experiences and perspectives. These do not happen sequentially. With the exception of Status Quo, schools may engage in parts or all of various categories at any stage in their work on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

| Status Quo | Food, Festivals, and Fun | Intercultural Teaching and Learning | Human Relations | Selective Education | Transformative Education |
|---|--|---|--|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Traditional educational practices are maintained with no intentional evaluation and critique. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Small changes to curricula or classroom materials focus exclusively on surface-level cultural traits. Teachers or the school purchase and display posters of famous women or African American figures (typically during the paralleling history month). | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers study the customs and behaviors of the cultures from which their students come in an attempt to better understand how they should treat those students. There may be a handbook that describes how to relate to specific groups based on an interpretation of traditions and communication styles of those particular groups. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Members of the school community are encouraged to celebrate differences. Teachers show an enthusiasm for learning about "other" cultures, drawing on the personal experiences of students so students learn from each other. Diversity is seen as an asset that enriches the classroom experience. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers and administrators initiate one-time or temporary programs. They might create a program to encourage girls to pursue math and science interests. This approach is usually reactive - in response to a particular issue or critique that became public. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> All education practice begins with a determination to make all aspects of schools and schooling equitable to ensure that all students have the opportunity to reach their full potential as learners. |

Collective Ownership and Shared Responsibility

Maisha T. Winn (2020) discusses the pattern of equity work becoming women’s work or the work of people of color in schools. Calling the phenomenon “when some of us are brave,” she argues that there are unintended consequences when the work defaults to a few adults in a building. Winn (2020) maintains that leveraging these groups as students and adults is a powerful resource. However, when these are the primary groups engaging in the work it can feel unsupported and produce “gendered justice – that is the feminization of peacemaking and making things right” (p. 118). “Perhaps more dangerous,” Winn adds, “is that this strategy does not hold the entire school community responsible for finding ways to be in relationship with one another” (p. 121). To avoid this, she proposes that schools “must send a clear policy and must practice signals to demonstrate that this labor is valued” and all staff should be capable instead of relegating the work to a few adults in the building (Winn, 2020, p. 119).

Report Findings

Priority Areas for Consideration

Our team identified four key areas for consideration during this review:

1. **Priority Area 1:** Continued Progression from Theory to Action
2. **Priority Area 2:** Beyond Holidays and Heroes
3. **Priority Area 3:** Collective Agency
4. **Priority Area 4:** Fostering Connection to Support Belonging

Data for each area of inquiry were collected from the perspectives of students, parents/guardians, teachers and staff, building and district administrators, and representative school board directors.

Priority Area 1: Continued Progression from Theory to Action

This section explores the extent to which the research-based, theoretical Inclusivity and Belonging Framework developed by Rose Tree Media School District has grown from theory to action. The probes examine the implementation of the Framework and the activities that have happened at the school, district, and community level. Additionally, this priority area considers how stakeholders have made connections to the theory resulting in changed practices, policies, and actions. Theory to action will assess not just Rose Tree Media School District's understanding of what and why (theory), but why and how to get results in a systemic way (action) to increase equity, belonging, and dignity for all.

Strengths

Many districts have explored equity and inclusivity and developed a plan to support the work. It cannot be overstated that the quality of work done on the theory related to equity topics at Rose Tree Media School District is an exemplar.

- The Framework is an asset-based model that emphasizes outcomes
- The RTMSD Strategic Plan in Goal 3 defines the goals for equity and access for all.
- Understanding that social, emotional, and ethical learning needed to be a focus, RTMSD incorporated time for Social Emotional Ethical Learning through the SEE curriculum.

Foundational work includes a focus on common language and a working (and evolving) knowledge of concepts like dignity and belonging.

- Many staff, administrators, and school board directors at Rose Tree Media School District have commonly read *Belonging Through a Culture of Dignity* by Floyd Cobb and John Krownapple, anchoring the initiative in research and educational pedagogy.

Needs

Give continued attention to the complexity of defining the mission of schools (i.e. educational equity) and understanding an educator’s sphere of influence (i.e. the classroom/school environment).

- Articulate the academic purpose behind resource implementation of resources.
- Provide teachers training and direction on aligning resources with instruction.

Staff recognize the district's verbal communication around the commitment to dignity and belonging for all students, but also seek clearer and consistent actions to demonstrate that commitment.

- Address the perception that the work on belonging, dignity, and inclusivity remains compartmentalized within specific roles or equity team members (building teams, district teams, FARE parent groups).
- Build on the ‘early adopters’ model to create clearer expectations of the roles and responsibilities that all have. This affirms that the work is owned by all and not some.

