

WEST HARTFORD HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

Minutes of December 1, 2021, Meeting

FOR FUTURE REFERENCE: Public Comments welcome via phone, by dialing 408-418-9388 Access Code 173 498 0586

Meeting was called to order at 7:20 p.m. by Co-Chair Esam Boraey due to technical issues which were resolved by 7:40 p.m. Video was recorded and the full video is available to be viewed on WHCI and on [YouTube](#).

Attendance:

Esam Boraey, Co-Chair (EB) was present
Dawn Ennis, Co-Chair (DE) was present
Aurora Melita, Secretary (AM) was excused due to illness
Ted Mancini (TM) was present
Sarah Raskin (SR) was present
Eric Schoenberg (ES) was present
Pramod Pradhan, Liaison and Facilitator (PP) was present
Tekisha Dwan Everette (TDE) was present
Kristin Sowell (KS) was present

Members of the public were in attendance as well as two guests from the Board of Education.

Minutes:

ES made a motion to accept the November 2021 meeting minutes, and seconded by DE, passed unanimously

Guests from the Board of Education discuss the subject of SEL

EB yielded to DE to introduce invited guest speakers for the meeting: newly-elected chair of the Board of Education Dr. Lorna Thomas-Farquharson (LTF) and re-elected member Dr. Jason Oliver Chang (JOC).

Dr. Chang made a presentation about [Social Emotional Learning](#) (SEL) which explained how West Hartford Public Schools were meeting the needs of elementary and secondary school students through strategies that are actually not new to our schools but have been utilized for many years. The focus now is in response to prior year's school closures and the global pandemic that caused major disruptions for families here and elsewhere. Students are experiencing a loss of reliable routines, many of which come from being a member of a school community where students see peers, teachers and other caring adults each day. As such, a program to support students as they find new ways to cope with a changing world is a crucial part of their education.

JOC said social and emotional learning is the process of developing skills so that students can recognize their emotions and understand how their emotions influence their thinking and actions. In SEL lessons, students are taught how to use problem-

solving skills that support responsible decision making. Students who understand their feelings can apply solutions to navigate difficult situations and can relate well to others. They are also more likely to exhibit confidence in themselves and have a positive self-image.

At the elementary level, JOC said teachers are intentionally including social and emotional learning opportunities through synchronous and asynchronous learning activities. These can include student reflection on their Second Step lesson learning, self-care strategies, and connections with fellow students and teachers. With small group schedules in mind, each school's morning or afternoon meetings provide a dedicated time each day for SEL, civics and social justice education.

For middle schools and high schools, aka secondary schools, JOC said the block schedule allows teachers time for students to apply these strategies, reflect, and make connections between what they learned and their personal and civic lives. Teachers are embedding SEL lessons and social justice opportunities within each academic block where appropriate. The Morning Advisory period in middle schools and weekly Community periods in the two high schools focus on SEL and social justice issues.

EB asked the first question, about what guidelines were used to build SEL and what sources and/or experts, parents or children were consulted to implement it.

JOC explained the division of responsibilities between the Board of Education and the WHPS administration. The Board sets policies, and the curriculum is what he called "a management issue" that is the responsibility of the district. The Board does not dictate instruction or specific books, for example. JOC answered EB's question by saying the curriculum comes from a number of community interactions from the [One Community Network](#) and with the LGBTQIA Alliance composed of teachers, staff and administrators.

TM asked the next question, regarding who are the unelected officials who built the curriculum and who do they answer to? TM indicated he had several more questions and EB asked him to list them all prior to JOC and LTF responding.

TM's questions:

1. How much does SEL/SJL* cost the district above and beyond federal funds?
2. Under what form was it decided public funds to this?
3. How was it decided to switch to SEL/SJL* curriculum?
Can you explain some of the curriculum?
4. Can you define "social and emotional learning through an equity lens"?
5. Can you let the public know the different parts of this SEL/SJL curriculum?
6. TM quoted from the Sept. 9th Board Meeting, Section 4, "Does it foster a moral imperative to be agents of change for social justice?" That's within the curriculum itself at the elementary school level
7. [1800 Educational Equity Policy](#), a line that stood out: "At the Board of Education, we have a statutory duty to implement the state's educational interests." TM's

question: Do you represent the state or do you represent the parents when it comes to the schools and the curriculum?

