

# Briarcliff Manor

Union Free School District



## Equity and Diversity Committee is off to Smooth Sailing

In the Briarcliff Manor School District, when students speak – we listen.

Last spring, around the time of the George Floyd killing, many students, alumni, parents and community members expressed the need for a systemic change in the Briarcliff School system. In just a few short months, we created an Equity and Diversity Committee and subcommittees and the entire faculty and staff engaged in anti-bias training.

The Equity and Diversity Committee, spearheaded by Briarcliff High School Assistant Principal Daniel Goldberg and Social Worker Tim Pellegrin, is charged with examining bias and racial disparity in the district.

“Students and alumni thought the district could do a better job in representing diverse voices and experiences of marginalized

communities,” said Mr. Pellegrin. “They wanted to make everyone feel welcomed here. The committee was formed out of this expressed desire directly from the students, as well as parents and community members.”

At the beginning of the school year, Mr. Pellegrin and Mr. Goldberg reached out to faculty and staff members to invite them to the committee. The committee meets once a month and has created three subcommittees to tackle equity and diversity from different angles: hiring, curriculum and student experience.

Mr. Pellegrin and Mr. Goldberg take part in those subcommittees as well and each of them includes representatives from all three schools. ■

*Read on for more detail on the work of each subcommittee on pages 2 & 3*

## Social-Emotional Learning in Briarcliff

Throughout this extraordinary year, the social emotional wellness of Briarcliff Manor students has been in the forefront of everything we have done at all three schools. There was surprising unanimity among faculty and staff around what each of our schools could and should be for students and families, especially during the pandemic. As we prepared for the first day of school, teachers and administrators were concerned about the potential impact of opening schools on the health and safety of students, staff and the school community. Nonetheless, in accordance with the District’s Reopening Plan, all three schools opened in September, revealing a deeply embedded district culture that prioritizes a student’s academic needs with that student’s social and emotional needs. Read on to hear from our three principals about the steps their schools have taken this year to support social and emotional wellness. ■

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## Equity and Diversity The Hiring Subcommittee

It is critical that students see themselves in a school district's faculty and staff. To that end, the Hiring Subcommittee is working to ensure a more diverse staff.

"We begin each committee with an investigative process," Mr. Goldberg said. "We have found that when different positions in the district open up, we tend to receive applications from the same candidates. So, we don't believe that we are tapping into all of the available candidates."

Most people who want to work at public school use a website called OLAS, which is an online job search platform run by Putnam | Northern Westchester BOCES. In fact, this is how both Mr. Goldberg and Mr. Pellegrin found their current positions in the district.

OLAS has taken numerous steps in the last two years to broaden its candidate pool,

which has 150,000 active members. To reach prospective candidates, OLAS uses radio, print and direct mail advertising as well as social media. It has also increased attendance at job fairs and enhanced its search engine so it is more visible to job seekers.

Nonetheless, Briarcliff is expanding its own outreach as well.

"Not everyone knows about this website, and right now it is the only place from which we get our candidates, so we are looking into using a wider approach, such as advertising in newspapers or attending job fairs," Mr. Goldberg said. "We are looking into getting quality candidates from diverse places in order to have access to all potential applicants."

Mr. Pellegrin agreed with Mr. Goldberg.

"If we receive more diverse applicants, the change will just happen organically over time



Assistant Principal Daniel Goldberg and Social Worker Tim Pellegrin

and we will build a more diverse faculty," he said. "That way every student can see themselves in the faculty, which is something that students have been vocal about."

Mr. Goldberg believes applicants from more ethnically diverse areas, such as lower Westchester and New York City, would apply for positions in Briarcliff if they knew about the job openings.

"Briarcliff is close enough that people can drive here from those areas. They just need to know about the open positions," he said. ■

## Equity and Diversity The Curriculum Subcommittee

Curriculum, or the content we teach, plays an important role in creating an inclusive environment in a school district. This committee is looking closely at the curriculum in order to identify where change is needed to better represent diverse voices.

"We want to have diverse figures in history, diverse writers, learning materials and textbooks that celebrate diversity in a more

meaningful way. We want to be systemically making those changes in the curriculum," Mr. Pellegrin said.