The competing demands of multiple focus areas with limited time impacts the year-to-year consistency of multiple professional development initiatives. This has been especially true throughout the last 24 months, where the full focus of schools was to meet the changing demands during the pandemic that affected every level of school systems.

Priority Area 2: Beyond Holidays and Heroes

This section explores how materials, perspectives, and voices are woven seamlessly with current frameworks. District staff dedicate themselves to continuously expanding their knowledge base through exploration of various sources representing unique perspectives and share that knowledge with students. Students learn to view events, concepts, and facts through various lenses cohesively rather than through differentiated activities.

Strengths

Increasing understanding of and learning experiences that highlight diversity.

- Students can and do point to celebrations and holidays and famous figures as instances where they learn about various cultures and backgrounds.
- The district has invested in purchasing diverse books in classrooms and libraries.
- During school walkthroughs, the program review team noted a variety of posters and visual materials that reflect a celebration of diversity.

Increased focus on relationships, social and emotional growth, and connection

- Staff point to morning meetings as a time where they can build relationships and connections with one another. Students appreciate it when their teachers greet them in the morning.
- Scheduling decisions reflect a commitment to fostering student social-emotional growth and staff-student relationships.

Needs

Clarity and Intentionality (Celebrate + Educate)

- Ensure students learn to view events, concepts, and facts as a means to increase perspective, understanding, and knowledge. Equity activities can then be part of a cohesive model that ties to skills and standards rather than stand-alone events.
- Increase knowledge about how to integrate inclusive practices and relevant lessons and materials beyond holidays and significant historical figures.
- Create more robust programming around issues that can be challenging (intellectual ability, gender identity, race, religion, and language) so that students become not only aware, but conversant in these issues as members of a global, diverse society.

Prioritize consistent practices and articulation of the why when decisions are made.

- Identify variations of practices around holidays. At the same time, honor that both staff and students refer to holidays as the primary way students learn about diversity.
- Provide the plan for and purpose around celebrations so families are empowered to have children participate/not participate. Additionally, create meaningful alternative activities to honor belonging and dignity of all.

Priority Area 3: Collective Agency

Much of the work that Rose Tree Media School District has engaged in since 2018 has focused on increasing capacity and agency in the work of equitable communities. As discussed, there have been a multitude of efforts that have effectively increased advocacy by individuals, stakeholder groups, and schools. This section examines how the work of individuals and groups has synchronized to increase organizational capacity and achieve systemic change.

Strengths

Dignity and belonging are core values that are demonstrated.

- Personalized service, responsiveness, and care for students is extremely strong. Multiple focus groups provided examples of where district personnel are living the mission and core values around the work.

Increasing the involvement of groups at all levels.

- Surveys, communication, and a consideration of multiple perspectives were noted by all stakeholder groups as a strength, particularly during the challenges of the past two years.

Strategies to increase agency are varied and effective.

- Achieving collective agency around the work is something that requires many years of scaffolding. As Rose Tree Media School District has built upon initial actions to create stronger systems, the effect has been significant.

- There are multiple points of evidence where capacity and agency have been built. The work on inclusivity and belonging has been strategic, and support is in place to strengthen skill sets. Examples of actions taken include the development of the Framework, professional learning communities, Board policy, procedures, inclusion of student voice, and integration of resources in classroom experiences.

Needs

Consistent practices related to dignity and belonging are important.

While the overwhelming feedback from staff, students, and family members is positive, there are clear themes about specific groups of people who are experiencing less belonging and inclusion. The data below is supported by the Youth Truth surveys and focus groups.

LGBTQ+

- The theme of non-binary or transgender students was significant from staff and students when asked about how students struggle with belonging. Some students characterized the school as very accepting. This was evidenced by LGBTQ posters, safe space or ally stickers, and the development of policy for gender language and identity. There is acknowledgement of the work that has been done to create an affirming environment. The opportunities for change are related to the ability for staff to effectively implement the established best practices at an individual classroom or community level.
- Staff recognized a current need to become more understanding of and comfortable using gender neutral practices and supporting students who have changed their names or pronouns, including at the elementary and middle school levels.
- Students expressed strong opinions that acceptance of pronouns and gender identity is important for their own sense of belonging at school and acknowledge that they do see this happening with some teachers. The perception is that consistency is critical.
- Another related theme was related to practices that reinforce traditional gender norms and structures. For staff, this centered on the trends and practices around academic placement in courses. Students and families are also concerned about ways that they notice differences in the treatment of students by gender. This included comments from both students and families about the dress code, discipline, and enforcement of peer interactions based on traditional gender norms.

