



West Orange Public Schools
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Superintendent of Schools

J. Scott Cascone, Ed. D.

June 3, 2020

Dear West Orange Public School Community,

At Monday night's public Board of Education meeting, we were joined by a number of members of our community and were appreciative of the honest and thoughtful feedback provided to the Board of Education and me regarding the current situation in which our country and our community finds itself following the tragic murder of George Floyd. As we stand in unity with our Black brothers and sisters, we also pray that we emerge from this time of strife safely, more enlightened, and unified as a county.

The board members, teachers' association president Mr. Maniscalco, and I all expressed our strong convictions relative to, among other things, ensuring that our public schools are bias free environments in which all students are treated equitably and have equal opportunities to grow socially as well as academically.

Understandably, members of the public are eager and anxious to understand what the district's approach and response will be moving forward. Likewise, the board, administration, and professional staff are also eager to continue this work. However, like any complex and challenging endeavor, research, inclusive feedback and thoughtful planning are essential in order to ensure that our work is not only of the highest quality but also sustainable moving forward.

Therefore, in the short term, in order to activate this feedback gathering, on Thursday, June 11, I and board leadership will participate in a town hall forum organized by the West Orange municipal government and facilitated by Dr. David Jones. Further, the district's Diversity, Equity, and Access Committee which is comprised of both community members and staff will be convened as soon as possible. Unfortunately, the great work which this committee had started this year was temporarily put on pause like so many other initiatives due to the school closures.

However, prior to the closures, one of the crucial actions taken by this committee was to administer a school climate and culture survey to parents, students, and staff. While this data was analyzed preliminarily, one of the charges of the reconvened committee will be to take a "deep dive" into this data to identify findings and prospective actions which can be taken.

That being said, as many community members came to the meeting Monday night asking what we will do moving forward to eliminate systemic racism and bias from our school systems, I thought it was important to emphasize the work which has already been ongoing in this regard in the West Orange Public Schools. This is reflected not only in this year's district goals adopted under the leadership of the Board of Education <https://www.woboe.org/Page/7366> ; but also the work of the

district's Diversity, Equity, and Access Committee led by our Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction Mrs. De Mendez.

This committee although facilitated by district administration in collaboration with faculty, and community members was also spearheaded by the Board of Education and remains a top priority to the board. Certainly, the most recent events we witnessed in our country only further reiterate and emphasize the critical nature of this work

Below is a link to the district website, wherein you may find documents, artifacts, and action plans associated not only with the work of the Diversity, Equity, and Access Committee; but also the board approved district Comprehensive Equity Plan.

<https://www.woboe.org/Page/7729>

Further, please find an additional, though not comprehensive list of activities and initiatives in which district leaders, staff, and board members engaged this year relative to Diversity, Equity, and Access.

- Team of administrators attended a 6-part Equity Leadership Network through the Rutgers Institute for Improving Student Achievement. <http://riisa.gse.rutgers.edu/Home>
- The full board attended an equity training sponsored by the New Jersey School Boards Association.
- District administration presented twice at public BOE meetings, in November 2019, and February 2020 regarding the Amistad implementation. The presentations can be found via the following link. <https://www.woboe.org/domain/216>
- A district team attended Amistad Commission training at the West Orange Public Library offered by the local unit of the NAACP.
- School administrators attended trainings on Restorative Justice. A Restorative Practices program and suite were established at the high school.
- Conducted a disproportionality analysis of suspension, student achievement, and course enrollment data. Met with the local unit of the NAACP to share results.
- Disproportionality data informed administrator and teacher goals as well as programmatic adjustments such as an evaluation of our Basic Skills Program.
- District Social Studies Department teachers were trained on facilitating critical conversations regarding sensitive social issues.
- District ELA and Media Specialists established a 2020-21 budgetary priority for the expansion of culturally and racially relevant student texts.
- The BOE is engaged in the review, revision, and updating of the policy manual with a critical eye on equity including the development of an equity policy.
- District wide professional learning day scheduled for May 15, 2020 on understanding our worldview, life space and how that might inform the way we understand, empathize with, and approach our students and conversations about race and unconscious bias will be rescheduled to next year.
- 2nd Annual Diversity Job Fair (cancelled due to public health emergency)

- Extensive training on social emotional learning, mindfulness and nurturing student centered classrooms and practices attended by numerous staff members.
- Extensive district wide observances of Black History and Hispanic Heritage Months.
- In August, the district leadership team will be equipped with diversity training.
- The BOE will convene for a summer retreat, wherein, the Comprehensive Equity Plan will be unpacked, appropriate district goals will be developed for the 2020-21 school year.

While we acknowledge that there is still much work to do, I would have been remiss, if I did not call attention to the relevant and outstanding work already being conducted in the school district under the direction of the school district administration, leadership of the Board of Education and initiative of our professional staff. Clearly, while the latest in a long history of unacceptable tragedies for the Black community was not the impetus for the aforementioned work; it will no doubt stiffen our resolve to see it through to fruition.

On behalf of the Board of Education, district administration and staff I thank you for your time and consideration and we are here for ALL of you with open eyes, ears, hearts and minds. We welcome your ideas and suggestions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. Scott Cascone". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

J. Scott Cascone, Ed. D.
Superintendent of Schools