The first step is to look for invisibility.

"We are going to look at what is absent, including, for example, a text that does not include women or certain racial groups," Mr. Goldberg said. "We will also look for stereotyping in textbooks or posters on the walls or

library books. For example, if we are teaching about African Americans, it is not enough to learn only about slavery and civil rights. What about World War I and II and Vietnam? We also want to learn about contributions of African Americans year-round."

"If you only discuss those things during Black History Month, it feels packaged. This needs to be discussed during the rest of the year," Mr. Pellegrin said.

Both Mr. Goldberg and Mr. Pellegrin acknowledge that this is a long process that will take time.

"It is hard to say when changes to curriculum will take place because it will not happen all at once, but rather incrementally but the work of examining the curriculum has begun," Mr. Pellegrin said. "We want to tell the whole story of the people and cultures that have contributed to our nation." ■



## Equity and Diversity

### The Student Experience Subcommittee

At the core of all of our work on equity and diversity is the student experience.

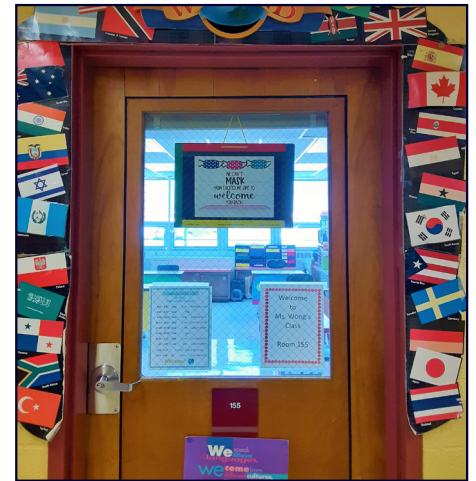
"There is a long list of experiences, ranging from feeling welcome, to seeing representation in the faculty and in the curriculum material to student behavior," Mr. Goldberg said. "Students of certain ethnic groups have mentioned that they don't feel connected to the community, and majority students have also expressed that sentiment – that the ethnically minority students do not feel connected."

Mr. Goldberg emphasized that some students have mentioned that the curriculum did

not connect to their experiences and that they didn't see faculty members that looked like them or shared the same religious belief.

"We even discussed in one of the meetings something as simple as having flags of different nations hanging in the schools so that students can see themselves in the flag of that country and feel represented," he said.

In the meetings, some students felt that they did not have a forum where they could express their experiences or thoughts as minorities. Mr. Pellegrin said a good place to share their experiences and their thoughts would be in the



classroom itself.

"The classroom should be able to give students space to discuss their experiences and their stories – a class discussion is always welcome, in most classes," he said.

Mr. Goldberg hopes to create additional spaces for students to have a voice.

"Our students are so savvy – they realized that they needed to invite to the discussion students who do not think the way they do, students with different viewpoints. We want to create a space for people of different opinions to join and we will need to find someone to moderate this."

Mr. Pellegrin believes that creating a more diverse curriculum will foster more discussion.

"There is learning that takes place in the classrooms with the teacher moderating the discussion but we are always looking for other spaces as well," he said. ■



Dr. Bryant Marks

In addition to the Equity and Diversity Committee and its subcommittees, the entire district – both faculty and staff – is currently undergoing Implicit Bias training by Dr. Bryant Marks,

educator, former White House Advisor and Founding Director of the National Training Institute on Race and Equity.

Mr. Marks has trained numerous educational institutions, private corporations and police departments (including the entire LAPD) among many other institutions. He worked with the leadership team in Briarcliff Manor back in February and the district is currently utilizing a program that he developed called Implicit Bias Awareness 101.

"Every single employee in the district will undergo this training and move on to the next level in the program next year," Mr. Goldberg said. "Mr. Marks will also connect with our high school students next year. He is extremely engaging, energetic and upbeat so we look forward to our continued work with him."

Mr. Pellegrin shares the sentiment.

