

Sustaining the Work: A Gordon School Case Study

By Kimberly T. Ridley

The Gordon School Board of Trustees, administration, faculty, and students have sustained their inclusion and equity work by embedding it in everything from the boardroom to the classroom.

Since 2000, Gordon School has intentionally focused on equity and inclusion work under the leadership of our head of school, Ralph L. Wales. Gordon was established in 1910 as a nursery through eighth grade coeducational school in East Providence, Rhode Island. At the time, it was the only independent school in the greater Providence area that educated boys and girls together, so it has progressive roots. However, for Gordon as well as all other schools, there is no simple approach to inclusion and equity work. It's hard and complex, with significant sociocultural, historical, and political implications. As a learning community, we at Gordon challenge ourselves to grow and evolve from hard lessons and challenges.

What follows are reflections on some of the strategies and perspectives the Gordon School Board of Trustees, administration, faculty, and students have found most useful for maintaining the momentum of our diversity, inclusion, and equity work by embedding it in all facets of school life.

AT THE FOUNDATION: OUR MISSION STATEMENT

Because it reflects what schools believe and value, a mission statement is both a driving force and a key component of diversity and inclusion work. The process of developing a clear mission statement can be the starting point for building consensus and accountability as well as for educating various constituencies about the benefits of diversity, inclusion, and equity initiatives.

The roots of Gordon's most recent mission statement date back to 1999, when our board first established its specific intentions around racial diversity by drafting and endorsing "A Vision Statement for Racial Diversity." The trustees followed up by developing and implementing board plans for diversity as part of a strategic planning process that was completed in 2004. The plans provided clear goals and objectives for student, faculty, staff, and board recruitment and, equally important, for transforming our curricula to reflect the principles of multicultural teaching practice.

Implementing these plans soon ignited a mission statement revision process among our

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board, administration, and faculty. More such encouragement came in 2006, when as part of our accreditation process, the Association of Independent Schools of New England recommended that Gordon align the school's then-current mission with the stated goals in our strategic plan.

Revising the new statement required active collaboration among our head of school, board of trustees, administration, faculty, parents, and students. The development process offered us important opportunities to talk openly about who we are and what we value. Nevertheless, the process proved challenging and difficult. The revision took two years of discussion even after we'd done persistent work and strategy setting at the board level.

Our current mission statement, which the board approved in 2008, says:

The Gordon School is a racially diverse nursery through eighth grade coeducational independent school in East Providence, Rhode Island. Child by child, the Gordon School community cultivates successful students by inspiring joyful learning, encouraging intellectual leadership, fostering an empathic spirit, and stimulating a drive for positive societal impact.

The mission's cornerstone is our intention to be a racially diverse school that believes in a multicultural approach to teaching and learning. Our mission further calls attention to the importance of creating a rich learning environment in which many social identities are represented and to the fact that we value both individual and group experiences. To read more about our guiding principles, founding purpose, and statement on inclusivity, see www.gordonschool.org/mission.

THE VITAL ROLE OF THE BOARD AND DIVERSITY COMMITTEE

Ensuring that our trustees represent diverse perspectives and experiences has been integral to the growth of our inclusion and equity work. As we see it, providing opportunities and access to people who represent marginalized groups is crucial to their having an influence on policy decisions that affect the school's direction. Hearing the voices of outside experts is also essential.

Among the evidence of our commitment to diversity: Thirty percent of our 27 board members identify as people of color. Several have significant financial resources, but others' families receive financial assistance. Some trustees' children receive academic support. The board includes alumni as well as educators from other schools who have significant experience with work in inclusion, equity, and diversity.

Important to the process of strategic thinking around inclusion work is our Diversity Committee, which is an arm of the board. There are 18 members of the Diversity Committee, which is made up of board members, faculty, and parents. The committee's purpose is to serve as an advocate for underrepresented groups in the school; advocate for the necessary financial resources to achieve critical goals; assist with recruitment and retention strategies; serve as ambassadors for the mission among the Gordon parent community; and carry out the work of the board.

The committee works closely with the director of diversity and multicultural practice in all aspects of her work. The committee also encourages attendance at our parent education events, which focus on our equity and inclusion work; and supports the academic program, which is delivered through multicultural pedagogic practices.

