GRAND RIVER
SOLUTIONS

Report Regarding Climate, Hiring, and Retention

Verona Public Schools

July 2022

Submitted by:
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Dear Dr. Charles R. Miller,

It is my distinct pleasure to submit this report in response to Verona Public School's ("the District" or "District") request for an evaluation, feedback, and recommendations for the district's climate and culture, as well as hiring, recruitment, and retention of staff through the lens of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). This report is intended to address both areas; upon receipt of feedback from the District, this report will then be finalized for presentation to the Board of Education.

As a starting point, it is important to acknowledge several key points regarding any work involving diversity, equity, and inclusion. These recommendations are designed to contribute to a campus culture that values, and demonstrates, tolerance and inclusivity. For teaching staff, greater diversity enhances the quality of teaching by reducing the likelihood of conceptual blind spots by increasing the likelihood of working with colleagues from different perspectives and backgrounds.[1] Overall, the District is highly heterogenous, and so affirmative and intentional steps are needed to increase the cultural understanding of the teaching staff, which will in turn contribute to greater learning experiences for all students.

As noted by the New Jersey Department of Education,[2] studies show that students of color taught by at least one teacher of color in grades K-5 have increased graduation rates and improved standardized test scores (Carver-Thomas, 2018). Students who are exposed to diversity teachings have improved cognitive skills, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills (Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), 2018). Regular interactions with a variety of racial and ethnic groups help students debunk stereotypes and reduce unconscious bias inside and outside of the classroom (CCSSO, 2018). This latter point is increasingly important, as diversity of the student body and teaching and administrative staff enriches the overall educational experience, and better prepares students for leadership roles in an increasingly complex and multicultural society.

It is also critical to note that, when considering the incorporation of sound hiring practices, none of these recommendations are designed to suggest that any employee

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[1] When referring to diversity of staff, this may include race, color, culture, sexual orientation, seen and hidden disabilities, neurodivergence, immigration status, and/or any category or group that is currently under-represented within the District's predominantly white teaching and administrative staff, and leadership.

[2] https://www.nj.gov/education/rpi/diversityandequity/diversityinitiatives/dataresearch/

should be hired *because of* their race, color, national origin, or on the basis of any protected category. Instead, these recommendations are designed to foster better overall practices, to assist with casting the net more widely, and to ensure that the District has the best possible opportunity to find, recruit, hire, and retain the best possible staff.

HEARD AT VERONA

The following represent some of the direct quotes provided by students during focus groups and other meetings. Those direct quotes that might have identified the speaker are not included here, nor are those comments that are duplicative of sentiments expressed here included[3]:

- I feel as I cannot express myself, when we read books with diverse points of view, I feel as if they would laugh at me, so I do not make comments

- If we read books by different authors from different backgrounds, some teachers don't know how to stop the comments by other students.

- There is a group, well-respected because of their sports . . . I have seen them harassing their female friends who put up with it because of who the guys are. . . . The teachers don't do anything, other than generally "hey stop that," but do not set boundaries.

- . . . a male student was sexually harassed, I heard about it in a class, they were laughing about it. They were making it into a joke, they were confused why he would even be uncomfortable.

- Teachers jump more about being loud, not about the content of comments. In (one) class, we were discussing . . . our teacher did not take a stance, he just kept saying "stop fighting stop fighting." . . .   The teacher finally stopped it, but only silenced me and not the other student, that it was my fault for getting riled up.

- In history (class), the ones who are not educated are allowed to be so wrong because they are so loud, if you present a more inclusive perspective, the looks,

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[3] By listing these comments, this is not intended to prove that these comments are true, but instead that these were sentiments expressed by several dozen of the students with whom the reviewer met, or who otherwise provided feedback.

the whispering, you will be the one to get in trouble if you speak back, the offensive kids are not seen as a bad.

- In (class), . . . it caught me off guard, I felt so isolated, the kids around me were not my friends I am usually with, I heard them talking about the n-word slur, f slur, the slurs were thrown around, said really casually. The way they said it, it was not a big deal to them. They were using the words to be offensive, it made me freeze in my seat.

- I hear students use the f-slur just to antagonize other students. No one is told "hey, don't say that."

- The "r-word" [retard] is used all the time, either no one educated the students why it is offensive, or they know and don't care.

- The popular kids, the other students know who they are, they are the most outspoken in making these slurs, they are closer to the teachers so everyone knows they will not get in trouble.

- The athletes, on more than one team, they will not get in trouble, nothing will be done if it is an athlete. If an athlete says it and the other person reacts, that other person gets in trouble. So it feels like the administration values certain students over others.

- We learn what is going on in our school administration through rumors, and the news that you get depends on which rumors are shared with you.

- We had one really great teacher, he made a safe space for us, he allowed us to just deal with our thoughts. He created a safe space for us to express our views. But then some parents got offended. There was so much pushback from parents, that is why he had to leave. It is the pushback from the parents who are in the ear of the principal or the school board. Once he was made to feel unwelcome, a lot of us knew we were unwelcome, too.

- All of that pushback to diversity initiatives by those parents at the Board of Ed meetings, I think those parents don't realize that students are listening. When offensive comments are made, we hear them, and we remember.

- I was called names all because of my sexuality. It did not matter whether the words were accurate or not, no one should go through that. I reported it, friends of mine who were there reported it. Nothing happened.