"Mr. Marks has an ability to make people understand that it doesn't make us bad people if we carry these biases, but that there is a process by which we all pick them up. It is important to understand that this happens

for all of us because it creates awareness," he added.

Both Mr. Goldberg and Mr. Pellegrin are extremely pleased with the committee's accomplishments thus far.

"I am overwhelmed with the excitement that people have. There is a lot of great energy. People are ready to do the work. The board and the administration have been very supportive. The energy from the committee has been tremendous. There is so much work to do but it has been a wonderful start. We feel very supported," Mr. Goldberg said.

"It is a lot of work to bring systemic change to any organization so it is going to take some time. But we have already had meetings, started our partnership with Dr. Marks and met with the students, so a lot of the work has already started," said Mr. Pellegrin. "We feel very grateful to everyone who has taken this on with us, from the Board of Education, to Dr. Jim Kaishian, to the faculty and staff and our students most importantly, because they drove this."

There was a very strong response from the beginning and the committee currently has a total of 23 members, but Mr. Pellegrin and Mr. Goldberg are always happy to add new members, including those from the community.

"We want to reach out and invite community members and parents to the committee," he said. "It is a great endeavor that we are both very proud to take a part in." ■



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**"ENGAGE, INSPIRE AND ACHIEVE"**



# Social-Emotional Learning at Todd Elementary School

## A Note from Principal Colleen O'Neill-Mangan

Childhood should be joyful.

That is why at Todd Elementary School we strive to connect with our students, to teach them strategies for coping with stress and anxiety, to create community and to leave plenty of room for fun.

When children find a healthy balance between the joy of childhood and the pressures of a high-performing community, we see evidence that they perform better, are more resilient, attend school with greater frequency and enjoy their day-to-day experiences at school more. We cultivate the inner lives that lead to high levels of engagement and achievement across the disciplines.

This year, it was more important than ever before to support the social and emotional well-being of our students so that when faced with challenges, they would have coping skills and strategies to draw upon.

To that end, we have employed literature read in the classroom, morning meetings, daily check-ins, social groups and classroom mindfulness lessons.

Our teachers have worked to build and maintain a sense of community with their students. They

work closely with our parents, our guidance counselor and school psychologist to provide a well-coordinated support system.

Social Emotional Learning is an important part of the daily lives of students and staff at Todd. We strive to help students recognize, understand, and manage their emotions by giving them language to articulate their feelings and strategies to build positive relationships with their classmates and adults.

The language includes words to describe how they may be feeling in the moment



and to recognize how others may be feeling in that same moment. These strategies include how to respond to those feelings including self-management techniques and social awareness skills. Todd has also placed a heavy emphasis on allowing students to practice empathy and communication skills.

Since returning to school in September, teachers have prioritized making connections with their students. This means dedicating time to establishing positive relationships and building community. Teachers create opportunities throughout the day for

children to practice “Habits of Mind” skills including collaboration, independence, curiosity as well as mindfulness skills and strategies within their cohorts. Given what transpired last spring, we understood that it would be critical to create kind and caring learning communi-

ties so that children felt safe and connected to each other and to caring adults.

And it is not just for students! Even in the best of times, serving as an elementary educator can be exhausting. Handling live, satellite and remote classrooms simultaneously can be overwhelming. This is why we have made access to self-care available to faculty and staff. These resources come in many forms and include regular check-ins with staff to see how they are doing, open office hours with School Psychologist Dr. Sarah

Rubin and access to Guidance Counselor Gillian O’Connell. Ms. O’Connell offers a once a week drop-in for all teachers to attend guided mindfulness meditation sessions.

What’s more, Dr. Rubin and Mrs. O’Connell have converted our faculty lounge into a “Zen Den” for teachers and staff. In between making their classrooms uplifting and empowering for students and supporting families, faculty now has a place to decompress and rejuvenate while surrounded by uplifting positive statements on our walls and peaceful sounds and elements.

