

Town of Needham
Needham Unite Against Racism Initiative Working Group
Minutes for December 21, 2020

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/87400034488>

6:00 p.m. A meeting of the Needham Unite Against Racism Initiative working group was convened by chair Marianne Cooley. Ms. Cooley announced this open meeting is being conducted remotely consistent with Governor Baker's Executive Order of March 12, 2020 due to the current state of emergency from the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus. She noted all public gatherings have been suspended as advised and directed by the Commonwealth. And, as such, suspending the requirement of the open meeting law to have all meetings in a public, accessible, physical location while encouraging and allowing members of all public bodies to participate remotely. Ms. Cooley stated the meeting will not include public comment and the Needham Unite Against Racism Initiative working group and all attendees are convening by Zoom, as posted on the Town's website identifying how the public may join. All supporting documents used at this meeting are available on the Town's website www.needhamma.gov. Present were Matt Borrelli, Sue Neckes, Natasha Espada, Ramin Abrishamian, Marcus Nelson, Jen Howard Schroeder, Jay Spencer, and Town Manager Kate Fitzpatrick.

Ms. Cooley asked for a motion to approve the minutes of November 16, 2020, and December 7, 2020.

Motion: Mr. Spencer made a motion to approve the minutes of November 16, 2020, and December 7, 2020. Ms. Neckes seconded the motion. The motion was unanimously approved 8-0 by roll call vote.

Ms. Cooley introduced School Superintendent Dan Gutekanst to talk to the group about the REAL Coalition and the work that has been on-going for many years in the Needham Schools. Dr. Gutekanst thanked Ms. Cooley and welcomed Joanne Allen-Willoughby, METCO Director and Mary Lammi, Assistant Superintendent who work with the REAL Coalition. He said that REAL stands for Race, Equity, Access, and Leadership. The REAL Coalition provides leadership and guidance on eliminating barriers to racial equity and supporting the advancement of all learners in the Needham Public Schools. They are committed to engaging staff, students, families, and community members in conversations and actions that promote equitable practices for all in the community. The REAL Coalition first met in October of 2018 and members include district leaders, school leaders, teachers, parents, community members, and students. The group is formed in a three-tier system consisting of the larger Coalition, Steering Committee, and sub-committees supporting six goal areas. These areas include 1. policies and practices, 2. curriculum & instruction, 3. professional Learning, 4. hiring and employment practices, 5. culture and climate, and 6. communications and community engagement.

Dr. Gutekanst highlighted accomplishments in 2019 and 2020, including an Elementary Racial Literacy Task Force, Elementary Parent Groups, Middle School Social Justice League & Launching Scholars Program, High School Castle Scholars Program, and Portrait of A Needham Graduate. He stated that one thing that has changed over the years is that now there is a specific protocol to follow to respond to an act of bias or hate in the Needham Public Schools. Where at one time when incidents occurred, it was the practice to deal with the situation quietly and sweep it under the rug. Now it is the practice of the Schools to call out the behavior and deal with the student who was the victim as well as the students and staff who were impacted by the incident. He then spoke about a few more accomplishments of the Coalition such as the “Courageous Conversations on Race” program which is an ongoing full-year NHS course where juniors and seniors apply what they learn about how racism operates on a systemic lever, both in our society and in the schools. They help design and deliver workshops to 9th graders, and more.

Dr. Gutekanst noted that another resource is the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Website which is a resource for educators and the broader Needham Public Schools community. Dr. Gutekanst concluded his presentation by saying it is increasingly apparent that we have to find venues to lift student voices as students so bravely did back in June when they gathered peacefully and protested after what happened to George Floyd. He is admired the power of their voices advocating for change. He said that we cannot just leave the work up to our children or young people. Adults in our community also need to stand up and be their allies and be there to support and in some cases block and get in the way and do the work on their behalf.

Ms. Cooley asked if there were any comments or questions from the group. Mr. Nelson thanked Dr. Gutekanst and noted the importance of having uncomfortable conversations. He noticed one of the slides showed an all staff event, and wondered if that was just a one-time event or if more work like that will happen? Ms. Lammi commented that the staff are really looking at what it means to be an anti-racist/anti-biased school system. They had to take a step back and pause and provide an opportunity for the entire district to really delve into the meaning of systemic racism. She said that over 800 people participated in event.

Ms. Allen-Willoughby commented they she has been working with Gary Bailey, Assistant Dean at Simmons College who has done work on anti-racism and anti-bias issues especially around language. Dr. Gutekanst talked about the School Improvement plan that is presented to the School Committees and the plan is based on the model of the Portrait of a Needham Graduate. There are clear race equity goals in the plan. Dr. Gutekanst also explained that part of the curriculum includes culturally responsive teaching, and an evaluation system to assess teachers, principals, and superintendents on their progress in being culturally responsive.

Mr. Abrishamian asked if the CCOR program is voluntary or a mandatory course? Ms. Allen-Willoughby replied that it is a course that students can elect to take. One of the goals of CCOR is to present to all the 9th grade students so that they all have

exposure to the program. Ms. Espada thanked Dr. Gutekanst for all the work that is being done with the REAL Coalition. She asked if there was any information on the percentage of minority students as well as the percentage of teachers and leadership. Dr. Gutekanst replied that this year they have 22% of student body are students of color. That is a significant increase over the last 15 years – when he came to Needham it was 8%. This is not true of the staff, who are predominantly white. Dr. Gutekanst said that there are fewer young people entering the education field, so the pool is small. However, Assistant Superintendent Alex McNeil is making some progress towards hiring more diverse teachers. In response to another question from Ms. Espada, Dr. Gutekanst said they are now responding to the incidents in a different way. He said that micro-aggressions are not “micro” to the students that they impact. Often those small aggressions can add up over time and can be very traumatizing. Needham is not immune in our schools or our community to racism. He is proud of how Needham is thinking about it and how we are dealing with it as a community.