- Some parents don't know what it feels like to deal with issues of race, feeling different, having a student who is questioning their sexuality, or having a student who has disabilities or who learns differently. They do not see what it might feel like. The pushback seems to be only from the parents whose children are not dealing with those issues. They are not facing those problems, so they think there are no problems.

- The teacher I used to go to for support, they are no longer here, no longer a constant in my life. But the school never addressed it. I guess because they didn't care what it might feel like to some of the students.

- My guidance counselor, it's the third one I've had in three years. Why make a relationship with them? They'll be gone in a minute.

- Guidance counselors, they can help with classes, but mine doesn't even ask about what I'm going through, even though they know about it.

- The safe teachers are the ones being attacked by the parents. And I feel bad that they have to be the ones to do that for us. They should not have to be our social worker too, but they have to do that for us. . . . All of the safe space teachers are gone. It hurts.

1. METHODOLOGY

These recommendations are based upon the following:

1. A review of documents provided by the District, with the District providing the following documents:
   2022 Human Resources Report
   Student disciplinary data
   Applicant pool data
   2021 – 2022 HIB data
   2015 climate survey data from Brookdale, F.N, Brown, Forrest Avenue, H.B. Whitehorne, Laning Avenue, and Verona High School

2. The results of a climate survey, with 158 students and 95 employees participating.

Key information from the recent climate survey has been used to inform many of the recommendations in this report. Some key findings include:

- Only 37.5% of women agree that people at the middle school or high school can have honest conversations about difficult topics like race and current events, as compared to 52.6% of men. It is also important to note that far fewer high school students (38%) agree with the statement that they can have honest conversations about race and current events, as compared to 56% of middle schoolers.

- Only 57% of students report that they are treated respectfully by adults at the school.

- Only 54% of all students agreed that teachers take student concerns seriously, with high schoolers less likely to agree as compared to middle school students.

- Of all students who reported negative interactions with other students or with teachers, the top reasons cited were LGBTQ status, skin color, race or ethnicity, or disability (which includes perceived disability).

- 76% of white students agreed that there are other people at school who understand them and their experiences, whereas only 52.9% of non-white students agree with that statement.

- Only 55% of high schoolers report knowing how to report bullying, or where to go for help at school, as compared to 82.5% of middle school students.

- 25% of all students stated that they disagreed with the statement that students at school respect each other, with non-white students most likely to have disagreed, and high schoolers less likely to agree as compared to middle schoolers.

- 27% of students reported that others are picked on due to race or ethnicity, and 44% reported that students are picked on or bullied because of LGBTQ status.

- For those reporting having experienced bullying comments either in person or online, the most common reasons provided were LGBTQ status or ethnicity.

3. Interviews with School and District staff, teachers, and students.

4. Multiple meetings with members of the six Diversity Committee subcommittees.

5. Emails received from members of the Verona community, offering comments for consideration.

II.   RECOMMENDATIONS REGARDING SCHOOL CLIMATE AND CULTURE

1. Classroom Management: Numerous students raised concerns about the difficulties of participating in classroom discussions, particularly discussions involving current events, history, or literature that touched on themes of race, sexual orientation, and similar topics. Some reported feeling shut out of discussions, others reported both subtle and overt slurs and denigrating comments made to them when they participated in these discussions. In addition, it is strongly recommended that the District incorporate and require all faculty to participate in annual professional development specific to culturally responsive pedagogy.

    A. Consider advanced training for all teachers on classroom management skills, including how to facilitate delicate, difficult or controversial discussions and how to handle outbursts such as disparaging comments or slurs (and responses to those) without the need for disciplinary measures, and how to follow up with those students who were on the receiving end of negative or disparaging comments relating to race, sexual orientation, or other protected characteristics to provide resources, support, and set expectations on next steps.

    B. Many students reported that teachers often tried to end challenging classroom discussions by saying "we should not be talking about [the subject at issue]." To many students, instead of being seen as classroom management, the dismissal of the topic made students feel that the teacher did not care, rather than a message that the teacher was trying to avoid an uncomfortable discussion that the teacher was unable to manage. Thus, it is recommended that the District provide teachers with training and support for how to effectively pause a difficult conversation that they are not ready to

address, while clearly acknowledging that it will be further discussed at another time and provide teachers with information about where to go for planning support when that occurs, so they can meaningfully prepare to address the topic in the follow-up.

C. When showing videos with the potential to cause distress, it is recommended that teachers provide a content warning, so that those who might be triggered can emotionally prepare. This is not to suggest that students should be excluded or automatically excused from such lessons, but only that they be allowed to prepare, which might include talking to a parent, therapist, or friend ahead of time.

D. Consider ensuring that all teachers, particularly those in the high school, have a shared understanding of words and phrases that are considered inappropriate or denigrating slurs. As language frequently evolves, it is strongly recommended that this not be a one-time discussion, but instead become infused into teachers' staff meetings or professional development on an ongoing basis. As part of these discussions or trainings, the District, together with school leadership, might consider scripting appropriate responses that are expected of teaching staff (such as "that is not okay," or "we don't say that here") so that the rationale for stopping discussion is clear, rather than simply changing the topic without providing the rationale. Consider also providing support for teachers to provide a foundation and context prior to introduce difficult photos or texts, including those that include language that today would not be acceptable.

E. Several students and parents raised concerns that students with certain hidden disabilities (anxiety, depression, ADHD, etc.) were subjected to ableist language, and/or to discipline or correction, based on manifestations of that disability in class. For this reason, it is recommended that teacher professional development include lessons on inclusive teaching practices when working with students with hidden disabilities.

