INCLUSIVITY & BELONGING PROGRAM REVIEW
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

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Project Overview

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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 their 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. Targeted practices for educational equity include structures at all levels of the district and encourage actions from all stakeholders in the following areas: Student Voice, Classroom Practices and Procedures, Schoolwide Practices & Procedures, Board Policies, Access and Opportunity, Relevant Curriculum, and Achievement & Outcomes.

To support Rose Tree Media School District's framework for Belongingness, Dignity, and Inclusion, the district has identified the following 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 and Efforts to Achieve Dignity and Belonging
The following major strategies have been identified by Rose Tree Media School District to support their goals around equity and access for all:
- 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).

In the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years, members of Rose Tree Media School District staff and students participated in a substantial amount of training, including District Equity Team Leadership Training, a variety of workshops through the Delaware Valley Consortium for Excellence and Equity (DVCEE), turnaround training provided by building-level equity teams, and flex professional development workshops (Increasing Equitable Instructional Resources and Equity During Flexible Learning). Many staff members have also engaged in commonly reading *Belonging through a Culture of Dignity* by Floyd Cobb and John Krownapple. 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 closure but staffing needs once in-person instruction resumed. Our team was made aware during this review of many 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

Beyond training, the district has built systems to support the work within the district and engage students, families, and teachers in shared agency and leadership to support educational equity. This includes:

- The formation of a district level equity team comprised of volunteer representatives from each school's building-level equity team. The district level team also includes central office administrators, principals, assistant principals, and parent representatives. Members meet and discuss equity topics related to achievement and outcomes, access and opportunity, curriculum, and schoolwide practices and procedures. In addition, team members have participated in equity leadership training and help facilitate workshops and projects at their home buildings.

- The establishment of equity teams for each school building which includes principals, assistant principals, teachers, and staff members who volunteer to participate. Teams study issues of equity and create goals related to: student voice, classroom practices and procedures, schoolwide practices and procedures, access and opportunity, curriculum, and building level achievement and outcomes.

- The 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.

- The development of a Social Emotional and Ethical (SEE) learning curriculum for students that is included in scheduled time across all levels. The volunteer group that developed SEE also promotes and encourages diversity awareness, provides family support, builds relationships, and creates deeper unity and understanding within and beyond the school community.

- 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. This group is composed of two members of the Board of School Directors, the District Superintendent, and the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction.

The district has also sought to include students and student voice in its work in a variety of ways. To increase student agency, middle and high school students were able to participate in DVCEE Student Leadership Institutes in 2019-2020 and students at the high school were trained in facilitating restorative circles. Surveys have also helped to capture student voice and opinions regarding their sense of connectedness. Rose Tree Media School District administered a Sense of Belongingness Survey in the 2019-2020 school year to analyze and evaluate school climate and administered the Youth Truth survey to students, families, and staff in November 2021. Further, schools throughout the district offer a variety of related clubs available to students, such as Penncrest Lions Inclusivity and Awareness, Worldwide Pride Group, Gay Straight Alliance, Women's Empowerment, and Human Relations Club.

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.

Purpose of the Program Review

The Rose Tree Media School District equity work that has occurred since 2018 has been extraordinarily multi-faceted, robust, and deeply embedded in district initiatives. The landing page of the Rose Tree Media School District welcomes visitors with a clear statement of the priorities of the Rose Tree Media School District. It articulates the vision and shared values by stating:

"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".

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 deepen the impact for all. The district initiated the *Youth Truth* survey in the fall of 2021, and this report

provides additional data. This review provides insights into what has worked well and what strategic actions support equitable, accessible, and inclusive programs for the Rose Tree Media School District community.

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). Additionally, the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) has noted that "to do their best, students must feel safe at school. A healthy and safe environment can help students thrive, and every student, regardless of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression should be provided the opportunity to learn – free from discrimination, fear, or harassment" (PDE Equity and Inclusion).

Belongingness, Dignity, and Inclusion
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. They define the following "keys" for success:

- *Beyond Diversity: Inclusion*
  To move <u>beyond</u> diversity and <u>to</u> 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).

  Cobb and Krownapple (2019) cite the following research-based benefits of inclusion in schools:
    - Greater social and emotional well-being
    - Boosted self-efficacy
    - Increased intercultural and cross-racial knowledge, understanding, and empathy
    - Enhanced learning outcomes and capacity for critical thinking
    - Better preparation for employment in the global economy (p. 29).

- *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
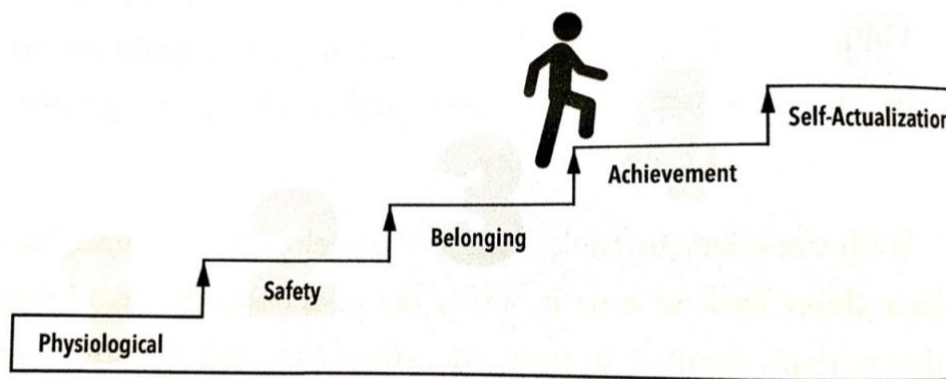
- *Beyond Strategies: Culture*
  To understand the importance of school culture in supporting dignity and belonging, Cobb and Krownapple (2019) offer an analogy of a plant. If inclusion is the plant we work to grow and belonging is the roots that make the plant strong, then culture is the soil in which the plant must grow. To successfully grow the plant, we must nourish and enrich the soil. Likewise, as educators seriously commit to equity in schools, we must also "be intentional about the environments we are creating, rather than just uncritically accept the environment we have inherited" (Cobb and Krownapple, 2019, p. 89).

- *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**: Having parts of your identity admired and positively noticed and/or represented.

o **Validation**: Having your lived experiences, thoughts, and/or feelings recognized and accepted as *real*, even if the other person(s) has not experienced similar things and may even disagree with the issues involved in your experience.

o **Acceptance**: Having your personhood completely embraced and regarded favorably without conditions attached to full belonging.

o **Treated fairly**: Having interactions defined by fairness and justice according to your specific circumstances, which may mean *not* being treated the same as others in order to ensure access to opportunities. Fair treatment may require different approaches that do not imply a lesser standard or status of personhood (p. 99-102).

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
• Traditional educational practices are maintained with no intentional evaluation and critique.	• 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).	• 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.	• 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.	• 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.	• 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 (2) all staff should be capable instead of relegating the work to a few adults in the building (Winn, 2020, p. 119).

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

Audit Report

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 the work done on theory related to equity topics at Rose Tree Media School District is an exemplar.

Rose Tree Media School District has created an overarching umbrella of belonging, dignity, and inclusion that has provided a clear purpose in doing the work and allowed the subsequent work to be fluid. The district has focused on a sense of belonging and dignity for all. Specifically, the Framework affirms "that individual identities and abilities are valued, embraced, and celebrated." The approach is asset-based, which allows the space for the work to be inclusive and accessible to all. The Framework for Student Belonging, Dignity, and Inclusion with associated commitments was developed thoughtfully and intentionally. The priorities are multi-dimensional and clearly integrate educational equity with social, emotional, and ethical learning. The related supporting documents are comprehensive and based on the work of highly respected researchers in the field. Further, the framework includes commitment areas that create a clear roadmap for the work.

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 common language and a working knowledge of concepts like dignity and belonging.

As noted in the research section, *Belonging Through a Culture of Dignity* is a well-respected book that supports the creation of effective educational equity changes in schools. The book guides educators to effective equity implementation by moving past random or disjointed efforts to embrace a deeper ethos to guide practical strategies. By having many Rose Tree Media School District stakeholders read the book, it engaged staff in not only the "what" of the related initiatives and trainings, but the "why" and "how". Developing this common knowledge and language builds a strong foundation for communication and action. In staff focus groups, this book was explicitly referred to as something that is helping schools in Rose Tree Media School District support a sense of dignity and belonging.

The Strategic Plan in Goal 3 defines the goals for equity and access for all.

The fact sheet on equity goals summarizes the efforts that were in place from 2019-2021 to support the strategic plan. Theory moved to action as the district and community members mobilized the Family Alliance for Respect and Equity (FARE) parent groups for each building, established building- and district-level equity teams, engaged the equity leadership team in rich professional learning, brought students to the Delaware Valley Consortium for Equity and Excellence, and provided newly hired staff with diversity training to prevent gaps in understanding.

