



The School District of Haverford Township

BASIS

Belonging and Sociocultural Identities in Schools

April, 2019

Every student should feel a sense of belonging in our schools. This is one of the beliefs of the School District of Haverford Township, which, since 2016, has been examining this issue. Today the group leading this work is known as BASIS, which stands for “Belonging and Sociocultural Identities in Schools.” Our goal is to infuse a common understanding and practice among all staff and students that our school environment must be supportive, inclusive, and safe for all.

What does that really mean?

‘Sociocultural identity’ refers to a person’s sense of belonging in different groups in our culture and lives. Any number of factors can impact this, including a person’s age, race, gender, education level, family background, health, religion, sexual identity, social and class status, and political affiliation. We strive to ensure that all students, regardless of these factors, feel there is a place for them in our school district, and that they are supported, included, and welcomed.

How did the group’s work begin?

In 2016, several community members asked the District how the needs of transgender students were being addressed. We formed a committee to examine this, and those discussions initiated a broader evaluation of how our District contributes to a sense of belonging that **any and all** students experience.

In 2017, BASIS was formed with a group of staff, including teachers, administrators, nurses, psychologists, and counselors from each level (elementary, middle and high school). BASIS committed to identifying and developing programs and practices for improving our school climate and enhancing our school culture. We didn’t have survey data to support that our climate was lacking — but we knew, anecdotally, that there was room for improvement. When students feel included and connected to school they will be more likely to participate in the school community and achieve academic success. Certainly, creating a more inclusive environment where all students feel a sense of belonging could only contribute to a reduction in stress.

The same district-level committee continues its work today, as the district creates school-based BASIS teams. In addition, a group of high school students were selected (based on their leadership in activities and in the school) to form a student BASIS team. The District worked to include a very broad representation of students who could help us to examine our culture through the lens of equity. These students have been developing specific activities and messaging in the high school around the BASIS work.



BASIS in Action Morning Meeting

Students in every classroom in the District in kindergarten through fifth grade begin their day with what’s called a “Morning Meeting,” designed to build a strong sense of community, and set children up for social and academic success. Each morning, students and teachers gather together in a circle for twenty minutes and interact with one another. After a polite structured greeting, students are encouraged to share important information in their lives (and respond appropriately by offering polite questions or comments). Teachers lead students in a brief group activity that enforces academic goals (reciting a poem or playing a game). Students then read and interact with a short message written by their teacher that helps them to focus on the work they’ll do in school that day. Morning Meeting establishes trust in the classroom, encourages collaboration, and sets the tone for respectful learning.



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The Work of BASIS in 2017-18 School Year

BASIS knew that in order to be successful, we'd need to raise awareness of this issue and offer training to our staff. We chose to work with Dr. Jeanne Stanley of Watershed Counseling, an educator whose teaching and research focus on the same issues that BASIS was hoping to address. Dr. Stanley actively works with numerous school districts on similar initiatives.

Our group expanded, forming cross-district groups. We drafted a vision, mission and purpose for our work. At the same time, our School Board adopted a policy addressing gender expansive and transgender students. Again, while this was the genesis of our formation, our goal was to ensure the same kinds of support and inclusivity for all of our students. We want all students to experience a sense of belonging.

During the 2017-18 School Year, BASIS helped to establish the following initiatives:

MIDDLE SCHOOL 2017-18

- The "Young Minds Change Lives" club was formed to address social justice.
- All new students received a student guide to help them get acclimated to the school community.
- Agenda items related to BASIS work have become a regular part of weekly staff meetings.

HIGH SCHOOL 2017-18

- Time is devoted at each faculty meeting to BASIS topics, and staff have participated in team-building activities to build awareness.
- The school's Rainbow Alliance hosts a Day of Silence in which anyone can purchase a button and then remain silent to experience what it might feel like to exist as LGBTQ in the community.
- Students have attended the Anti-Defamation League's Youth Leadership Conference.
- Students/staff have attended the Women's Leadership Conference at Penn with former First Lady Michelle Obama.
- Students have taken a field trip to the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C.
- Student have participated in the Rainbow Connections Conference at West Chester University.
- Staff at the high school and at other district schools have participated in training provided by the Anti-Defamation League and The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia regarding transgender and/or gender expansive students.



BASIS in Action

Students Leading the Work

High school students have played a prominent role in leading the work of BASIS. In February 2019, about 20 student leaders presented their thoughts, ideas, and work to date to the high school faculty. Students shared what they'd learned at the Delaware Valley Consortium for Equity and Excellence student leadership conference they attended earlier in the school year. Students emphasized the importance of building authentic relationships between students and staff. Student leaders from the Rainbow Alliance, African American Cultural Alliance, and No Place for Hate also shared the importance of staff support, their perspective about how to be supportive of students and address unintentional discrimination, and current activities occurring within their clubs.



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During the 2018-19 School Year, BASIS helped to establish the following additional initiatives:

- Students in grades 4-12 were surveyed in partnership with the Catalyst program at the University of Pennsylvania about their sense of belonging using the Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) tool.
- Principals were asked to develop school-wide goals based on our research and work. For example, morning meetings in each elementary classroom can offer an opportunity to develop stronger student relationships.
- All 900+ staff will have received training on this topic by the end of the school year.
- Racial Literacy training occurred for a team of students and staff.
- Approximately 40 staff members attended professional development offered by the Delaware Valley Consortium for Excellence and Equity.
- We began reviewing our curriculum, examining it from differing perspectives.
- Our administrators are attending diversity recruitment events.
- Every student in grades K-5 begins the school day with a classroom morning meeting designed to foster respect and open communication.

Who is responsible for the BASIS work?

The District's Director of Learning and Assessment, Sara Christianson brings leadership to this work. Ms. Christianson taught in West Philadelphia where her leadership helped transform a K-8 school into the Junior Academy for Social Justice. The program gained city-wide attention from lawmakers and educators at the University of Pennsylvania. She was the Principal of Chatham Park Elementary School before assuming her current role.

What is the ultimate goal?

Maintaining and Enhancing an Affirming and Supportive Learning Environment for All Members of The School District of Haverford Township. Our goal is to ensure that every member of our school community feels included, respected, and valued. We want the School District of Haverford Township to be a learning environment in which meeting the needs of all of our students is a continuous, daily goal. We hope that our work will be powerful, tangible and impactful. We understand that our school community is comprised of people with a wide variety of opinions, thoughts, and experiences. We want our work to be responsive to this.

Who can I contact with questions or more information?

The building principal or Sara Christianson at (610) 853-5900 ext. 7208 or schristianson@haverfordsd.net.



BASIS in Action

Examining Our Classroom Communities

Haverford's faculty, under the direction of Dr. Crystal Lucky, Associate Dean of Baccalaureate Studies at Villanova University, is examining ways to create classroom communities that support and respect various perspectives. Teachers are also working hard to provide context around uncomfortable topics, such as various historical events and human rights violations including slavery. Many of the texts taught to students in social studies and English classes are written from one perspective. During a workshop, teachers were asked to examine Narrative of Frederick Douglass and to build the context around the writing to help students better understand it. They also examined photographs that helped to tell stories from varying perspectives. Teachers are helping students to delve deeper into history and the texts we study.