2. Sexual Harassment, Harassment on the Basis of Sex, and Title IX:
A. It appears that the scope and requirements of Title IX are poorly understood throughout the District, with the exception of the Title IX Coordinator. For example, several staff stated that, in a case alleging sexual misconduct, they would immediately interview an accused student to better determine whether it was more likely than not that the conduct at issue had occurred. However, Title IX has very specific requirements regarding written notice to any student prior to being interviewed, as well as additional specific steps that must be taken. It is strongly suggested that all employees receive training on their Title

IX obligations, and that all who might otherwise conduct a HIB investigation receive training on recognizing Title IX allegations so that they may properly respond in keeping with federal requirements. As part of this training, all Responsible Employees (designated by the Department of Education as all employees with the exception of therapists, counselors, and others who are privileged by law) should also learn the appropriate way to listen to a student voicing a potential concern, including ways to avoid victim-blaming or dismissive language.[4]

B. It is strongly recommended that the name and contact information for the District's Title IX Coordinator be posted on the District's website, as required by the May 2020 Final Rule from the Department of Education.

C. The 2020 Title IX regulations (which are still in place) require that all who have any role in the Title IX process receive training on certain specified topics, including avoidance of bias and conflict of interest, as well as information on weighing evidence and handling appeals. It is strongly suggested that all who may have a role in any Title IX matters, including all members of the Board of Education who may handle an appeal, receive such training.

D. Several of those interviewed described situations that would generally fall under Title IX, and yet were not handled using compliant Title IX processes. This includes the "outing" of a student by disclosing their sexual orientation without consent[5]; comments from a staff member about expectations that female students should pursue nursing or teaching, rather than engineering; slurs regarding sexual orientation; and, denying trans students the right to use the bathroom associated with their identified gender. As noted above, proper training could better assist all teachers and staff in understanding their Title IX obligations.

E. Students reported experiencing comments from other students in class that, if true, would fall under the District's definition of sexual harassment. Some of these comments were directed by members of one sex or gender toward members of the same sex or gender, and thus may not have been recognized by teachers who overheard those comments as sexual harassment. It is strongly recommended that teachers and administrators participate in

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[4] For example, some staff in student-facing roles referred to some HIB cases as "just kids being kids." At least one staff member shared that they had reflected this sentiment back to a student.

[5] According to more than one student, students have been "outed" to their parents as part of the HIB investigation process. All staff, including investigators, are urged to avoid outing any student to their parents, as it is always unknown whether doing so might subject the student to greater emotional or physical harm.

advanced training on recognizing sexual harassment and their role in prevention and response.

3. Consider teaching, modeling, and emphasizing people-first language (PFL) throughout all communications, both verbal and written. For example, instead of referring to a student as "autistic," PFL would suggest "person with autism." Similarly, instead of "disabled child," PFL would suggest "child with a disability" as a more appropriate term. In referring to a particular student in communications with them or their family, it is best practice to ask the student what kind of language they prefer. Not every person with a disability (or disabled person) prefers the same identifying language.

4. Many high school students in particular noted that they had formed close ties over the years with teachers and staff who left the District. For some of these students, that teacher or staff person was their "safe place" within the school. Students, particularly students of color and LGBTQ+ students, noted that the changes were not only disruptive to the educational environment, but also particularly disruptive to their emotional well-being. These same students noted that there was very little, if any, communication from school leadership about the changes, leaving the students to wonder why their "safe person" was gone. This lack of official communication to the students also resulted in increased speculation as to the reasons for the employee's departure, and this speculation merely served to increase the anxiety of many students.

5. Turnover in Guidance Counselors: It was noted that there has been significant turnover among guidance counselors. It is strongly suggested that the school principals conduct more frequent check-ins with guidance counselors to assess their levels of work satisfaction, and work to address, when possible, any concerns about work environment or workload raised by guidance counselors.

6. Curriculum, pedagogy, and academic programming:
   A. Multiple parents, students, and teachers noted the lack of opportunities and paths for those students who are not planning to pursue a traditional four-year college degree. It is strongly suggested that the District work to find paths toward vocational education programs for non-traditional learners, those who may not be able to afford a college degree, and for any others who may recognize the value in skills-based education. It is important that these paths not be perceived as "lesser" options, in large part because it is increasingly recognized that many will not pursue an excellent vocational

education program due to peer and societal pressures and current local values that often under-value such a program.

   B. The District might also consider whether to further study shifting its rubrics from seat-time-based metrics to competency-based learning metrics. Competency-based learning metrics, combined with a shift toward standards-based grading (rather than grade point average-based grading) can increase inclusion-based practices throughout, but particularly in the elementary schools.