Ms. Howard thanked all for sharing. She wondered if there has been any negative feedback from parents. She asked how to bring people along on the journey. Dr. Gutekanst said it has become clear to him that they work to make sure they can provide students, and families to allow for an anti-racist culture. It is what we are going to do in Needham. He isn't sure that would have been the case two or three years ago. The time is now, and the work is critical. There has been some feed back from families, but it hasn't been too strong. Some parents did not want their elementary students taught about racism as they felt there were “color blind”. There have been more questions from parents as opposed to angry complaints or comments.

Ms. Allen-Willoughby told about an instance where a young person used a racial slur towards another young student. They were able to bring both families together to solve the problem, but it was eye opening from both sides. She said that this kind of work can't only be done in school systems, that we need the community to help in engaging people in larger conversations. Ms. Lammi said the creation of the REAL Coalition was a defining moment for the Needham Public Schools. It provides structure to be able to say this is the work we are doing, eliminating barriers to racial equity, and being sure that every one of our students is advancing and being the best version of themselves. She said that we have to engage with the community in order to be successful with this work. Dr. Gutekanst said he tries ear to have all the principals of the schools meet with the Needham Clergy Association annually. He also commented on the exceptional relationship they have with the Police. He and Chief Schlittler work closely together.

Ms. Neckes commented that the work that NUARI is doing is important. When we are recruiting for the Needham Public Schools to increase diversity in our staff, one of the things that matters is that Needham is a welcoming community. She wants to be sure that like the Needham Public Schools, the Town is providing resources and educational opportunities as well. Ms. Cooley stated that she is hearing a lot

of discussion about hiring and recruiting, and that an upcoming meeting will be talking about Town hiring, and she is hoping the schools will be able to participate in that conversation too.

Mr. Borelli thanked the schools for their presentation. He said it is important to have difficult conversations. He hears from his kids about what they are learning about and what they are discussing. A take-away that he has is how difficult these conversations are. He hears his kids talking about some of these issues within their peer groups. Sometimes there is a fear that people are going to say the wrong thing and worry about saying the wrong thing. He feels like this group is very open about how we feel. How when we move forward there is that open discussion. It's hard for a lot of people to ask those questions and it is an evolving conversation with much more work to do.

Mr. Nelson said that it is kind of a different perspective for black and brown people who can't turn off who they are. These conversations can't not happen. We can't be any different in the way we were made and who we are. If it is difficult for the majority, just imagine how much more difficult it is to not be able to change that. Those micro-aggressions that are macro-aggressions and more of a life-long thing that people go through. There is only so much people can take over time. It is so much deeper than just a conversation.

Ms. Cooley commented that vulnerability is a skill that needs to be taught. Ms. Espada said if we are looking to hire more diverse staff, you also need to make sure they are comfortable. They need to feel welcome and we need to be mindful of how people speak to each other. Dr. Gutekanst closed by saying it's a start and he is trying to focus leadership to do this work, but he also needs community participation as well. Ms. Allen-Willoughby said there is a group called Voices in Unity that attempts to bring the district work and community work together. They meet monthly and she would encourage all to attend a meeting. They get together to talk about work that is being done collaboratively.

Ms. Cooley then asked how the work of the REAL Coalition and the NUARI work can be complementary. She feels they really need to look at the schedule and figure out if they have time to process this question. Ms. Howard said that she is still having a hard time trying to figure out the purpose of the group. Each of these topics is so big, it takes a long time to get through it all. Perhaps the group should meet less frequently but for a longer time. Ms. Cooley asked if there were any other take-aways from the school discussion. Mr. Abrishamian said that he feels encouraged by the quality and amount of work being done in the schools. He is curious as to how the percentage of minority students went from 8% to 22%, and who the 22% is made up of, as well as how they are being supported. Mr. Nelson also commented on the percentage of staff that are minority would be interesting too. He feels that it is probably low.

Ms. Neckes said you want to make it safe for teachers and staff to have these conversations. You want involvement and willingness to engage, and make sure they are being thoughtful when they speak. Ms. Espada wondered if anyone has tried to talk to the minority students to see if they think anything has changed or what they would like to see change. Ms. Neckes said they survey often. There are some open and honest conversations that have happened because of the surveys. The one question that is very telling is “Is there an adult that you feel like you can go to in the school?” They look for 100% yes on that question. Ms. Espada said she was willing to create working matrix for the NUARI working group to understand the pieces and to have a visual. Ms. Cooley offered to help her with this. Ms. Cooley said that Lisa Smith-McQueenie will be at the next meeting. She will be providing us with three statements and our goal would be to emerge with one vision in the form of a draft. She would also like to refer to Article 17 and collectively talk about what is in the article to agree on which topics to bring forward and work with. Ms. Howard commented that five years ago, there was a much different audience at the schools and that with some of the incidents that have occurred, and after they had a equity audit, they were really able to dig in and make changes and progress. Ms. Cooley questioned what we really wanted to audit. Mr. Borrelli said that the Town does a National Citizen survey every couple of years and can include a few custom questions. Perhaps we could craft a question to put in the survey. Ms. Fitzpatrick said they would probably do another survey in the Spring and could include a custom question.

7:38 p.m.

Motion by Mr. Nelson that the Needham Unite Against Racism Initiative meeting be adjourned. Second: Mr. Abrishamian. Unanimously approved 7-0 by roll call vote.

A list of all documents used at this Needham Unite Against Racism Initiative Working Group meeting is available at:

<https://www.needhamma.gov/4942/Needham-Unite-Against-Racism-Initiative>