Race and Ethnicity

- There was a feeling across staff focus groups that there has been progress in understanding students' lived experiences around race. There is still a need for continued and intentional focus in ensuring students do not experience less belonging, dignity, or inclusion because of their race. Specifically, staff were concerned about the connection between student race and microaggressions, deficit language, and placement in advanced courses.

- In the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) section of the Youth Truth Survey results (only included in middle school and high school student surveys), students who identify as a person of color were less likely to feel comfortable talking about their race or ethnicity when talking to adults or other students compared to students who do not identify as a person of color.

Religion

- There is a need to create stronger understanding of how to support students of non-Christian religious faiths around holidays and in other related religious and cultural practices. There were several instances of teachers curious about how to best support students' religious dietary restrictions during school lunches and events.

Socio-Economic Status

- Focus groups shared examples where families with socio-economic barriers were supported by the district. Areas for growth were more systemic such as increasing student access where cost is an issue and creating strategies to help all understand the challenges for families based on socio-economic status.

Language

- Stakeholders indicated a need for translation services and more academic supports when facing barriers. In the Youth Truth Survey, students who identified as English Learners reported positive experiences with belonging as related to peers. Finding ways to connect more adults to English language learners was indicated in the Youth Truth survey.

Special Education

- Parents across focus groups expressed appreciation for support for special education students. One example was the sensory hour at the Winter Carnival. Suggestions were provided by parents, students and staff to increase inclusive opportunities students. This could include more education for their peers regarding needs and learning supports in place. Also, there were requests for strategies to ensure inclusion in school/district wide events.

Students feel like adults at school value their opinions, but all stakeholders are less clear about specific and systemic channels to consider student voice as a school community.

- Multiple data points indicated that feedback from students is sought and valued. One way to increase student agency is to build systems for demonstrating how the student feedback is incorporated. If student feedback is not incorporated, there is value in having conversations about rationale. This could increase dialogue and mutual respect.

Inclusion of all staff groups in the school community

- There is a genuine willingness by teams outside of the professional staff (office teams, custodial staff, cafeteria staff, bus drivers) to be part of the work on belonging and dignity. Their unique insights and relationships with students, staff, and community could be leveraged to enhance the work and increase positive outcomes.

Priority Area 4: Fostering Connection to Support Belonging

This section examines the ways that Rose Tree Media School District values and prioritizes a sense of belonging within its school community with a comprehensive approach that incorporates a range of strategies that help to build a collaborative and inclusive community for learning. Strategies to consider include: (1) Encouraging positive relationships with teachers and school staff; (2) Creating a positive peer culture of belonging; (3) Emphasizing engagement and value in learning; (4) Taking proactive steps toward mental health; and (5) Including parents in the educational experience.

Encouraging positive relationships with teachers and school staff.

- Staff, students, and families discussed how practices that reinforce traditional gender norms and structures can contradict the work on belonging and dignity. For staff, this centered on the trends and practices around academic placement in courses. Students and families also observe potential differences in the treatment of students by gender. This included comments from both students and families about the dress code, discipline, and enforcement of peer interactions based on traditional gender norms.
- Connections with teachers are strong as related to issues around academic support. Students suggested that adults could increase positive relationships by also focusing on students' lived experiences outside of school.

Creating a positive peer culture of belonging

This had different data points at each level:

- High School had a higher than typical sense of belonging for boys/men. There was a typical sense of belonging for girls/women, and a lower than typical for LGBTQ+ and gender non-conforming.
- Middle School had a higher than typical sense of belonging overall. Students who reported bullying or harassment indicated the reasons were related to how they looked or perceived sexual orientation (people think I am gay).
- Elementary noted a higher than typical sense of belonging. Students who reported bullying or harassment indicated the reasons were related to sex or gender or disability.

Emphasizing engagement and value in learning

- This was rated higher for those who achieve stronger academic outcomes/grades. The engagement and value in learning was lower among students who identify as LGBTQ+ or a person of color.

Taking proactive steps toward mental health (only asked at middle and high school)

- Students ranked lower than typical when asked if they understand services and resources for mental health support.
- The middle school students ranked higher than typical for individual resilience and coping skills. High school students ranked lower than typical in individual resilience.
- SEE curriculum focuses on resilience skills and may have a positive impact over time.