7. Training for Students:
   A. Middle and high school students report that they currently do not receive training on bias, implicit bias, and/or the impact that certain words and actions may have on others. Students further reported that they do not receive training that includes definitions of sexual harassment (which can include same sex harassment), how specifically to identify forms of sex-based harassment and other forms of harassment, or how to report it. It is strongly recommended that such training be offered annually, in an age-appropriate manner, starting in the eighth grade. While there is some limited training and prevention education, such as the Week of Respect program in the high school, training on key topics such as bias (including implicit bias), the power of words to both heal and hurt, age-appropriate consent training, and character lessons, should start in elementary school, with messages reinforced regularly, in increasing complexity as the students age and mature. The District might consider using counselors to visit classrooms more regularly in order to deliver these lessons.
   B. High school students also report that they do not receive training on bystander intervention techniques[6], or allyship. Training effective bystanders,

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[6] Bystander intervention is a technique by which students learn skills on how to safely intervene when witnessing bullying or harassment. Bystander techniques do not involve "breaking up a fight" or any physical acts. Bystander training is an evidence-based approach to prevention through learning to safely speak out against those social norms that allow verbal bullying or harassment. Providing bystander skills training for students, teachers, and staff is an important part of any comprehensive prevention plan. Campuses could also implement media campaigns that model appropriate student behavior and conduct, like bystander skills and consent. By teaching potential bystanders that they have a rule in changing the culture around tolerating bullying or harassment, they can participate in encouraging a culture where harassment or bullying are not tolerated, resulting in a safer campus for all. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, evidence-based population level programs that counter racism in education settings and that promote healthy resistance to racism among all children and adolescents as well as among the adults in their lives are identified as key priorities for child and adolescent health. *See also*, "Gender Violence, Gender Justice: A Teaching Guide for Teachers of English, Literature, Social

so that they can learn how to intervene safely, de-escalate when possible, and alert District staff, when necessary, is key to changing any school community on issues relating to race, LGBTQ+ status, sex or gender, and more. It is strongly recommended that such training be offered to students annually, starting in the eighth grade.

C. Many of those interviewed noted that students are taught "if you see someone being something, say something." One concern is that most students do not understand what is meant by "something," and further do not understand the difference between bullying, versus bullying on a protected class (sex, gender, race, color, etc.), and thus lack the information to make timely reports that could end such bullying or cause the District to promptly respond.

D. While interviewing students, teachers, and administrators, there were discussions of alleged sexual misconduct by athletes. As athletes are generally at a greater risk of engaging in sexual misconduct,[7] it is strongly suggested that all athletes be offered specific training on healthy relationships, consent, and the relationship between consent and alcohol. The District might also consider revising future climate studies to more carefully identify perpetrator types, or whether such individuals were more likely to have membership in any particular group(s); if so, this might provide the basis for additional targeted prevention education.

E. Generally, long-term approaches designed to reduce harassment, intimidation and bullying are more likely to succeed as compared to any short-term or single-component training. The District might consider finding ways to weave in-class lessons on the development of social and emotional skills and empathy into existing curriculum.

Studies, Health Education, Peer Counseling and Family and Consumer Sciences" for students in grades 7-10; includes lessons on courage and whether or not bystanders intervene; while focused on issues relating to gender violence, many of the lessons are applicable to incidents of racism.

[7] See, e.g., Team Sports and Sexual Violence: Examining Perpetration by and Victimization of Adolescent Males and Females, finding that adolescent males who are involved in team sports 1-4 days a week and males involved 5+ days a week were more likely than peers not involved in team sports to perpetrate sexual harassment (telling sexual "jokes," making sexual comments or gestures towards another person, or engaging in bullying behaviors); Cheever, J., & Eisenberg, M. E. (2020) "Team sports and sexual violence: examining perpetration by and victimization of adolescent males and females," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence,* 37(1–2), NP400–NP422, finding that *middle and high school sport-involved students were more likely to be involved (both victimized and a perpetrator) in sexual violence than peers not involved in sport*

F. Multiple students stated that, despite experiencing harassment or bullying, they are reluctant to report because they do not understand the HIB process, and/or because they do not believe the responsible student will be held accountable. It is strongly suggested that annual student training be provided that would help create a culture of outreach and reporting from students to trusted designated employees who could help them navigate to desired resolutions.

8. Several teachers and parents noted that, particularly for middle school students, detention was commonly used to address disruptive or other inappropriate conduct, and that some students receive detention on multiple instances. It is highly recommended that the District examine other avenues for modifying student behavior, as repeated detentions are evidence that detention is not working. Further, it is strongly recommended that leadership responsible for disciplinary conduct consider ways to combine detention with effective remedial and supportive actions that are connected to the misconduct at issue, as a way to drive home the point that the detention is related to specific wrongdoing, and as a way to better deter future misconduct. Such coaching may be productive on an ongoing basis and should be made available outside of the context of detention.

9. Harassment, Intimidation and Bullying (HIB) Investigations:
    A. It was noted that, once interviewed, students are almost entirely excluded from the HIB process. Best practices suggest that high school students should receive written notice of the alleged wrong, and that they should receive copies of the same outcome communications as those provided to their parents.   According to most staff interviewed, parents routinely try to minimize the harm of HIB cases when their child is the accused and offer inappropriate reasons why their child should not be found responsible. As such, there is no reason to believe that all parents are fully sharing with their student the nature of the allegation and/or the actual findings. By excluding students from the full process, many will never learn the full scope of the allegations against them, nor learn the details regarding whether or not there was a finding of wrong-doing, and the extent of such wrong-doing, and thus will have been deprived of a meaningful opportunity to learn.
    B. Several high school students reported reluctance to report their experiences with HIB misconduct, noting that "everyone knows that you just made a report because you go to talk . . . and then a minute later the other student is called down, making it obvious to everyone." If true, it is strongly

recommended that the high school take a new look at the processes in place for responding to and launching any HIB investigation.