Understanding that social, emotional, and ethical learning needed to be a focus, Rose Tree Media School District has incorporated scheduled time for formal Social Emotional Ethical Learning through the SEE curriculum.

Rose Tree Media School District has committed to fostering students' social-emotional health through its Social-Emotional-Ethical (SEE) framework focused on developing self-awareness, compassion for self and others, self-regulation, and building skills for community and global engagement. SEE lessons are delivered through morning meeting and advisory in K-8 and embedded in content courses for 9-12. Throughout focus groups, teachers and administrators referred to the designated time to build skills as an asset in supporting belonging and inclusion for students. Especially at the elementary level, teachers felt that although there are sometimes competing curricular pressures, established time for morning meeting is a strong opportunity to build relationships with students. Students also noted SEE lessons as a time where they can learn and talk about acceptance, bullying, and being nice to each other. Some examples of these comments from students include:

- "We are learning about different cultures right now. It is pretty cool because we are all the same because we care about each other."
- "We are reading a book about different opinions and the teacher is encouraging to everyone's thoughts."
- "We learn about perspective and understanding world views."

Needs

As theory has moved to action, thematic concerns centered on 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), especially in light of the current political climate.
Some teachers reported feeling caught between receiving training and materials to support this work juxtaposed against community complaints which can lead to being unsure whether they would have support if they selected to use a particular resource. Teachers wanted more direction and clarity from the district regarding the use of materials and topics of discussion, especially around being developmentally responsive in managing gender education. Teachers appeared to feel the struggle of doing this work in public schools that serve an engaged parent community. There is a need for building agreement and support within the community to move from theory to action which includes recognizing voices and perspectives and areas of shared agreement. For example, one student noted, "I feel as though teachers are afraid that there will be backlash." There were multiple examples given where teachers were discouraged from using books purchased on equity topics. Receiving training and materials to support this work juxtaposed against community complaints can lead to instability. Teachers said that if there were stronger, unequivocal statements from the district regarding the added resources and practices, it would increase the participation and buy-in among all community members. Additionally, as decisions are made, there need to be systems for articulating the academic purpose behind implementation of resources to increase critical thinking skills.

A sample of some of the comments from teachers reflecting this concern are below.
- "Some are hesitant and not clear on support from district administration about what can be discussed. Many are still uncomfortable. Teaching to respect others who are different is important and not always seen as okay to discuss."

- "Every time we suggested new things or honoring other religions, or to think about our LGBTQ or trans students, there was always a comment about the community and how we had to think about what they liked or didn't like."
- "Apprehension to doing it – worry that when the phone call comes about what students discussed, what would the reaction be from administration."
- "We need permission to deviate from what we have always done. We need to know that we won't be penalized."

We recognize that the controversy over representation of diversity, equity, and inclusion in curriculum and instruction has been amplified and misrepresented by groups that seek to diminish the school's impact on students' understanding of equity. School districts serve all in the educational community and must be reflective in meeting the needs of parents and community members who have concerns about explicitly including and honoring all forms of diversity in our society. At no time in this review did DCIU hear any expressed concerns about pursuing diverse materials or furthering students' cultural competence. There is an awareness, however, that complaints do come at public meetings and to the district. People are concerned that a small number of loud voices may slow down or diminish the progress that has been made. For that reason, staff want to know whether support is in place should complaints occur. It is recommended that the district continue to purposeful diversify curriculum with a clear set of standards and transparency. A mechanism to receive and address concerns and feedback will be supportive to the implementers in the classrooms. If district and building administration clearly articulate this, it will support teachers who are seeking to be true equity educators. There is more detail on this in the final recommendations section.

There is a perception that the work on belonging, dignity, and inclusivity remains compartmentalized within specific roles or equity team members.
Teachers, staff members, and administrators who sit on the building equity teams are highly involved and attuned to the work. There is also a student relations staff member at the high school and middle school to handle related issues. Having these supports in place is a strength. The challenge is integrating the support strategies, so all staff members participate and develop agency in supporting students. Right now, there is a perception among staff that the equity team is responsible for the work while all other staff can choose what practices to engage in within existing comfort levels. Clarity regarding the role and responsibilities for all staff members beyond the equity teams may help support Rose Tree Media School District's non-negotiable commitment to dignity, belonging, and inclusion for all students.

Staff commented the following:
- "It feels like a lot of the things are left to the equity team to be like the equity police. This has created a humongous rift in our building."
- "That [establishing an inclusive classroom environment] is something the equity team is pushing."
- "As it stands, you opt-in or you opt-out. It feels like we've gotten worse off when we're trying to bring people together. We need to expand the vision so it isn't opt-in, but everyone is in."

- "We are encouraged to teach about ideas and concepts in our lesson up to the degree we feel comfortable."
- "Teachers share different holidays, celebrations, and traditions at their own comfort."

A parent commented: "I think certain teachers are trying to make strides and make room for it. I think as a district that can be more fully embraced in a more inclusive way. My kids were more exposed to that because of our family makeup and their past school. I know it's a challenge, but I know we can beef the learning up a little more and a little sooner and a little deeper."

The comments above may seem that people are critical of the changes. Our findings were the opposite in that people want more involvement and fidelity so that the efforts of some become the efforts of all. This is a natural barrier in systems change, particularly in work as complex as equity. As a next step, consistency and fidelity among building- and district-level leaders to monitor and communicate the district's commitment to dignity and belongingness will support the shift from some to all.

Staff recognize the district's verbal communication around the commitment to dignity and belonging for all students, but also seek clear and consistent actions that demonstrate that commitment.
Staff were widely aware of the commitment in Rose Tree Media School District to dignity and belonging for students and pointed to this audit process as evidence. However, there is a desire to see this commitment embedded much deeper into year-to-year decisions and across related messaging. This could add stability and solidify the actions associated with this commitment. Decisions that seem contrary to Rose Tree Media School District's commitment to dignity and belonging can negatively affect teachers' buy-in and individual investment in the work. In focus groups, the desire for greater consistency and clear action around the dignity and belonging work fell into three subcategories: (1) consistency in student experiences with dignity & belonging; (2) year-to-year consistency; and (3) consistency with words and actions.

Consistency in Student Experiences with Dignity & Belonging
Teachers expressed a desire for greater consistency and uniformity to practices across buildings and within classrooms. At times, staff were unsure what accountability for the district's commitment to dignity and belonging could look like. Some quotes from focus groups that reflect this include:
- "A child's experience at this school is very dependent on the teachers that they have. It doesn't necessarily need to be the same but I wonder on what level the kids feel it. I hear students make observations about the differences of classrooms. We need consistency with what we stand for."
- "There is inconsistency in the support in different buildings."
- "We need time to share what is happening in each building and not having to recreate the wheel all the time at each building."

Year-to-Year Consistency
Teachers discussed a need for consistency as something that affects their willingness to fully engage in topics the district is focused on. For example:

- "Consistency. We start one thing one year and then we never stick to it. […] We don't build on the foundations that we've already made."
- "There is a lot of push right now, but I don't know how it ever gets sustained from year to year so the kids will feel it's valued. It's more of an open conversation."
- "I struggle with starting new things over and over again every year, but never follow through on the other things. I'm wary of trainings because you do it once and then it's gone."

As with all educational efforts, the competing demands of multiple areas of focus with limited professional development time also 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 impacted every organizational level of schools.

Consistency with Words and Actions
At times staff feel dissonance between what the theory around dignity and belonging indicates teachers *should* be doing and what their explicit directions are. There was some tension reflected in what can feel like pressure for students to achieve academically versus time spent on relationships and connection. This is not an uncommon tension, particularly as students and staff return to school from COVID-19 closures and schools are simultaneously concerned with "learning loss" and ensuring students' social and emotional wellbeing in difficult and tumultuous global contexts. As discussed in the research section regarding *Belonging Through a Culture of Dignity*, belonging is a necessary step to achievement. Thus, focusing on students' academic needs necessitates simultaneous consideration for their emotional needs. As schools continue to support the needs of students related to the COVID-19 school closures, it will be important to balance and support what seems like competing demands. Rose Tree Media School District has been unequivocal that work around dignity and belonging should be a support to academic achievement, and not used to usurp time or energy from instruction.

Some supporting examples from focus groups include:
- "We are also trying to focus on getting kids back on track and closing the achievement gap. We feel a little lack of cohesiveness and continuity in understanding the actual plan."
- "When we came back from lockdown we went right back into evaluating testing. When I have students do writing assignments, I see things that make me cry. […] We also need to help these students."
- "I know what the district says the goals are, but not about what the actions are."