Our Diversity Committee led the 2004 strategy-setting process and, in 2008, conducted a racial-climate assessment that provided the board with

essential data as it assessed progress toward our mission-based intentions. Further, in 2009, the committee helped the director of diversity and multicultural practice research best practices for meeting the needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender constituents in our school.

In short, the Diversity Committee plays a lead role in deepening the board's understanding of diversity work's purpose and value and in building board members' capacity to support and advocate for the work.

Another essential part of helping any board maintain momentum around equity and inclusion work is ongoing professional development. For Gordon's trustees, professional development includes:

- Presentations about the meaning and practice of multicultural and anti-bias education and teaching strategies; about gender and sexual identity and schooling; and from facilitators who lead student race-based affinity groups.
- Ongoing climate assessments, which provide good benchmarks to measure the pulse of our dominant and diverse communities.
- A focus on racial identity development and white privilege.
- Assistance in developing understanding about the needs and experiences of students and families with economic challenges.

HIRING AND PREPARING DIVERSE ADMINISTRATORS, FACULTY, AND STAFF

Maintaining momentum in inclusion and equity work is directly connected to intention. Hiring and retaining teachers of color is an essential intention in this work. In an interview about Gordon, head of school Ralph Wales said, "The most powerful curriculum in a school is contained in the people teaching and learning." It was during his tenure that Gordon hired its first teacher of color — an African American woman — in 1999. As of this

book's publication in 2013, 22 of our faculty, staff, and administration are people of color (out of a total professional community of 86 people).

Our significant gains in hiring are connected to several important factors. Among them:

- **A board-approved hiring policy** that states we will have people of color in every finalist candidate pool and on every hiring committee. More important, our policy goes beyond ensuring this kind of representation (which is relatively easy to achieve) to making clear statements about the school's aspirations. The board and administration established specific goals and time frames for significantly increasing faculty and staff of color and then defined accountability for achieving these goals.

- **Deliberate efforts to find and appeal to diverse candidates.** To meet our goals, we attend the traditional job fairs for independent schools as well as fairs that focus on under-represented groups. The team we send looks specifically for candidates of color and sets a game plan before each fair. Because we value the notion of maintaining contact with any candidate who we feel might, some day, teach or work at Gordon, we cultivate potential hires the way a development officer cultivates potential donors.

The feedback from candidates we've interviewed tells us that they can feel our mission in everything from what they see on our bulletin boards to their own conversations with students and teachers. They also report that seeing diverse faculty and staff has a welcoming effect.

- **The multicultural education approach we take to teaching, bolstered by professional development work** that helps support teachers as they explore, evaluate, and deepen their teaching practice. Partnering with schools that do similar inclusion and equity work can also be stimulating and motivating for faculty and staff.

At Gordon, we provide education and training on a number of diversity issues and topics by using consultants such as Enid Lee, Jennifer Bryan, Deb Roffman, Mariama Richards, Elizabeth Denevi, and Robin DiAngelo (to name a few). Although we honor the fact that individuals come with varying knowledge, attitudes, experiences, biases, and expectations, we require everyone to participate in these learning opportunities.

We also make sure our professional development budget enables faculty to attend the NAIS People of Color Conference, the White Privilege Conference, the National Association of Multicultural Educators Conference, and other diversity-focused seminars and events. Our faculty, administrators, and trustees have regular opportunities to present our practices — from the boardroom to the classroom — at regional and national conferences and at schools that have requested our guidance in both teaching practice and institutional planning. Publicly presenting our work has required teachers and administrators to both critique and strengthen their own craft knowledge.

Ideally, professional development work should also provide faculty, staff, and administrators with time to think about how their particular identities shape experience. This shaping of experience has implications for how we engage in our work together and interact with our students and families. An example of Gordon's professional development work is our focus on race and teaching practice. Since 2011, our entire faculty, staff, and administration has been meeting in small race-based affinity groups. Faculty and administrators facilitate the groups, with the director of diversity and multicultural practice guiding and leading all aspects of this process. The groups explore their racial socialization and conditioning and how this learning impacts our work. By

using various resources and designing and implementing experiential learning activities, our teachers and staff are developing skill sets that come with ongoing reflection, analysis, and practice. Because the entire school is involved, we are growing together. White faculty and administrators are actively leading the work and modeling best practices.