C. There is no vetting process in place used to determine whether reports of bullying or harassment need to be investigated; instead, all matters appear to be sent forward for investigation. The better practice is for an appropriate administrator to conduct an intake interview and learn more about the allegation. The school principal can then review, and determine whether those facts, if true, would violate the HIB policy. If there is a student-on-student conflict that is not a HIB case, the principal then has an opportunity to educate the complainant (and, in most cases, the parents or guardians) and explain that the conduct, while falling short of community values, does not require a HIB investigation. In this way, there are increased opportunities for education to the community, and each investigators' caseload is not unnecessarily increased. When too many cases are investigated, this shows up in the statistics as a large number of investigations with very few that result in a finding of responsibility; this type of statistic also carries the unintended message that cases are not taken seriously, which can then undermine overall prevention efforts throughout the school and District.

D. It is strongly suggested that all HIB investigations be conducted by one or more trained investigators who are not also Guidance Counselors. The District might consider training two individuals to conduct all District-wide investigations, and to relieve the guidance counselors of all investigative responsibility, so that both the guidance counselors and the students can have an open and trusting relationship in which the students know their guidance counselor has their best interest at heart, and has not been, and will not be, in the position of gathering information that is potentially adverse to the student. Any such training should include the importance of trauma-informed investigation methods, the elimination of bias in investigations, as well as best practices in documenting all investigation steps, and report-writing.

E. It was noted that many in the District used non-neutral language when discussing HIB cases. For example, several referred to accused students as "the aggressor," or "the perpetrator." Such language can contribute to the impression that the accused student has been pre-determined as having violated the policy, and is therefore inappropriate for those who are accused, given that no determination has yet been made regarding whether or not there will be sufficient evidence to find that a student did, or did not, violate District policy.

F. Consider re-launching the Conflict Resolution program that previously existed (pre-Covid) within the District. Administrators and teaching staff all spoke highly of the program as a means to create greater empathy, teach critical conversation skills, and provide students with a means to intervene when hearing objectionable or inappropriate language by de-escalating, rather than escalating, the situation.

G. In at least one instance, a HIB case was not moved forward because of a deadline that was missed by an investigator. To avoid the possibility of this happening in the future, it is strongly recommended that a spreadsheet be maintained showing all current HIB investigations, the date filed, and the due date, and to have calendar reminders in place that would send an alert on the day prior to the final date for any investigation. When failing to complete an investigation, the District runs the risk that there is known harassment, intimidation or bullying that is being unaddressed, thus potentially contributing to a hostile learning environment and a later legal finding of deliberate indifference to known harassment. It is also suggested that the District's principals and investigators better understand that incomplete reports can be corrected, even after the 10-day statutory deadline has passed.

H. It is strongly suggested that the District learn more about Restorative Justice, a practice whereby parties to a HIB incident may work together to create greater respect, and the accused student learns to accept responsibility and take steps to repair the harm to the relationship and to the community. Restorative Justice practices have been shown to bring about powerful learning opportunities for learning and leave the students with a greater sense as to their ability to be part of a solution. The District, through its Board of Education, might consider seeking out an expert practitioner to provide an overview of the Restorative Justice practices, so that the District might make an informed decision as to whether to add Restorative Justice as another tool available to its schools.

I. It is strongly recommended that the District work with school principals to review appropriate consequences for violations of HIB policies. Consequences have a three-fold benefit; (1) a consequence aimed at stopping the harassment and preventing recurrence will do just that, if appropriately applied; (2) for the student who experienced the harassment, a known and visible consequence is an indication that the matter was taken seriously and that school is a safe place; and, (3) for the community, consequences become a form of preventive education for others who are reminded that actions have consequences.

J. For any student who is receiving discipline or counseling at the conclusion of a HIB investigation, it is strongly recommended that the counselor or other individual charged with supporting or disciplining be provided with the detailed factual findings, so that any support or discipline is more likely to be properly tailored, and thus effective.

10. Several students and parents described situations in which LGBTQ+ students felt compelled to leave sports teams due to bullying and other harassing conduct based on their LGBTQ+ status. It is strongly suggested that the District send out a confidential survey either every year, or every other year, to all athletes as well as to those who left any team, to better understand their experiences.

11. It is understood that transgender students are currently required to use bathrooms in the main office, where they must stand in the office and wait for access to a staff restroom, rather than being allowed to use the restroom that is (a) closer to their classroom and (b) more appropriate to the gender with which they identify. The District may wish to rethink this policy, particularly in light of current federal guidance from the Department of Education on the discriminatory exclusion of certain students from equal access to restrooms and changing rooms. Given the particularly high suicide rate of transgender students who are not recognized by the gender with which they identify, and given the negative messaging implicitly sent to staff and other students when requiring that transgender students are required to use separate restrooms in a central office, it is particularly important that the District reconsider its bathroom use policies and practices.

12. High school students do not have a fully confidential space in which to examine issues of potential sexual harassment. While Guidance Counselors are somewhat confidential, conversations with the Guidance Counselors are not privileged under the law. It is not reasonable to expect middle or high school students to fully understand the differences between private, confidential, and privileged conversations, particularly as some staff did not have a solid understanding as to which confidentiality provisions applied to them. Further, it is not uncommon for a high school student to need a safe, privileged, space in which to work out their feelings. It is strongly suggested that the District hire, either part-time or on an hourly basis, a confidential and privileged crisis counselor.[8] This would not be

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[8] One suggestion might be to determine whether Effective School Solutions, or a similar organization, could be retained to provide 5 -10 hours per week, or to offer crisis counseling on an as-needed basis.

someone available to students for repeat visits, or to provide ongoing therapeutic support, but simply for one or two visits to help process pressing concerns regarding sexual or intimate relationship issues.