In some cases, families expressed the idea that this work is led primarily by parent groups and that there is a desire for the district to take more collective action.
While having the FARE groups as a family-school partnership is an asset in that it provides a forum for family voice, some families would like to see the work of the FARE groups matched with collective action from the district. Teachers and administrators also pointed to the FARE group as a current leader in the work through sending resources for books and holiday celebrations and offering workshops for parents

and teachers. As FARE continues, defining their role clearly and having the district establish their roles and responsibilities would be a good next step to unifying and aligning their work.

Some family members commented:
- "FARE can be really wonderful at the school, and this comes from a person who is a minority family at the school. But, it feels like it is up to FARE and people of color to provide the initiatives instead of the school. I wish the school would provide practices and press the conversation forward instead of burdening the family. And if our work is important and valued by the school, then the school can also take the lead."
- "Our school does cultural heritage day, which brings parents in to talk about their heritage from different countries. They also bring in assemblies. It's just not enough. This is all at the pushing of the parents. It's not self-driven."

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

Students can and do point to celebrations and holidays and famous figures as instances where they learn about various cultures and backgrounds.
Throughout student focus groups, students frequently discussed holidays as how they learn about people, perspectives, and experiences that are both alike and different than their own. Students frequently referred to Hanukkah. Some discussed Diwali and Martin Luther King Jr. Day. As one student described it, "We talk about different holidays that happen and how some people do not celebrate some holidays." Adults shared similar thoughts about using holidays to show value and teach about various backgrounds, experiences, perspectives, and attributes. Staff often pointed to the celebration of a wide range of holidays as something the district is doing to increase a sense of belonging for students.

For example:
- "We celebrate different traditions and cultures."
- "Do a good job with respecting and sharing cultures and holidays."
- "Creating a calendar where there are different holidays and events and offering teachers opportunities to participate."
- "Morning announcements, informational tidbits about things going on that day or month. For example, Kwanza and Hanukah."

- "We have a team of people who put up different holiday displays based on what is being celebrated that month."
- "We look at 'all' the calendars."

The district has invested in purchasing for diverse books in classrooms and libraries.
Staff widely recognized the district's recent investment in expanding its classroom and library resources to include books that are representative of a variety of backgrounds, experiences, attributes, and cultures. Across focus groups, staff are appreciative of the resources available to them and recognize the financial contribution the district and parent groups have provided to ensure access to materials.

Staff comments included:
- "For the past couple of years there has been more purchasing of books around diversity and disabilities in the classroom and library."
- "In the last two years, we've really tried to diversify our book collection."
- "The librarian does a great deal to support this; articles are emailed from both the principal and the librarian. The FARE group and PTG group provide resources."
- "The library is filled with different books that represent different cultures and abilities and general differences that anyone can have."

During school walkthroughs, the program review team noted a variety of posters and visual materials that reflect a celebration of diversity.
The program review team noted a variety of positive, inclusive, and welcoming visuals throughout the buildings. Throughout classrooms and shared spaces (libraries, hallways, cafeterias, etc.), the team noted visual evidence of the following elements:
- Connection
- Components of the environment that promote a sense of belonging
- Representations reflecting a diversity of people, backgrounds, and ideas
- Visible student work
- Physically accessible community spaces

Of note is the Chill Room at Springton Lake Middle School. Our team happened to conduct a site visit on the opening day of this shared space for students, which is designed to provide an environment for students to socialize and connect.

Staff point to morning meeting as a time where they are able to build relationships and connections with one another. Students appreciate it when their teachers greet them in the morning.
When asked what ways their school effectively supports belonging and inclusion for students, many elementary staff members referred to time set aside for morning meeting because it helps to build community in the classroom as well as support student voice. During student focus groups, students cited being greeted by their teacher in the morning when they come in as something that makes them feel accepted by adults at school.

Scheduling decisions reflect a commitment to fostering student social-emotional growth and staff-student relationships.
Rose Tree Media School District has demonstrated a clear commitment to fostering student social-emotional growth and positive staff-student relationships through scheduling decisions. This includes ensuring there is built-in time for dedicated social emotional and ethical lessons at all levels, morning meeting in elementary classrooms, and team-based scheduling at the middle school level. It is a strong asset that relationships and connection are actively included in scheduling decisions at Rose Tree Media School District.

Needs

While the investment in materials and books that reflect a range of backgrounds and experiences is commendable, there is a need for greater clarity and intentionality around the use of these materials.
In focus groups, Rose Tree Media School District's investment in diversifying the available books was widely discussed as something that the district is doing to enhance a sense of belonging for students (as noted in the strengths above). Staff also noted a need for additional support in the use of these materials. Comments typically fall into two general types of desired support: (1) a need for additional training so teachers can understand how and when to incorporate these materials intentionally and (2) clarity around what can be included in classroom content. This need for clear and intentional use of recently purchased materials was noted in parent focus groups, as well. For example, one parent commented: "In terms of diverse materials, there are not enough. It is very surface and very performative and does not go very deep into the conversations that need to be happening about current events and race and gender and all the differences that exist within our community. Even if the materials are in the classroom, I'm not sure the teachers are doing enough with them. There is a growing need for this."

A sample of teacher comments reflecting the desire for support around using the recently purchased materials is below.
- "I would like trainings on the books we should have to address equity and diverse students and on some ideas for what kind of lessons we should do."
- "We can order books and do things that we want on our own, but bigger picture training on resources and cultures would be beneficial to all. Just to make sure we understand different cultures and aren't insulting anyone. It's hard to know all the things for all the people."
- "It's often 'read on your own time'. Staff shouldn't have to find their own time to revamp curriculum. They need time to do this."
- "There has been a push to have more diverse books. I would encourage more training – we try to implement materials."
- "We feel like we might not have support if we include diverse materials and the community pushes back. Will the district have our back?"
- "The diverse library isn't very integrated, and it is teacher by teacher. A teacher might not want to use a new book or might not want to face those conversations from parents. The diverse books that are in the library are not a priority being integrated into the curriculum."

Inconsistent practices around holidays has created confusion for some staff and left some staff and students experiencing less belonging. At the same time, both staff and students refer to holidays as the primary way students learn about diversity.

As discussed in the strengths section, there has been an attempt across buildings to use holidays to teach students about diverse perspectives, and students can and do point to these holidays as a way that they learn about people like and different from themselves. However, it seems that holidays and special occasions may have become the default way to educate students on differences. Rather than being fully included and embedded within the curriculum, it is something "extra". As one staff member commented, "There is a lot of energy around equity, but I wish it wasn't so separate. Right now, it is very focused on an event or holiday, but it needs to be part of our daily living and breathing in the classroom." Another teacher commented, "We celebrate a lot, but don't educate a lot." Students also described defaulting to learning about holidays. For example, "We learn a medium but only when it is a holiday."

Celebrating holidays to practice inclusion can create an expectation for students of color, lesbian or gay youth, or transgender students to join celebrations of diversity while not equally addressing the ways they may feel marginalized in schools. The staff at Rose Tree Media School District seem aware that this might be the case and are cautious of how holidays are celebrated and the need to do something different than what has always been done before. However, many staff are less clear on what to do instead, creating confusion and sometimes defaulting back to the same activities.

Examples of ways staff feel tensions around holidays include:
- "All students struggle at some point. Nothing shocking, typical things around growing up. The Muslim population struggles with Halloween and Christmas, gender nonconforming struggle. The school is not diverse, so it's hard to be in forefront of the minds at school."
- "Still need to support more diversity (not just Christian). The holiday of Christmas was a big focus."
- "I am Jewish, and I was shocked to see the list of songs for our holiday concert. Not that it needed to be more Chanukah songs, but there's so many more students that are Muslim or Jewish who don't celebrate, and the songs might be hard for them to sing."
- "We were told no for changing the Halloween parade to a fall festival. Every time we suggested new things or honoring other religions, and/or to think about our LGBTQ or trans students, there was always a comment about the community and how we had to think about what they liked and/or didn't like."
- "There was a meeting that we shouldn't celebrate holidays but educate. But then we were told to have the Halloween parade."
- "People think, 'Oh, I have a Jewish child in my class this year so I won't do a Christmas project' but then they will resume the project the following year."

Decisions that default back to traditional holiday celebrations may lead to instances where students are excluded. For example, one parent commented, "We do not celebrate Halloween. They have a

classroom they go to and do not participate. They feel isolated around Halloween because there is a big parade and parties and my kids do not participate." Other examples included instances where children did not come to school on days that there were Christmas celebrations.