We have done numerous activities since the beginning of the year. We have had Kindness Week as well as Spirit Week. We have had mindfulness and lessons with Ms. O’Connell about the difference between joking, teasing and bullying, and about being an upstander, not a bystander. We have held school-wide read-alouds of important books such as: “Strictly No Elephants,” “One” and “Say Something” – all about inclusion of all students and celebrating diversity. Our sensory hallway provides physical and brain breaks. We have also provided our staff and parents with helpful articles, such as “Dealing With Uncertainty, How To Stop The Negative Chatter In Your Head,” and “How To Develop Grit And Resilience.”

By addressing each student’s social and emotional needs, we hope that students will better enjoy the wonder and awe of learning, better balance humor with a seriousness of purpose and not confuse doing the best they can with needing to be perfect all the time. Teachers, staff and I want students to know that each and every one of them possess a special place in the Todd School community. ■



# Social-Emotional Learning at Briarcliff Middle School

## A Note from Principal Susan Howard

At Briarcliff Middle School, we know that middle school learners do best with a consistent, structured day that allows them to connect with both teachers and peers. To maximize student emotional health, we have employed home base groupings, school spirit days, special events and formal training in emotional intelligence.

As we had enough space to do so, we divided classes into small groups that we call "home base" groups. Students spend the bulk of the day with their home base groups where we have worked to create a sense of community. For example, the home base teacher welcomes students to school as they arrive, and students chat informally among themselves and with their teachers as they wait for class to begin.

At the start of the school year, teachers incorporated activities that allowed students to share about themselves as they fostered new relationships. Seventh grade students designed "all about me" T-shirts and then hung them on the front of their desks.

Eighth graders identified silly nicknames for their cohorts and set up a friendly competition between them. In sixth grade, students read a novel called "Rules", which spurred students to reflect on the tenets that guide their own lives.

School spirit days, the Snowflake Challenge, a classroom decorating competition called "Cribs" and Valen-Kind notes are some of the school-wide activities that have helped to build group cohesion. Now virtual, Student Government continues to organize fun, community-building events. The Soup-er Bowl allowed us to collect items for the local food pantry while predicting the winning Super Bowl team. A virtual talent show gave us an opportunity to celebrate little-known skills and talents.

To further our work in social emotional learning, the middle school embarked upon RULER training this fall. Developed by Yale University Psychologist Marc Brackett, RULER helps students improve their emotional intelligence, creating a positive school climate. The acronym stands for:

- Recognizing emotions in oneself and others
- Understanding the causes and consequences of emotions
- Labeling emotions with a nuanced vocabulary
- Expressing emotions in accordance with cultural norms and social context
- Regulating emotions with helpful strategies

In our first year, a school-based team has been learning about RULER through virtual sessions. Team members will share their learning and turnkey skills and strategies with colleagues throughout the building.

Finally, the team will create a plan to implement this program in classrooms next year. We will build capacity over time.

In the guidance office, Dr. Elissa Novick and Sara Piersons run weekly lunchtime chats with remote learners. They also send all students a short survey to see how the students are feeling about school and to help identify areas of need. They follow up

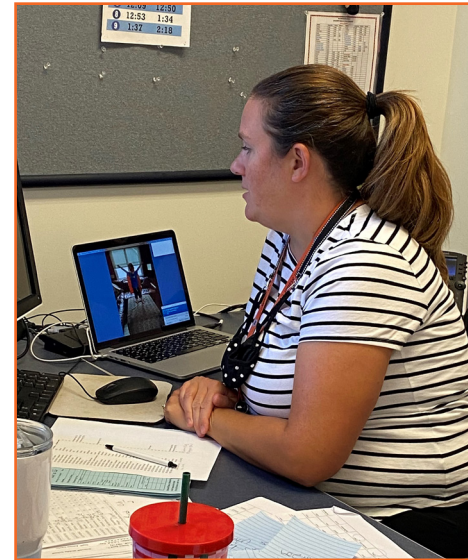
with classroom visits to talk with students

periodically. In our school "Teams" account, students can link into a virtual Wellness Suite that suggests activities for stress reduction and relaxation.

Our student advisory program has shifted and looks a little different this year. Counselors partner with teachers at all grade levels to check on the well-being of students and see individuals for counseling as needed. In grade seven, Ms. Piersons works with our Student Assistance Counselor Alexa Mennuti to provide lessons on positive self-esteem, peer relationships and drug/alcohol awareness including refusal strategies. In grade eight, Ms. Piersons has been meeting with students in groups to focus on the transition to high school.