- **Having a director of diversity and multicultural practice.** This position is central to the success of Gordon's diversity and mission-based work. We have had three directors of diversity since the first one was hired in 2000. This senior-level administrative position answers directly to the head of school and works with division heads to lead work around curriculum; professional development programs for administrators and teachers; faculty and staff hiring and recruitment; student admissions work; and affinity work. This position also serves as the administrative liaison to the board-level Diversity Committee.

RECRUITING AND AFFIRMING STUDENTS

As of this writing, Gordon has 132 students of color out of a total student body of 412. Although we have more work to do in this area, this represents a significant increase since we initiated our strategic intentions. Among the factors that help us in our work with students:

- **Deliberate efforts to find and appeal to diverse students.** Gordon makes it clear that we are a school that wants families from underrepresented groups; we do this through our mission statement, advertisements in various media, open houses, visit days, and outreach to neighborhood libraries and day care centers. We also have special events where we reach out specifically to families of color and LGBT-headed families. Members of our parent association and the Parents of Students of Color affinity group reach out to prospective

parents and invite them to programs we offer throughout the year.

Even so, one of our greatest recruitment tools is word of mouth. We get specific benefits when prospective students and their families see an environment that is working hard to be inclusive. Creating a critical mass of students of color is an important and effective strategy for attracting more of them and sustaining our commitment to the students and their families.

- **Making sure students of color are not alone and will see images of themselves reflected in every aspect of school life.** The multicultural approach to teaching challenges students to view the world through multiple perspectives while, at the same time, affirming students.
- **Our Gordon School Institute on Multicultural Practice.** At the end of the school year, all teachers are required to participate in a multicultural summer institute. Enid Lee has been a consultant with our school for more than 12 years and with the Multicultural Institute for five years. During this time, we meet as a school, in cross-divisional groups, to examine our curriculum and to assess the windows and mirrors we provide for our students. All disciplines of the school are represented during the multicultural institute, and we are all engaged in thinking about how we develop and expand our curriculum. This institute offers the time and sustained focus that can lead to a transformative revision of a piece of curriculum or a substantive enhancement of a teacher's pedagogic approach.
- **The Social Identity Advisory Program.** This is an important facet of our curriculum for our middle school students in which teachers lead discussions to help students explore the connection between identity and experience. The focus of this advisory time is to help students think about how we construct our world views based on our many

social identifiers. Experiential activities and discussions stimulate students to examine their biases and stereotypes and consider how we are influenced to react to differences. Students meet for an hour each week during advisory time on Fridays between January and May.

- **The Common Ground Affinity Group.** This is a voluntary program for students of color that starts in first grade and ends in eighth grade. In place since 2006, the lower school Common Ground Affinity Group meets in three eight-week sessions in the fall, winter, and spring. Begun in 2007, the middle school Common Ground Affinity Group meets once a month on Friday mornings.

The program's purpose is to facilitate positive racial identity exploration, self-awareness, support, and connection. Through various activities, projects, and dialogue, students find affirmation, advocacy, and a safe space to talk about challenging issues in the school community. Our middle school students also plan and participate in the Day of Silence, which is a national effort to protest the silencing of people who identify as LGBTQ.

A TRANSFORMATIVE PROCESS FOR OUR COMMUNITY

From the classroom to the boardroom, Gordon School's approach to maintaining momentum is to embed important practices like the ones described here into every facet of school life. Our process did not happen overnight. It has taken vision and courage, plus years of careful research, professional development work, and a willingness to see the benefits of change.

Multicultural education and practice continue to be transformative for Gordon's teachers and students. Learning in a diverse community — where race, socioeconomic class, sexual orientation, religion, ability, language, and other important differences

exist and are valued as a source of learning and knowledge — broadens our thinking and builds our connections to each other. This kind of learning is relevant and rigorous, and it strengthens our students' critical thinking skills. But most important, it connects the head to the heart.

To maintain the momentum, key constituents such as faculty, board members, and parents have to see the value in this important work. We can sustain diversity, inclusion, and equity work only through collaboration and an openness to change.