In contrast, small changes around holidays led to increased feelings of inclusion for families. For example, one parent explained, "There are not many Jewish things in the school district, but they did change a scheduled meeting when I expressed it was on a Jewish holiday and that I could not attend. I felt happy to not be forgotten and feel included in that respect." Establishing a clear plan and guidelines for holidays would be a strong step forward. Increasing celebrations and honoring all with educational structures is a natural next step to the work already being done. This includes giving equal weight and acknowledgement of celebrations of all family traditions – not just majority or minority. This supports core values of understanding and appreciating cultural values and traditions, even if they are not your own. In proceeding with consistent and carefully considered practices around holidays at Rose Tree Media School District, it will be important to communicate consistently with families about the purpose behind holiday celebrations. Providing the plan and purpose around celebrations could empower families to have children participate/not participate. Additionally, having meaningful alternative activities could be a way to honor belonging and dignity of all.

There is a desire among staff to be more knowledgeable about how to integrate inclusive practices and relevant lessons and materials beyond holidays and significant historical figures.
As discussed above, there is currently a lot of reliance on using holidays and significant historical figures to celebrate and teach about a variety of cultures and customs. Using holidays, multi-cultural events, and celebrating diversity are all components in the stages along the path to a truly transformative culturally relevant curriculum as discussed in the research section of this report. That teachers have embraced these components in the first few years of intentional focus in the district and are still aware of work that remains commendable. During focus groups, staff indicated the desire for a more inclusive approach to this work, as well as a need to know how to do this well.

For example:
- "We tend to teach different cultures and lessons at certain times of the year like black history month, but it would make sense to have it included throughout the year."
- "Not to say that it (valuing diversity of student and staff attributes, skills, experiences, and backgrounds) is not valued, but not valued enough above other things – falls into just isolated times and not really integrated all year."
- "Yes, we could use some more training and resources to help with making choices about integrating diverse materials – the district is giving the time and money for these materials."
- "I don't feel able to integrate anything else."
- "I think we could use supports in how to integrate culture into different topics and also more resources."

There was also support among parents and guardians for a more integrated approach to inclusive and culturally relevant learning opportunities for students. For example, "There is room for more robust programming around issues that are difficult like intellectual ability, gender identity, race. I think attempts at having children talk in an informed way are important around those issues. I know that is beyond the curriculum, but I think we could learn a lot by having our kids be more conversant in these issues earlier on. I know it is difficult, but it's one of the most important things the kids can do."

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

There is a strong awareness among all stakeholders that progress since 2018 has been significant. The understanding of the importance of relationships and connection is something that intersects a variety of priority areas. Faculty and staff are genuinely caring and want students to have an experience where dignity and belonging are valued. There has been an increased focus on equity issues related to race over the last few years as current societal events compelled greater dialogue and understanding.

Dignity and belonging is a core value that is demonstrated.

One strength to highlight is the personalized service that is a core value in dignity and belonging. It was often mentioned that the Rose Tree Media School District administration, faculty, and staff are connected to those they serve. One parent shared: *"When we were shopping around for houses, we were genuinely concerned about districts. I reached out as a perspective parent and the superintendent reached out and the principal gave me information about the schools and their values. I was very happy to get that response. I'm sure I sounded crazy, but it was so beneficial."*

Increasing the involvement of groups at all levels.

The district has increased feedback loops to hear the voice of students, families, and the community. This was heard in several comments including the following: *"Most of the communication that has come home, especially during COVID-19, I have been pretty happy about. I feel like they try very hard to walk the fine line to make everybody happy. We would try to be on the safe side but also get the kids back in. They definitely try to make everybody happy. They do a lot of surveys."*

This speaks to the efforts of administration to make decisions that consider multiple perspectives. That sentiment was expressed in focus groups across the board. There are many opportunities for stakeholders to share their needs. Rose Tree Media School District is committed to communicating not only their decisions, but the process by which they receive input and make decisions in the best interest of students, families, and the community.

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.

- The Framework for Inclusivity & Belonging is constructed in a way that illustrates what integration should look like. It is an excellent reference tool for making connections between goals and initiatives that is known by users and referenced frequently.
- The book study on the work of Krownapple and Cobb provided users with common language and understanding educational equity. This supports collective agency while personalizing the work to meet individuals where they are.
- The establishment of equity teams at the district, Board, building, and parent levels provides compelling evidence of the systems work being done to increase collective agency.
- Equity, dignity, and belonging is factored into Board policy, procedures, training, communications, and classrooms.
- Mechanisms to involve students and increase their footprint on the work have evolved, and there are opportunities through clubs and partnership events to enhance student leadership.
- Incorporating topics into the classroom at all levels is fostering the dialogue between educators and students. Their discussion can lead to better integration of ideas and facilitates more authentic understanding of students' needs.

Needs

This section can be extremely useful in identifying gaps where theory has not fully impacted practice. The analysis shows that across multiple data sources stakeholders want everyone in the school community to understand cultural competence and practice it consistently. The collective agency of a district around equity issues relies on the strength of every adult who interacts with students. We want to express that the identified needs do not negate the impact of individual efforts to achieve the goals in the Framework. The needs below illustrate the experiences of students or adults who identified a need for more effective and consistent inclusive practices by all adults to affirm and value them.

Consistent practices related to dignity and belonging are important.

Students expressed concerns about inconsistency in their experiences. As the focus on dignity and belonging has increased, students are aware that the words and actions of adults in the schools should match that intention. While some teachers are extremely aware and adept at employing strategies, students and parents provided non-examples of dignity and belonging:

- "If someone is having trouble some teachers yell at them even though they're doing their best." (Student)
- "One teacher in particular is making inappropriate statements that shouldn't be said or tolerated. I was afraid to say anything because of how my child might have been treated." (Parent)

- "I would say censoring the experiences of underrepresented groups needs to stop. What are you bringing about to create a sense of belonging for underrepresented families who don't see themselves in the community...People look at you a certain way and your family a certain way if you look different and it gets awkward. It's gotten better, but it has a long way to go." (Parent)

While these are singular quotes, they represent multiple examples where students and parents provided ideas for improvement. Parents requested better mechanisms to understand more about the work being done beyond the formal FARE groups. Another strong suggestion was incorporating students more deeply into the work. The district has increased student voice in a variety of ways, and both parents and students would like that to continue. Other suggestions pointed to using data to evaluate how DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) is implemented into lessons and curriculum (a DEI scorecard).

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.
For many students, their experiences at school have been positively impacted by the focus on social and emotional learning, well-being, and belonging. As schools evolve in their diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, it can be instructive to understand which groups of students and adults may not feel as included. The Youth Truth survey data and our focus groups and interviews were consistent in identifying demographics where inclusive practices could be strengthened. The identified trends align with challenges being addressed not only by schools, but professional organizations and society at large. Specifically, understanding the unique needs of students as related to LGBTQ+, religion, race and culture, socioeconomic status, and special education is identified across data sets. This rich and specific data provides a very solid roadmap for future decision making and professional development to increase collective agency for achieving belonging and dignity in Rose Tree Media School District.

LGBTQ and gender identity and gender expectations
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 LGTBQ 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.

The Youth Truth Survey results provided some insights to the differences in comfort in this area among students who identify as LGBTQ+.
- When asked about whether students feel comfortable talking about their **sexual orientation**, student subgroups who identify as LGBTQ+ (only asked in the high school survey) had much lower average responses compared to peers who do not identify as LGBTQ+.
- When asked about whether students feel comfortable talking about their **gender identity**, students who identify as transgender had much lower average responses than students who do not (only asked in the high school survey). This was also true of students who identify as non-binary or gender non-conforming at the high school level. Middle school students who identify

as non-binary or gender non-conforming were more likely to have similar responses to peers who identify as a woman or man.

There were additional themes in these areas discussed during focus groups. 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. Some examples of this theme from staff comments include:

- "We could use support around pronouns and non-binary and LGBTQ inclusion."
- "I feel that sometimes I could use resources and teaching strategies for LGBTQ+ and how to navigate conversations, mostly from a legal standpoint."
- "I think gender [is an example of how students struggle with belonging at school] - there are students that use pronouns that others don't accept or understand."
- "There's a policy in the district around nongender language and it's not always followed. We need to be careful around boy-girl and mom-dad language."

Students discussed their own lived experiences about gender identity and how it affects their sense of belonging at Rose Tree Media School District:

- "There's a lack of knowledge on transgender for students in the school and staff."
- "I have a group of people that accept me, but not everyone is accepting to a trans person like myself. I am misgendered all the time."
- "They know my name, so they call me my name, but they still refer to me as a she sometimes, even though I go by he."
- "Some friends go by different pronouns and some teachers ignore it; some teachers don't care. Most teachers are good about it, but often specialist teachers are noted as not caring."
- An exchange between two students during a focus group:
  - "Lots of other kids have teachers that do they/them."
  - "Every teacher should do that for pronouns."