13. Parents:
   A. Multiple students discussed the negative and hostile language used by some District parents who had posted on social media, were emailing to other students, or otherwise communicating with other District parents. The District is highly encouraged to remind parents that students are occasionally able to see such communications, and that those communications are easily captured through a screen-shot and then shared among other students, thus contributing to a hostile environment, particularly for students of color, students with disabilities, and/or LGBTQ+ students.
   B. Students, teachers, administrators, and parents shared instances when parents were offended by certain reading assignments given to their students, usually because the material contained themes of racial justice, LGBTQ+ issues, and/or civil rights issues. It is strongly recommended that the District prepare ahead of time for any such push-back and have clear communications planned, so that teachers will be able to spend more time teaching and less time responding to parents who would prefer to limit all students' reading and learning materials.
   C. The District might consider trainings for parents on social media usage and the dangers of allowing younger children to access social media (particularly apps such as TikTok or Snapchat). Such a training should also include the reminder that many students take nude or intimate photos of themselves or of friends, and often exchange such photos without consent. It appears that many students and parents are not aware that the exchange of such images can be considered a criminal act, for which a student can be prosecuted.

14. Student disciplinary data:
   A. While disciplinary data was provided, the District does not currently track "time out of class" for reasons relating to discipline, including the time spent in an administrator's office either being interviewed or discussing consequences. By gathering and reviewing such data, the District can better ascertain whether any particular identity of students (whether students identified as having a disability, students of color, or any other group) are experiencing a greater loss of classroom learning time as compared to students in other groups.

B. It is also strongly recommended that data on disciplinary referrals include a notation that includes the name of the referring teacher. While it is understood that any one teacher may have a particularly unruly class any particular year, by looking for trends over time, the District can better identify whether there are concerns of discriminatory referrals requiring additional inquiry and/or remediation.

15. Library and other school-wide displays: It was noted that the librarians throughout the District worked hard to create culturally-responsive, sensitive, and inclusive displays, and these practices are to be commended. It is also noted that the high school library included many books on issues critical to under-represented students, including books on display that touched on topics of race, sexuality, students with differing abilities, culture, and immigration. Students reported that, because these displays, they perceived of the library as a "safe space" in which to look at the literature and have discussions with library staff. It is strongly recommended that the library continue these practices. Others noted that the libraries have also been successful in celebrating important cultural events of students and community members from diverse cultural backgrounds, and it is strongly recommended that the libraries continue and, when possible, enhance those practices.

16. Diversity Group Subcommittees: The current six working groups do not appear to have any particular charge, and in some cases lack specialized knowledge (for example, non-educators who are part of the curriculum subcommittee). It is recommended that the District consider reviewing the scope of each group's charge, reducing the number of groups to two (so as to avoid overlap), and then provide each group a timeline and clear goals for creating specified work product. Further, if the working groups are to be successful, the District should require that each member commit to attending meetings and actively participating in the work. Finally, in order to ensure that the working group addressing hiring practices understands the legal limitations of that work, it is strongly suggested that legal counsel for the District provide a lesson and/or reading materials for subcommittee members.

III.   RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HIRING, RECRUITING, AND RETAINMENT PRACTICES

The State of the New Jersey Educator Workforce JerseyCAN Educator Workforce Report Series states that, according to 2020-2021 data provided by schools to the

NJDOE, 59% of New Jersey's student population are children of color, while teachers of color represent 17% of the educator workforce. It is noted that the District's data reflects a far lower percentage of students or educators who are persons of color.

Collecting candidate data throughout the entire application process is essential to understanding what happens to applicants over the course of the entirety of the hiring cycle. It is also recommended that EEO data collection be marked as voluntary and include statement such as "You will not be subject to adverse action or treatment depending upon the information provided, nor if you decline to provide this information." The page that gathers the information should note, in large and/or bold lettering, that the information provided will be kept separate from the application file, and will not be used for any hiring decisions, nor for any decisions regarding terms and conditions of employment. Furthermore, if possible, consider collecting this EEO data anonymously to encourage authentic participation.

<u>Overall Recommendations Regarding Hiring Processes:</u>

1. As part of the application process, it is recommended that the District include an EEO page with an intentional diversity statement letting applicants know how much the district values and is committed to diversity. This may contribute to both encouraging more diverse candidates to apply, and also encouraging those with an interest in diversity and inclusion as fundamental values. Further, it is recommended that the district develop job descriptions that attract more diverse (racially, ethnicity, linguistically, country of origin) candidates by including as a qualification the need to demonstrate understanding of culturally responsive pedagogy as a required qualification.
2. It is recommended that the District develop a shared definition of diversity, another for equity, and a third for inclusion, and begin integrating these definitions into the District's training, marketing, and branding materials. These terms have very different meaning and are not synonymous with each other, and it is critical that there be a shared definition of each. These definitions of diversity, equity, and inclusion should be included in training for all new hires and returning staff throughout the school year and used on the District's website as may be appropriate.
3. When reviewing District processes for hiring, each step should be evaluated to ensure it is conducive to, and upholds, the District's commitment to diversity as it is defined within the District's diversity statement.
4. To both attract more diverse candidates, and as an aid to retention, the District might consider whether all programs offered are reflective of all members of the

diverse community. For examples, the District should take care to ensure that events, key meetings, trainings, and professional development opportunities do not conflict with major religious holidays for those who may be Jewish, Muslim, or a member of any under-represented religious or cultural group.