Including parents in the educational experience

- The Youth Truth Survey asked families key questions about their experiences in the areas of engagement, relationships, culture, communication & feedback, resources, and school safety. Parents' overall responses tended to be highest at the elementary level and lowest at the high school level.
- Relationships and Culture were the highest rated themes at the elementary level, Culture and Resources at the middle school level, and Relationships and Engagement at the high school level in comparison to other participating schools.
- Additionally, articulating mechanisms for communication between the school and families may clarify what information families can anticipate receiving about their child's education.

Recommendations

Program reviews contain a substantial amount of data about equity, inclusion, dignity and belonging. In consideration of the strengths and needs highlighted in the previous section, DCIU has developed five overarching considerations to guide Rose Tree Media School District in its continued strategic planning. The district has already demonstrated an exceptional, long-term commitment to achieve behavioral and academic success for all students through the comprehensive Framework for Inclusivity & Belonging. Through the years, the model itself has had a variety of iterations and added more resources. The overarching recommendations below are designed to frame the next level of work and establish stronger consistency and alignment across schools and levels.

Continue to shift theory into action.

- The data clearly showed that the district has been extremely effective at building a solid foundation, clear expectations, and policies to support equity. The next step would be to take the theory and structures that were built and determine what action steps are needed to implement deeply in all pockets of the district. The data identified the areas where fidelity or consistency of implementation is creating gaps.
- Consider the difference between diversity and inclusion efforts. As noted in the research section, diversity fails to offer a vision or articulate a goal to work toward. Inclusion, on the other hand, is about the response to diversity in all its forms. When we embrace inclusion as a goal, it means a commitment to "change our culture to ensure all people feel that they belong, not in spite of their differences but because of them" (Cobb and Krownapple, 2019, p. 30).

Establish feedback loops or mechanisms to address needs in real-time for students and adults.

- Successes are evident. However, this work is iterative and requires constant learning and growing. There will be times when individuals may not feel honored because of a particular experience. One topic that came up repeatedly was for the district to establish more authentic means for dialogue when issues arise. In many focus groups, participants suggested having a way to provide meaningful feedback to guide coaching and personalized training.
- Student voice is critical to this work as they understand in a unique way what is happening in schools. There was validation across groups that the district is receptive to feedback and

extremely responsive when issues are reported. It is more important to create systems for ongoing feedback loops and response structures. Identifying a district liaison to conduct such activities and deciding how they process and provide feedback is a part of this recommendation.

Prioritize “what to do” versus “what not to do.”

- One overarching theme was that practitioners approach the work from the view of avoiding harm or hurt. This is often the case in work on diversity, equity, and inclusion. Focusing on “what not to do” can overshadow the adults knowing “what to do.” One may know not to use the wrong gender pronoun, but one may not know how to engage a group of students in a productive dialogue about gender identity. One may know not to allow certain terminology or language to be used, but one may not know the best way to teach students about critical topics related to diversity within content areas. One may know that a child is isolated, but one may not know how to create an environment where they are better acknowledged.
- There is a perception across stakeholder groups that some are less comfortable or adept at decision making, problem solving, or taking risks. This speaks to a need for more time for staff to train and develop tools for greater inclusivity. Also, there could be great benefit to providing individuals with a clearer definition of proactive actions to establish belonging and dignity versus reacting to what is in front of them.

Because people are opting in, the work is not getting systemic traction. Establish the non-negotiables to move forward and give permission for people to engage in the work.

- Along with growing the collective capacity in many ways, the district is now poised to select specific goals that can be measured and assessed for effectiveness.
- Consider how to include some groups at the table who may not have participated in the current structures. Typically, this work has been done in the context of classroom educators and school communities but including operations and other groups would bring a more diverse set of voices to the process.

Systematically evaluate how the regular curriculum is or is not inclusive for all students and make decisions to formally integrate relevant resources and materials (vs. only teaching to special occasions like Black History Month).

- Finding ways to represent students lived experiences in classrooms honors their dignity and increases their sense of belonging.
- As the work continues, it would be beneficial to define the goals more clearly. At times, efforts are compartmentalized or attached to an event or occasion. Conducting a review of K-12 curriculum through the lens of equity is often utilized by schools as a starting point. From there, using equity standards can provide a balance and achieve a systems driven approach. This can help establish connections to current curriculum topics.
- As relevant materials and resources are integrated, it is important to train teachers in effective use and culturally competent instructional practices to ensure that the delivery of content is not compromised.

Our team appreciated the opportunity to partner with Rose Tree Media School District to provide this report on dignity and belonging. As you continue your process, please know that the Delaware County Intermediate Unit is available to provide partnership, support, and professional development for your ongoing efforts in this area.

References

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