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.

During family focus groups, parents and guardians also expressed the importance of acceptance and inclusivity around LGBTQ+ students and family structures. Comments included:

- "Our child is a non-binary child. So, accepting inclusive curriculum will help this child and feel like they can participate in the school. They feel very much alone even though they do have friends. There have been issues with misgendering and children not understanding what it means to be non-binary. I think overall, educating children very early on about acceptance of gender would really help. Not just the kids, but the teachers would benefit from more training as well. We had an issue where seating was done by boy-girl, groups in gym were done by boy-girl. My non-binary child would go into a third corner. It's something that I know they can improve on, and society will have to improve on. Our children learning early on acceptance could be so helpful."

- "The school could make me feel more welcome and comfortable by updating communications around applications when it comes to a 'family unit' and how they address parents as husband/wife."
- "They could do specific small things that don't take time or effort. Knowing the school is LGBTQ friendly would be helpful, not just on a badge and knowing that there is support when kids need it."

Another related theme that staff, students, and families discussed regarding what they need to feel a greater sense of belonging 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, enforcement of peer interactions based on traditional gender norms. The following comments illustrate how students experience these trends.

- "I have short hair and I get in trouble for going into the girl's bathroom.
- "My teacher treats girls with more respect than the boys. The boys get yelled at more often. He helps the girls and tells the boys to figure it out."
- "Boys are allowed to be shirtless in swim class, but girls can't wear a two piece."
- "When the girls are hugging each other at recess without masks the teachers do not say anything, but the boys get in trouble for touching each other."

Race and Ethnicity
Throughout the program review, staff and administrators were aware of recent district efforts to be more sensitive to students' lived experiences around race. There was a feeling across staff focus groups that there has been progress in this area recently at Rose Tree Media School District, but that 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.

Examples of how students perceive their experiences in Rose Tree Media School District as related to race from focus groups include:
- "Around me some people treat me the same, but others treat me different because of my skin color."
- "I feel uncomfortable with the color of my skin and the language my mom wants me to speak."
- "There's a group of girls who tease and target black kids. Our teacher handled it privately, so we didn't know what happened."

Examples of how families perceive their experiences in Rose Tree Media School District as related to race from focus groups include:

- "Black students are treated differently. They are talked down to and some teachers even use 'baby talk'."
- "Teachers have asked if my student speaks English because she looks Hispanic."
- "There is a lot of division in the high school and it is discouraging, ethnically based insults and treatment."
- "I feel as though race is playing an issue in the rules and how they are applied."
- "My daughter has been struggling […] She's been asking to be pulled out of school because she feels like she wants to be part of things but isn't feeling included. I was in a meeting with the assistant principal and there was a group that has to do with black kids and they tried to include her in that and that seems to be a good thing. I think that's a good thing about this school, when they see someone struggling, the staff helps her. As a black kid, she's struggled."

Religion
Many of the staff, student, and family experiences at Rose Tree Media School District related to religion are like those expressed about holidays in Priority Area #2. Beyond this, teachers are specifically seeking to better understand 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 lunch, such as not being able to eat pork. For example, one teacher commented, "We need more exposure o student needs or specific relevant information to the student cultural needs or religious needs/implications that effect a student, such as not being able to eat pork but being unsure if food in the lunchroom contains pork."

Socioeconomic Status
While not a major theme among students, teachers were concerned in focus group about differences they observe between students based on socioeconomic status. Teachers were both concerned with *access* for students to different school activities and *treatment* of students because of a lower socioeconomic status. Access-related comments included concerns about inclusion during snack day and in extracurricular activities due to the costs associated with those activities. Treatment comments included concerns about the wide range of economic resources families have in comparison to one another. For example:

- "A lot of kids who stick out are kids who have come from schools that are widely different. Some kids come from very low-income schools as compared to us and we need to do a better job at mediating that."
- "Students struggle with 'I don't fit in'. This is usually for socioeconomic reasons and students whose families struggle financially."
- "There's a very interesting dynamic at school between SES groups. It can cause conflicts when some students are more well-off than others."

In the Youth Truth Survey when asked "*Students from my school value people of diverse incomes (how much money someone makes"* high school students had an average response of 3.30, which is in the 25th percentile.[1] Middle school students had an average response of 3.32, which is in the 51st percentile. High school and middle school had nearly identical responses (3.30 and 3.32), but when compared to other schools nationally who have taken the Youth Truth Survey, the result is different. The middle school average response about valuing people of diverse incomes reflects the 'typical' response in comparison to other middle schools who have taken the Youth Truth survey nationally. The high school average response is below average in comparison to other high schools who have taken the Youth Truth survey nationally.

It should be noted, however, that families did express feeling supported in this area when they needed it. One parent commented, "When we were struggling and needed a car, the district helped with pick-up. They never made us feel bad about our financial situation."

Special Education
Staff recognize a variety of activities that schools offer and ways that students are welcoming and inclusive toward students, such as a unified bocce club. However, they recognized special education as an area they would like support strategies to be more inclusive in daily practices within their classrooms. For example, one teacher stated, "We have life skills kids, but we do not always know what to do. We do not have that type of training." Special education specifically emerged from staff focus groups as an area where students experience less belonging. Teachers were very cognizant of the ways this might be the case for students, such as:

- "Special education and autistic – we are an inclusive environment. However, some kids can feel spotlighted and when it comes to concepts some students are put off or identified doing different instruction (which is necessary) but can feel singled out."
- "Students with behavioral needs struggle to feel belonging and connection."
- "We have some students with pretty significant behaviors and that can sometimes be hard to come back from when a regular ed student is afraid. Maybe we need to do a little more teaching on the front end so that students can be accepted once they have an explosive behavior experience. We need to educate students more on the different disabilities and severity of some disabilities and why peers might act in certain ways. Be more proactive instead of reactive. Teachers can use some of this training, too."

Families also discussed their experiences with special education at Rose Tree Media School District. They were grateful for opportunities that the district offered to be more inclusive of students with special

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[1] DCIU also considered data from the Youth Truth Survey in this report. The Youth Truth Survey was administered to staff, students, and families in November 2021. Average ratings are reported on a scale of 1-5, with the exception of elementary students' results which are on a scale of 1-3. Percentile ranks are a metric to understand the average rating at Rose Tree Media School District in comparison to all other Youth Truth Survey schools nationally at a given level (e.g., elementary). A percentile rank at the 50th percentile would correspond to the median or 'typical' school nationally.

needs. For example, the sensory hour at the Winter Carnival was very appreciated. Families requested more of these types of events to include their children in school-wide or district-wide events.

Families described the support children receive very positively during the focus groups. One parent described the "phenomenal job" the school has done in supporting her son's reading needs. Where families indicate a need for additional support is in resources to know how to access special education support or in navigating the special education process. For example, one family member commented, "I did not know how to find the resources I needed." Another component of the desire to have additional resources and information available was a need for the information that is provided to be culturally aware. As one parent noted, "In the black community there is a stigma attached to medicating children for mental illness. For me, I have no supports or people to help me and guide me through to support my son through special education."

In the Youth Truth Survey, middle school students who report having an IEP or 504 Plan generally feel comfortable talking about a disability they may have relative to general education students. However, at the high school level, the comfort among special education students in talking about a disability they may have with other students sharply declines relative to reported experiences in other schools nationally that have taken the Youth Truth Survey. For general education students at the high school level, the average measure was 3.49 (above the 75th percentile, or well above average compared to other Youth Truth Survey high schools), while the average measure for special education students was 3.04 (below the 25th percentile, or below average compared to other Youth Truth Survey high schools).

Language
During focus groups, both staff and families felt that supports are needed around translation resources for families and students. For example, a staff member commented, "The IEP is only in English and families can't read the report." A parent commented, "For Spanish-speaking parents there should be a way to have documents in Spanish, as well as translating services." Families were also interested in the exposure students have to resources in other languages, for example books in various languages in the library.

Teachers were also interested in additional training to support students who are English learners. Comments included:
- "There is not a lot for English learners in the district. Since teachers are required to teach and plan for this, I feel like this is a training we could use."
- "We maybe need more differentiation for our ELLs."

Insights into the sense of belonging and connectedness for middle and high school students who identify themselves as an English language learner in the Youth Truth Survey (not asked at the elementary level) are below.
- Middle school students who are English language learners report similar overall measures for engagement as compared to non-English language learners at RTMSD. They report greater

academic challenges. English language learners report positive experiences with belonging and collaboration among peers than non-English language learners; however, for relationships with school staff this is reversed.

- High school students who are English language learners report similar overall measures for engagement, academic challenge, and belonging and collaboration among peers as compared to non-English language learners at RTMSD. There is a lower overall measure for relationships with teachers for English language learners compared to non-English language learners.