Finally, we launched virtual clubs this year to give students another way to create a sense of community based on shared interests. In addition to Student Government, there is a virtual STEM club, Mathletes, Yearbook Committee and Bears-2Bears. We commend teachers and students for being thoughtful

and creative about how to make things work this year, in spite of the restrictions in place due to Covid-19. We are pleased that we have been able to welcome students consistently since September, and look forward to seeing them right through June. ■



Guidance Counselor Sara Piersons



**Counselors partner with teachers at all grade levels to check on the well-being of students and see individuals for counseling as needed.**



# Social-Emotional Learning at Briarcliff High School

## A Note from Principal Debora French

An extended orientation process. A focus on mindfulness. A quick return to student clubs and activities. These were some of the ways that Briarcliff High School faculty and staff supported the social emotional health of our students as they returned to school this year.

Although high school students are older and thus better able to intellectualize the pandemic and better able to handle remote access learning, we knew it was imperative that we provide the social connectedness and direct emotional support that had been absent since last March.

This is why BHS extended the traditional orientation process. We spent the first week of school bringing students together in their grade-specific cohorts for our orientation program, instilling the community responsibility of following necessary health protocols as they comfortably adjust to our new and unusual school day experience. We started these early days as we now do every day, standing at the high school entrance, welcoming students by name with "good morning" wishes for a great day and letting them know that we will get through this together.

Building upon the work of our elementary and middle school colleagues, Briarcliff High School continues to promote Social and Emotional learning in the classroom and through our robust co-curricular program. We continue to include mindfulness and decompression strategies and activities. However, this is done with a renewed emphasis on action and efficacy as high school students are encouraged to exercise their passion to get involved, to lead, and to create positive change in school, in our community and

beyond. This is why a variety of virtual student clubs and activities such as the Fall Drama and athletics were among the first activities reintroduced as it became clear that our reopening plans were working.

Beyond self-efficacy and autonomy, the high school provides resources and support to students and their families. Our counselors and clinicians provide ongoing outreach, counseling and resources to students

throughout the year. Every year, our Student Assistance Counselor hosts a Newcomers Group for all students who are new to the District. While this year's group meeting took

place virtually, it was well attended, with nearly all students having the opportunity to connect with Student Assistance Counselor Meredith Ohmes and with each other.

Through all of this, we have not forgotten our strictly remote learners. Counselors and clinicians have been, and continue to, reach out to remote learners to check in and assess any needs for social connectedness outside of the classroom. The Counseling Department also hosted a virtual Senior Informa-

tion webinar for parents and seniors on the college search and application process. As in past years, counselors speak with parents throughout the year. These informative workshops help parents understand the

Briarcliff High School Four Year Plan as well as curriculum transitions, academic expectations, and strategies for maintaining a balanced student life experience for their child.

In light of the myriad struggles that so many of us have faced as a community, nation, and world since last March, we are constantly looking to ensure that we are providing each and every one of our students with needed social-emotional support. With this in mind, Tim Pellegrin, social worker, and Ms. Ohmes, student assistance counselor, developed a Social-Emotional screener sent to all BHS students at the end of orientation week.

The screener included a short series of questions to gauge students' experiences since March and identify emotional needs as we transitioned back to school. Mr. Pellegrin, Ms. Ohmes, as well as our counselors, Meredith Safer, Erin Ryan, and Michael Muranelli, worked together to examine survey results and make counseling connections where appropriate. A comparative social-emotional screener has been sent to students on a quarterly basis to maintain an informed social-emotional barometer and to address the ever-changing needs of our students. Our hope is that the screener will offer opportu-

nities for students to self-reflect and cultivate greater self-assessment skills.

While we know that the pandemic and our new learning experience has taken a toll on students and families, we continue to be

amazed at our students' resiliency, fortitude and maturity. We are grateful to our parent partners as we strive together to provide a sense of normalcy and overall well-being in our students' daily lives. ■

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