5. It was noted that there are contract paraprofessionals who overall represent more under-represented groups as compared to the rest of the employee paraprofessionals and teaching staff. It is strongly recommended that the District consider the establishment of a teacher apprenticeship program as an on-ramp to future employment as a teacher. Such a program would allow participants to earn while learning, and for current paraprofessionals to join a career path toward teaching. On a somewhat related note, it was noted that some teachers use dismissive language when discussing the contract paraprofessionals (for example, "why do *they* get to park in our parking lot." Given that it is only the contract paraprofessionals who represent a somewhat diverse workforce within the District, it is strongly recommended that school administrators who hear teachers make such comments engage in conversation with the teachers or other staff making such comments, and to offer an opportunity to reflect on the potentially biased sentiments, as well as exclusionary sentiments, hidden within such comments.

6. **Hiring Process:** It was noted that the school principals utilized different processes in hiring. It is strongly recommended that the District develop one set of standards that will be applied to each step of the process. For example,
   A. It is strongly recommended that the District identify a rubric to document the consistency of applicant screening process, so as to ensure that the screening process is consistent and free of bias.
   B. It is strongly recommended that the District develop more consistent practices for considering whether candidates without preferred qualifications will be considered for further review, and, if they are considered, for ensuring that the rationale for including some but not others is fully documented.
   C. It is strongly recommended that all hiring managers use Applitrack to identify which candidates have moved forward in the hiring process at each stage. Thus, each candidate should be marked for whether or not they passed the first review, and for those who did, whether they were passed on past the next step, and so on. The data should be able to show each applicant's experience in the hiring process.
   D. It is recommended that any hiring manager complete a course in implicit bias each year, so as to better identify the ways in which bias (whether for a particular person or group, or against) can be identified and countered.

E. At least two administrators with a role in the hiring process commented that "it's best to meet them all, you can just tell" whether or not the candidate was "a good fit." This type of language is strongly suggestive of bias in the process and, at the very least, is more likely to allow for the consideration of biased decisions. Further, this language is problematic as it reenforces decision making and selection through the lens of implicit bias. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that the district refrain from subjective measures for hiring faculty and adopt a fair and non-biased process to move candidates through to the consideration and then interview processes.

F. It is recommended that candidates demonstrate their knowledge of culturally responsive pedagogy at some point in the interview process.

G. Excellent candidates tend to apply for multiple positions and tend to get multiple offers. In order to hire the best candidates, it is strongly recommended that any hiring manager develop, and stick to, a timeline for the hiring process.

H. It was noted that, in order to increase the pool of qualified applicants, administrators have attended job fairs at local colleges and universities, particularly places where it is likely to find potential teachers. There is also some effort to recruit at schools where the District is more likely to attract minority candidates. It is strongly recommended that these practices continue, and that they be prioritized. In addition, it is recommended that the district consider participating in a program like the Men of Color Hope Achievers Program that advances a diverse teacher workforce.

7. It is strongly recommended that the district conduct self-audits each year to assess the impact of its hiring practices, including whether the District is receiving fewer candidates from under-represented groups as compared to all other districts in New Jersey. It is also recommended that the district self-audit also be utilized to assess the number of diverse candidates that apply and the number of diverse candidates that are hired. As noted by the New Jersey school board Association, "a diverse teacher workforce benefits all students." However, diversifying the faculty to be more demographically reflective of the students in the district would also support faculty retention efforts; just as students need to see themselves in their faculty, the same is true for minoritized groups of faculty members within the district.

A sample self-audit might include:

	Number	Percent
How many candidates submitted applications for teaching vacancies across the district last year?		
Of that number, how many candidates of color submitted applications for teaching vacancies in the district last year?		
How many candidates who applied for teaching vacancies passed the school's/district's initial application screening?		
Of that number, how many candidates of color passed the school's/district's initial application screening?		
How many teacher candidates participated in a school or district interview?		
Of that number, how many candidates of color participated in a school or district interview?		
How many teacher candidates were invited to conduct an in-person teaching demonstration?		
Of that number, how many candidates of color were invited to conduct an in-person teaching demonstration?		
How many teacher candidates were selected fill a teaching vacancy in the district?		
How many candidates of color were selected for a teaching vacancy in the district?		
How many teaching candidates accepted a formal offer of hire?		
How many candidates of color accepted a formal offer of hire?		

Overall Recommendations Regarding Retention Efforts:

1. The District did not provide retention data for Black and Hispanic employees within the District, and it is suspected this is, in large part, because the numbers are too low to be meaningful. It is recommended that the District annually review the retention data for minoritized employee groups to determine trends related to length of stay with the district and begin to document the reasons minoritized individuals are leaving the district so that the district can assess for trends. Also, because the numbers of non-white administrators are so low, the District might consider incentivizing under-represented teachers to get leadership training to become a supervisor or administrator. This training might be accompanied by a service agreement for one or more years in return for the coverage of the programming costs.

2. Currently, there appears to be more turnover among newer staff and teaching staff. As there is limited diversity amongst established employees, it is critical that newer staff, where there is room for increasingly diverse hires, be incentivized to stay with the District. Nationally, teachers of color tend to leave the profession more rapidly than white teachers.[9] Teachers of color are more likely to be evaluated more harshly, and their ideas for innovations are more frequently dismissed. For these reasons, it is critical that the District focus on the experience of first, second, and third-year teachers and staff, particularly those staff members in student-facing roles, such as Guidance Counselors.