One overarching point across groups in this section was an expressed desire to examine the ways that students are impacted relative to course pathways and course placements. Having a greater understanding of the unique issues that students face because of diversity could inform strategies for addressing opportunity gaps.

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.
During student focus groups, students generally felt that the adults at school valued their opinions, particularly among the younger grades. Students generally are able to note classroom experiences where they feel their teachers want to know what they think. For example, students commented on the following:

- "Yes, our teacher wants to hear what I think."
- "Yes. We're reading a book about different opinions and the teacher is encouraging to everyone's thoughts."

However, students were less clear on whether they have any decision-making abilities to influence actions within the building environment. For example:

- "No they don't ask our opinion."
- "I feel that since I'm a child and they are an adult they don't care what I have to say."
- "Adults decide everything."
- "No one is listening to us."

Staff and families were also unsure of specific and systematic ways to listen and respond to the opinions of students within the school environment. Within classroom instruction, teachers sometimes discussed that it was hard to include student voice and choice in learning activities due to time constraints for projects or training needed. Some examples from staff illustrating the need to support student voice include:

- "Not enough time to be able to implement UDL (Univeral Design for Learning) for students so they can have choices in demonstrating knowledge. It's hard to fit in projects."
- "We miss a lot of opportunities, but we have limited time during our day or professional development time to think about how to incorporate."

- "Not sure how much student voice is available . On a whole with curriculum it is scripted."
- "I'm not sure if we have had a place for student voice."

Examples from families include:
- "I hope more communication channels open for students, not just for parents."
- "There is no channel of communication for students."
- "Help students find the courage to raise their voices and ask for help."

Inclusion of all staff groups in the school community

A vital component in building a school environment of belonging, dignity, and inclusion is mirroring this environment for the staff expected to practice this with students. A noteworthy step was the intentional decision to include all staff groups – not just instructional staff – in the focus groups for this program review. The importance of office staff, support staff, custodians, and cafeteria staff in ensuring a positive school environment cannot be understated. As one parent noted in describing what ways the school provides a welcoming environment, "The front desk staff is great and courteous, welcome, respectful, inviting. My wife feels the same way. Staff when dropping off and picking up is welcoming. You become a regular." However, there are instances where staff groups are seeking to experience more belonging themselves.

Staff members noted that the voices of custodial staff, office staff, building subs, and paraprofessionals are often missing from decision-making processes. Below are some examples of how these groups described their own sense of belonging in the buildings.

- "We don't always feel in the know. Sometimes we're the last to know."
- "Sometimes I feel as if I am not heard."
- "Not sure that they know all of the skills and knowledge we have gained over the years. They only care about what you can do to add more to your plate. They are clueless to what we do."
- "Sometimes there is a staff barbecue after everyone leaves. We are usually not included in it."

Teachers were also aware of the lack of belonging these groups may experience. For example:

- "Our support staff are not part of decision making – custodian and support staff – not sure if they even feel as part of the building."
- "There is lack of contribution the custodial staff in decision-making (e.g., decisions for potluck dinners and the extra work for them)."
- "The custodial staff does not have a seat at the table for decision-making."
- "The building subs and paraprofessionals are left out and left off emails that teachers get and so support staff don't know things."
- "We don't include teacher aids and custodial staff members enough."

It should also be noted that these groups have not been included in the professional development at Rose Tree Media School District around dignity and belonging thus far, and therefore may feel like they

are not included in the educational team. There is a genuine willingness by teams outside of the professional staff to be part of the work on belonging and dignity. Their unique relationships with students, staff, and community and insights 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.

This section examines belonging and connection within the Rose Tree Media School District community primarily through the Youth Truth Survey results. This survey, conducted in November 2021, assessed students, staff, and family perceptions in several areas. Of particular importance to this report are the survey sections regarding engagement, culture, belonging and peer collaboration, relationships, and emotional & mental health. Because the survey results present overall perceptions as well as differences within subgroups, this section of the report discusses themes wholistically rather than disaggregated into strengths and needs.

There are two important concepts to keep in mind while reading the Youth Truth Survey data.
1. *Average measures* reflect the average response for survey participants at a given level (e.g., high school). This measure is reported on a scale of 1-5, with the exception of elementary students' results, which are on a scale of 1-3. This distinction is critical. A 2.74 among high school students may be considered a generally negative response but would be very positive among elementary students.
2. *Percentile ranks* are a metric to understand the average rating at Rose Tree Media School District relative to all other schools at the same level (e.g., middle schools) who have administered the Youth Truth Survey nationally. A percentile rank at the 50th percentile would correspond to the median or 'typical' school nationally. Results falling at the 60th percentile or above are described as "higher than typical", that is, higher than 60 percent of other schools at the same level that have participated in the Youth Truth Survey. Conversely, results are described as "lower than typical" when they fall below the 40th percentile – or lower than 60 percent of other participating schools at the same level.

Encouraging positive relationships with teachers and school staff.
The relationships section of the Youth Truth Survey describes the degree to which students feel they receive support and personal attention from their teachers. Focus groups also asked students questions

about their relationships with adults at school, such as *"Do you feel like adults at your school value the opinions of students?"* As discussed in Priority Area #3, students were generally positive about their relationships with adults in the building and note the importance of acceptance in contributing to positive student-teacher relationships. For example, one student commented: "My teachers, they accept me, and I can open up to them." Focus groups also asked staff about how they help to support relationship building and belonging for students. Many indicated that things like reserved time for morning meetings help to do this. It should also be noted that during the focus groups for families, parents and guardians frequently referred to their child's teachers and school staff as one of the best things about their child's school.

The data from focus groups on student-teacher relationships is discussed in greater detail throughout Priority Area #3. This section focuses closely on insights from the Youth Truth Survey.

High School
The overall summary measure for relationships for high school students at Rose Tree Media School District was 3.29 out of 5. This is in the 26th percentile, or lower than typical as compared to other participating Youth Truth Survey high schools. Fifty-seven percent of high school students report that there is at least one adult at school who would be willing to help them with a personal problem. This is lower than the percentage at other schools who took the Youth Truth Survey. There were some minor differences between students based on gender identity, identifying as LGBTQ+, and identifying as a person of color. Students identifying as transgender had a lower summary measure for relationships than students who did not identify as transgender (3.19 and 3.31 respectively). Students also reported wide differences based on self-reported grades. Those who reported mostly A grades had an overall measure of 3.41 compared to mostly B's (3.18), mostly C's (3.04), and mostly D's (2.90). During focus groups at times there were students who indicated they sometimes feel uncomfortable or like they must hide their grades and that there are sometimes differences in how teachers treat students based on academic ability.

Generally, student-teacher relationship questions related to academic work were higher than those questions related to students' personal lives. For example, *"How many of your teachers are willing to give extra help on schoolwork if you need it?"* had an overall measure of 3.97 (61st percentile, or higher than typical) and *"How many of your teachers believe that you can get a good grade if you try"* had an overall measure of 4.19 (48th percentile, or about typical). In contrast, "*How many of your teachers make an effort to understand what your life is like outside of school?"* had an overall measure of 2.42 (9th percentile, which is lower than typical) and "*When I'm feeling upset, stressed, or having problems there is an adult in school who I can talk to about it"* had an overall measure of 2.98 (10th percentile, which is lower than typical).

Middle School
The overall summary measure for relationships among middle school students was 3.64 out of 5, which is in the 54th percentile, or about typical relative to other middle schools participating in the Youth Truth Survey. 52 percent of middle school students report that there is at least one adult at school who would be willing to help them with a personal problem. This is similar to the percentage at other middle

schools who participated in the Youth Truth Survey. Subgroup differences were similar to the high school survey, with small differences within groups based on gender identity and identifying as a person of color. The middle school survey did not ask about LGBTQ+ or transgender identity. Again, students who self-reported grades of mostly A's had a higher overall measure than B's and C's.

Elementary School
The overall summary measure for relationships among elementary school students was 2.79 out of 3, which is in the 76th percentile. This is higher than typical elementary schools participating in the Youth Truth Survey. The highest overall rated question was *"Does your teacher treat you with respect?"* while the lowest rated question was "*Does your teacher give you extra help if you need it?"* There were small differences in the overall measures based on gender identity (female/male). Most race/ethnicity groups had an overall measure above the 75th percentile, or higher than typical. However, students identifying as Middle Eastern or North African had an overall score below the 25th percentile, or lower than typical.

Creating a positive peer culture of belonging
The belonging and peer collaboration measure of the Youth Truth survey describes the degree to which students feel welcome at their school and have collaborative relationships with their classmates. Notably, throughout student focus groups, students often referred to their peers as their favorite thing about school.

High School
The overall measure for belonging and peer collaboration at the high school level is 3.38, which is in the 60th percentile, or higher than typical compared to other high schools participating in the Youth Truth Survey. Belonging is measured both in terms of positive experiences (whether other students are friendly, feeling like a part of the school community, etc.) and negative experiences (bullying). Twelve percent of high school students report being bullied or harassed during this school year. This is similar to the percentage of other high schools who have taken the Youth Truth Survey. Generally, students reported working together with peers for classwork and that most students are friendly at rates higher than the median Youth Truth Survey high school. When asked "*I can be myself around other students at this school"* high school students had an overall response of 3.36, which is in the 19th percentile – or lower than typical – compared to other Youth Truth Survey high school students.

Boys/men reported the highest overall measure of belonging at 3.52 (over the 75th percentile, or higher than typical), while girls/women reported an overall measure of 3.33 (over the 50th percentile, or typical) and students who are non-binary or gender non-conforming had an overall measure of 2.97 (below the 10th percentile, or lower than typical). Students identifying as LGBTQ+ had an overall measure of 3.02 (approximately the 10th percentile, or lower than typical), while those who do not identify as LGBTQ+ had an overall measure of 3.52 (over the 75th percentile, or higher than typical). These differences were consistent both for sexual orientation (gay or lesbian and bisexual students had lower overall measures compared to heterosexual students) and for transgender status. Students who do and do not identify as a person of color had similar overall measures of belonging (both between the 60th and 75th percentile, or higher than typical). Students who report receiving mostly A grades had an

overall rating of 3.51 (75th percentile, or above typical), while students who report receiving mostly D grades had an overall rating of 2.80 (below the 10th percentile, or below typical). These indicators can inform the school of opportunities to put structures in place for groups with low percentiles.

Middle School
The overall measure for belonging and peer collaboration at the middle school level is 3.61, which is in the 85th percentile. This is above typical relative to other middle schools that participate in the Youth Truth Survey. Seventeen percent of middle school students report being bullied or harassed during this school year. This is similar to the percentage of other middle schools who have taken the Youth Truth Survey. "*How I look*" and "*Because people think I'm gay (whether I am or not)*" are the top reasons students cite for why they were bullied or harassed. All overall measures for belonging and peer collaboration in the Youth Truth Survey are above the 50th percentile, or about typical.

Similar to the high school responses, there are some notable differences in responses within subgroups, specifically gender identity and self-reported grades. The middle school survey did not capture identification for LGBTQ+ with a breakdown for how students identify within the category.

Elementary School
The overall measure for belonging at the elementary level is 2.64, which is in the 80th percentile. This is higher than typical relative to other elementary schools participating in the Youth Truth Survey. 17 percent of elementary school students report being bullied or harassed during this school year. This is similar to the percentage of other elementary schools participating in the Youth Truth Survey. "*My sex or gender*" and "*A disability that I have*" are the top reasons students cite for why they were bullied or harassed. In focus groups, elementary school students referred to the bus as a location where bullying occurs.

All overall measures for belonging at the elementary level are near or higher than the 75th percentile, or higher than typical.

Emphasizing engagement and value in learning
The engagement section of the Youth Truth Survey describes the degree to which students perceive high expectations and feel engaged with their school and their education.

High School
The overall measure for engagement in the Youth Truth Survey for students at the high school level was a 3.36 (out of 5), which is in the 14th percentile. This is lower than typical relative to other high schools participating in the Youth Truth Survey. There are some differences in perceptions within student subgroups. Students identifying as a girl/woman reported the highest overall engagement (3.49) compared to boys/men (3.33) and non-binary or gender non-conforming (3.11). Students identifying as LGBTQ+ also are experiencing less engagement than those who do not (3.22 compared to 3.43). There are not large differences between the overall engagement measure for students identifying or not identifying as a person of color, but there are differences in experiences between different

races/ethnicities. Also of note are large differences in the perceptions around engagement for students who report receiving mostly A grades (3.62) compared to B's (3.15), C's (2.84), and D's (2.98).

Middle School
The overall measure for engagement in the Youth Truth Survey for students in middle school at Rose Tree Media School District was 3.44 (out of 5), which is in the 48th percentile. This is about typical relative to other middle schools participating in the Youth Truth Survey. Of note across all engagement-related questions is that students who self-report receiving mostly A grades report much higher engagement (3.58 overall) versus students reporting mostly B's (3.26 overall) and mostly C's (2.89 overall). There were also differences between students according to gender identity. Students identifying as a girl reported the highest overall engagement (3.60), followed by boys (3.41) and students who are non-binary or gender non-conforming (3.36). There were not great differences between students who do or do not identify as a person of color, although there were differences between different races/ethnicities suggesting that some students within specific racial groups are experiencing less engagement than others.

Elementary School
The overall measure for engagement in the Youth Truth Survey for elementary students was 2.83, which is in the 48th percentile. This is about typical relative to other elementary schools participating in the Youth Truth Survey. Measures by gender identity were similar across groups (Male: 2.84; Female: 2.81). Middle Eastern or North African students and Black or African American students reported the highest overall engagement (2.93 and 2.92 respectively), while Asian or Asian American and Hispanic or Latina/o/x students reported the lowest (2.74 and 2.70 respectively).

Taking proactive steps toward mental health

The Emotional & Mental Health section of the Youth Truth Survey asked students to describe the degree to which they have external supports and intrinsic resources they can use to cope with problems. This section asked questions about support they have in school and outside of school. The data discussed in this report, though, focuses primarily on support students perceive in school and on the skills students feel they possess.

High School
The Youth Truth Survey results for high school students suggest that students do not sense strong support at school for their emotional and mental health. The overall response when asked "*When I'm feeling upset, stressed, or having problems my school has programs or services that can help me*" was 2.73, which is in the 4th percentile, or lower than typical relative to other Youth Truth Survey high schools. Students who self-reported receiving mostly D's or below had a much higher overall response of 3.25, which is higher than the 50th percentile and about typical. This indicates that students who are struggling academically do recognize the programs or services available to help them in school.

The overall response when asked "*When I'm feeling upset, stressed, or having problems there is an adult from school who I can talk to about it*" was 2.89, which is in the 10th percentile, or lower than typical relative to other Youth Truth Survey high schools.

The overall response when asked "*When I'm feeling upset, stressed, or having problems I know some ways to make myself feel better or cope with it*" was 3.79 (the 25th percentile, or lower than typical). Rose Tree Media School District's new SEE curriculum focuses on teaching related skills to students. As students participate in these lessons over time, this measure can be reassessed to measure growth or difference from this measure.

Middle School
Perceived emotional and mental health support at the middle school level was higher relative to the high school responses. The overall response when asked "*When I'm feeling upset, stressed, or having problems my school has programs or services that can help me*" was 3.21. This is in the 34th percentile, or lower than typical relative to other Youth Truth Survey middle schools. Perceived supports are highest among 6th grade students and lowest among 8th grade students.

The overall response when asked "*When I'm feeling upset, stressed, or having problems there is an adult from school who I can talk to about it*" was 3.24, which is in the 51st percentile. This is typical compared to other middle schools participating in the Youth Truth Survey.

The overall response when asked "*When I'm feeling upset, stressed, or having problems I know some ways to make myself feel better or cope with it*" was 3.90, which is in the 66th percentile. This is higher than typical relative to other middle schools participating in the Youth Truth survey.

*Elementary students were not asked the emotional and mental health series of questions.

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. This experience of a decreasing sense of connection to their child's school was also discussed in focus groups. As one parent described:

> Where I really see a big problem is, in elementary school I felt very connected, but once the kids reach middle school we are very cut off. I do not feel that we are in the classrooms and connecting with teachers. It feels like we drop the kids off and don't know what is happening in the schools. I just wanted to be invited to be a part of the school. […] I miss creating that community. I have been part of the FARE meetings and have taken part in it. I haven't seen that connection as much. PTG groups are small and the same people come. It becomes so separated from the parents. Maybe there is room to create more of a community feel. It feels like it's never part of the community.

During focus groups, families who perceived more ability to connect with other parents as well as more communication from teachers and the school were more likely to discuss their experiences positively. Parents who sought more connection to their child's school environment suggested additional parent events at schools as COVID-19 restrictions permit, perhaps by grade level rather than whole-school events.

Among all three levels, communication and feedback was one of the lowest rated themes in the Youth Truth Survey in comparison to other participating schools. The lowest rated question across all three levels was "*I receive regular feedback about my child's progress*" (which is in the Communication & Feedback section of questions). 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. Drilling down into this data to better understand what is working and where gaps in communication exist would be helpful as this is a broad statement to decipher. Additionally, articulating expectations and mechanisms around 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.