3. When asked about retention efforts, administrators pointed to professional development opportunities, a pleasant work environment, teacher appreciation efforts by parents, and comprehensive benefits. While these are important, these efforts may not be sufficient to retain newer teachers and staff. For teaching staff, it is recommended that the District examine ways for established teachers to earn more and contribute beyond the classroom, without having to leave the classroom (as promotion to an administrative role is a traditional path toward advancement and higher pay). These efforts might include increased pay for mentorship roles, with a rigorous selection and training process for mentors, dedicated time for mentorship, and a multi-year mentorship expectation. As newer teachers join the District, the knowledge that they might someday be able to serve as a mentor for increased pay may aid with retention efforts.

4. To improve retention efforts, consider the addition of racial and ethnic affinity groups for faculty support. However, as there are currently insufficient faculty members to create such groups, the District might consider reaching out to

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[9] https://teach.com/resources/how-to-support-teachers-of-color/

neighboring districts, to find out if it would be possible to join their teachers in creating such a support network.

5. Multiple students and staff suggested that the few minority employees have been judged more harshly by the administration as compared to other teachers and staff. Whether or not true, it is critical that the administration provide ongoing feedback to all staff throughout the year, ensure that directives and praise are consistent (for example, if praising a teacher for an act in one year, ensure that same teacher is not reprimanded for doing the same thing the following year), and particularly important that such feedback be provided to minority teaching staff who may have been excluded from the informal mentoring that often occurs among non-minority employees.

6. It is recommended that the District consider developing an equitable teacher mentoring program pipeline. This would be a way for teachers that value diverse and equitable spaces to serve as mentors for student teachers that hold minoritized identities. All the identified teachers that would serve as mentors would also be required to complete specific trainings related to understanding the current cultural climate of the district, inclusive language, privilege, collusion, allyship, and change leadership.

7. It is strongly recommended that the District gather annual data from teachers regarding their experiences working within the District. Any such survey should either ask each respondent for demographic information, or pre-load that information into the survey instrument, so that it will become easier to identify trends, positive or negative, that may have a greater impact on some groups as compared to others. It is strongly recommended that any such survey ask specific questions about experiences of teachers within the district. It may also be helpful to begin surveying new and returning teachers twice a year to glean insight on how teachers are experiencing the District, so as to identify climate trends and areas to improve the cultural environment. The District might also consider developing a process for new teachers to submit any concerns or comments anonymously. Especially since they are new to the district and may want to share information regarding the cultural climate and their teaching experience.

Prioritizing Recommendations:

The District might consider prioritizing the above recommendations and starting with those that are more easily implemented within the next (2022-23) academic year. The other recommendations remain important, but it is recognized they make require more planning before being implemented:

1. <u>Classroom management</u>.   Advanced training for teachers to address the difficulties that may be posed by leading discussions involving current events, history, or literature that touches on themes of race, sexual orientation, and similar topics. Advanced training might also include:
   a. Annual professional development specific to culturally responsive pedagogy;
   b. Handling outbursts such as disparaging comments or slurs, without the need for disciplinary measures;
   c. Development of shared words and phrases considered inappropriate or denigrating, together with a shared understanding of appropriate responses expected of teaching staff in those situations;
   d. Techniques for pausing a difficult conversation, while clearly acknowledging that it will be further discussed at another time;
   e. Inclusive teaching practices when working with students with hidden or non-visible disabilities.
2. Responsible employee training (Title IX) for all teachers and staff, on how to recognize and appropriate respond to all reports of potential sexual or sex/gender-based harassment.
3. Add the Title IX Coordinator's contact information on the school website, along with required documentation to show that the Title IX Coordinator has completed the basic training required by the May 2020 Title IX regulations.
4. Provide Title IX training for all who may be involved in any Title IX cases.
5. Consider including middle and high school students as part of the HIB process, particularly at the outcome stage, so that they may better understand the results, as well as the rationale for any result reached as part of the investigation process.
6. Train teachers and staff on people-first language.
7. Consider increased, regular communications to high school students regarding school and district staffing changes, as well as any new protocols.
8. Consider adding training for students on bias, implicit bias, sexual harassment, bystander education, and reporting
9. For HIB or Title IX investigations, consider adding timelines for each step of the process into the Notice letters sent to each party, so that the students and families may better understand what to expect, and will then be better prepared to hold the school accountable should steps or deadlines be missed.
10. Calendar all HIB cases, so that no deadlines are missed.
11. Consider having an expert in Restorative Justice practices provide the Board of Education with an overview of Restorative Justice, what it means, how it works, and what is required to add Restorative Justice practices into HIB and Title IX

cases. In this way the Board will be better able to determine whether or not to incorporate such practices in the future.

12. Review disciplinary practices, and detention practices in particular, to determine whether current practices are resulting in reduced incidents and changes in student behavior, as well as eliminating repeated misconduct.

13. Develop and implement a written campus-wide plan for any teachers who are receiving push-back from parents or others regarding the perceived content of any literature or teaching discussion. Have clear communications planned so that teachers will be able to spend more time teaching and less time responding to parents who would prefer to limit students' reading and learning materials.

14. Revise the District's subcommittee meeting structure and reduce the 6 working groups to two teams, one on climate, culture, and communications, and the other on curriculum and professional development.

15. Look at the District calendar to ensure that meetings, events, and trainings do not conflict with major religious holidays or events.

16. Train all hiring managers to use AppliTrack to identify which candidates were moved forward at each stage, and to consistently enter all data into AppliTrack.

17. Consider implementing a self-audit of hiring practices.