Rose Tree Media School District has created a Framework that is grounded in the research on essential components to support dignity and belonging. As a result, there are key areas to understand in educational equity, social, emotional, and ethical learning. Expanding expertise in the sixteen goals in the Framework for Inclusivity & Belonging has been scaffolded to grow capacity in a very intentional way. For the past several years, the district has immersed stakeholders at every level in training, book studies, focus groups, and work teams to impact practice. Dialogue has been an essential part of changing culture and establishing clear expectations. 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. Those gaps could be groups that are not fully experiencing belonging and dignity because of actions (or inaction). The research section discusses how

moving from diversity to inclusion can be a powerful way to shift theory to action. *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.

The district has communicated that belonging and dignity is the mission, and students and families are invested and aware. Because the district is taking courageous steps to ensure equity, the successes are evident. However, everyone recognizes that 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. In many focus groups, participants suggested having a way to provide specific feedback to guide coaching and personalized training. Finding ways to increase student voice is something requested by all stakeholder groups, not just students. Staff want to understand gaps perceived by students, students want increased advocacy, and parents/community members want to ensure that the district knows opportunities for continuous improvement. One topic that came up repeatedly was for the district to establish more authentic means for dialogue when issues arise. As the district now has an Administrator for Safe and Inclusive Schools, the continuation of ongoing focus groups or other mechanisms for dialogue when issues arise would be encouraged. 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. This recommendation is not intended to suggest ways to bring complaints as the district is responsive to those. It is more important to create systems for ongoing feedback loops and response structures. Identifying who conducts such activities and how they process and share the feedback could be a starting point on this recommendation. The research section discusses how organizations can move from understanding diversity to being inclusive.

Prioritize "what to do" versus "what not to do."

As entities engage in work around diversity, equity and inclusion, the starting point is often understanding the implicit bias (systemic and personal) that happens because of not knowing, understanding, or empathizing. A strong theme among all groups and topics below was that district staff are gaining awareness of what "not to do" as it relates to a particular group. As stated in the research section, to move <u>beyond</u> diversity and <u>to</u> 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).

Understanding what "not to do" was deemed positive by many groups that we spoke with. One overarching theme, however, was that avoiding harm or hurt is the way that practitioners approach this work. That focus 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. These are just a few examples. This recommendation aligns well with shifting theory to action. 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.
The district has done an admirable job of increasing buy-in over the course of the past years. Rather than force adoption of the principles and practices, there has been shared vision, collaborative decision making, meaningful structures for dialogue, and effective professional development. It was a point of pride among many groups that the work on dignity and belonging has been an extremely collaborative process with multiple voices at the table. Often, the people engaged in the work are passionate about it and are assisting as key communicators. Task force members are leaders who help support the work in buildings and across departments. As the district seeks to achieve greater impact on all stakeholders, one consideration is to establish how everyone can and should have a role in the work. Some perceive this as voluntary, and that can preclude them from taking risks. Clear and measurable action steps and non-negotiables with defined roles and an accountability mechanism will assist the shift to a model in which all take part. Along with growing the collective capacity in many ways, the district is now poised to select specific goals and non-negotiables that can be measured and assessed for effectiveness. One other area to consider is 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 decision-making 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).
The data from this program review has revealed that curriculum and instruction has been a strong consideration in work on belonging and dignity. Finding ways to represent students lived experiences in what they learn in classrooms honors their dignity and increases their sense of belonging. It has been done in numerous ways with consideration of certain systems (literature selections, social and

emotional learning). Curricular changes are often associated with selecting certain books or increasing representation of a particular group. It is important and supportive to make those changes. 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, culturally competent practices, and instruction to ensure that the delivery of content is not compromised.

From a systems perspective, tools to consider intentional selection of materials for meeting academic skills and standards can be achieved through various mechanisms. A few are suggested below:
- A backwards design approach such as Understanding by Design would identify what students should know and be able to do from a skills perspective and be aligned with priority standards. How will skills be assessed, and from there the content to support the learning is selected.
- Universal Design for Learning is a tool used in lesson planning that ensures access for all learners. It examines the content, instructional strategies, and assessment practices through the lens of possible barriers to access and achievement. This could be an effective way to assess how new resources meet the needs of all learners.
- Including structures to encourage connection such as "get to know me" activities and check-ins could help inform teachers and support staff about the unique needs of their learners (food restrictions, traditions celebrated) in an authentic way that can increase trust and participation.

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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Appendix A: Stakeholder Participation

The DCIU program review team conducted a total of 211 focus groups, interviews, and classroom walkthroughs, providing thousands of data points to consider in this program review report. This section synthesizes the activities to engage members of the Rose Tree Media School District community.

Full-day site visits at each school building on the following dates. During site visits, the DCIU program review team conducted classroom walkthroughs and focus groups with students, building administrators, guidance teams, office staff, custodians, and instructional assistants.

- Glenwood Elementary: December 6, 2021
- Indian Lane Elementary: December 6, 2021
- Media Elementary: December 7, 2021
- Rose Tree Elementary: December 7, 2021
- Springton Lake Middle School: December 9, 2021 and January 18, 2022
- Penncrest High School: December 13, 2021

A full-day of focus groups for district administrators, teachers, and building-level equity teams for each of the six schools occurred on January 3, 2022.

Ten focus groups for parents and guardians were held virtually via Zoom. Building-specific focus groups occurred in conjunction with an existing FARE or PTG meeting where possible. A total of 57 parents participated.

- Glenwood Elementary: January 12, 2022 at 6:30 p.m.
- Indian Lane Elementary: January 19, 2022 at 6:15 p.m.
- Media Elementary: January 10, 2022 at 6:30 p.m.
- Rose Tree Elementary: January 11, 2022 at 7:00 p.m.
- Springton Lake Middle School: January 19, 2022 at 7:00 p.m.
- Penncrest High School: January 10, 2022 at 5:45 p.m.
- Open to all parents and guardians:
  - January 31, 2022 at 12:00 p.m.
  - January 31, 2022 at 6:00 p.m.
  - February 2, 2022 at 12:30 p.m.
  - February 2, 2022 at 6:00 p.m.

Appendix B: Related Summary Youth Truth Survey Data

DCIU also considered the data from the Youth Truth Survey, which was administered to staff, students, and families in November 2021. The following table reflects summary data in sections of the survey used in this report by level and stakeholder group. The average rating reflects the average on a scale of 1 to 5 across all Rose Tree Media School District participants. The percentile rank is a metric to understand the average rating at Rose Tree Media School District in comparison to all other Youth Truth Survey schools at a given level (e.g., elementary). A percentile rank at the 50th percentile would correspond to the median or 'typical' school nationally.

Measure & Description	Elementary	Middle School	High School
Engagement Describes the degree to which stakeholders are engaged in their school and empowered to influence decision-making.	**Families** Average rating: 3.80 Percentile rank: 61st **Staff** Average rating: 4.01 Percentile rank: 30th **Students** Average rating: 2.83 Percentile rank: 48th	**Families** Average rating: 3.53 Percentile rank: 54th **Staff** Average rating: 3.44 Percentile rank: 48th **Students** Average rating: 3.36 Percentile rank: 14th	**Families** Average rating: 3.31 Percentile rank: 41st **Staff** Average rating: 3.71 Percentile rank: 15th **Students** Average rating: 3.36 Percentile rank: 14th
Relationships Describes the degree to which stakeholders experience positive relationships in their school based on respect, care, and approachability.	**Families** Average rating: 4.37 Percentile rank: 78th **Staff** Average rating: 4.23 Percentile rank: 57th **Students** Average rating: 2.79 Percentile rank: 76th	**Families** Average rating: 4.13 Percentile rank: 69th **Staff** Average rating: 4.02 Percentile rank: 42nd **Students** Average rating: 3.64 Percentile rank: 54th	**Families** Average rating: 3.83 Percentile rank: 45th **Staff** Average rating: 3.87 Percentile rank: 28th **Students** Average rating: 3.29 Percentile rank: 26th
Culture Describes the degree to which stakeholders believe their school fosters shared goals, respect, fairness, and diversity.	**Families** Average rating: 4.20 Percentile rank: 77th **Staff** Average rating: 3.89 Percentile rank: 44th **Students** Average rating: 2.37 Percentile rank: 67th	**Families** Average rating: 4.02 Percentile rank: 76th **Staff** Average rating: 3.65 Percentile rank: 36th **Students** Average rating: 3.43 Percentile rank: 43rd	**Families** Average rating: 3.64 Percentile rank: 39th **Staff** Average rating: 3.87 Percentile rank: 28th **Students** Average rating: 3.13 Percentile rank: 27th