8. In hiring decisions, is race and policy agreement utilized in hiring decisions? Does merit trump everything else? Which is more important?
9. TM said one of the most important questions he had, which he said others had asked him to ask, was: Who do parents inform when their children, or when they want their children, to opt out of this curriculum?

*NOTE: Although TM repeatedly referred to SEL as SEL/SJL, the official designation is SEL. However, [in the summer of 2020](#), WHPS did adopt [A Commitment to Equity and Anti-Racism Statement](#) which does specifically mention “justice” education, in a statement promising that WHPS teachers will “engage students in a peer-to-peer and student/educator discussion platforms and events that will center racial justice and anti-racism in teaching about race, racism, privilege, allyship and justice.”

Otherwise, “Social Justice Education” or SJL is not referenced in Board of Education policies or WHPS administrative documents online. [The Equity and Diversity Council](#) and the [WHPS Office of Equity Advancement](#) are a resource for further information.

LTF thanked TM for his questions and explained that the word “social” applies to everyone, and we all have some level of “emotions,” and that the curriculum is designed to support all students’ social and emotional needs.

LTF said the federal funding has to go to items that are being impacted by the pandemic, and that includes social and educational needs, now and what may come.

LTF addressed the items TM cited in the 1800 document as an ongoing effort to put into practice the district’s equity policies.

LTF reminded us that March 2022 will mark the 2nd year of the pandemic and “Our young people have been through a lot,” and SEL is designed to support them now and in the future.

JOC responded to TM’s initial question about accountability. While it might be desirable to have curriculum dictated by elected people, what we have instead is a system of professionals who are licensed, have degrees, who studied and were trained in the state’s best institutions and learning in other school systems. These dedicated credentialed, highly trained individuals bring their expertise for what works for students and teachers to provide a high quality education to students in our district.

JOC responded to TM’s question for specifics as to the curriculum. There is a pre-K to grade 3 band and grade 4 to grade 5 band.

The first set of learning targets (pre-K to grade 3) is:

- “I can express who I am.”
- “I show respect to others when they express who they are.”
- “I can identify examples of gender stereotypes.”

The second set of learning targets (grade 4 and grade 5) is:

“I can be respectful to others and refer to them by their preferred pronouns.”*

*NOTE: TDE made a note in the chat that everyone attending the meeting via WebEx could see, and is a matter of public record, reminding us that it is not advisable to use the adjective “preferred” with the word “pronouns.” Our pronouns aren’t what we prefer we be called, offering someone an option to call us by some other pronoun. Our pronouns are our pronouns, and Co-Chair Dawn Ennis followed up with our guests regarding this advice, in writing.

JOC said some of these learning targets are driven by children’s literature. He said if someone cannot express who they are, that is a violation of our school climate where all students feel they are free to learn.

JOC said some ask when is it age appropriate to address these issues, and his answer is that it’s appropriate whenever there are problems or issues. We know from student experiences that these can happen.

JOC answered TM’s question about hiring, saying the only way to get the best talent is to have a diverse pool, and this policy is aimed at having the most diverse pool of applicants as possible.

JOC answered TM’s question if race trumps merit, saying hiring is about their capacity as a teacher. Having a diverse pool of applicants gets you the very best. WHPS selection processes follow non-discrimination policies.

EB introduced DE, who asked JOC and LTF to respond to TM’s unanswered question about whether parents can opt-out of SEL and followed up by asking why would WHPS allow parents to have their children opt-out of any part of education, and also asked them to respond to the claims in an article in National Review that claimed WHPS was teaching kindergartners about transgender identity. DE noted that she is a transgender woman who knew she was a girl at the age of four.

JOC explained that the schools cannot turn away any student for any reason, and have to accommodate any and all gender identities, and said, “Even if there were no transgender children in the district, it would still be important to teach it because that is a reality in the world.” He called teaching respect a fundamental rationale for why gender identity should be taught.

JOC said as for opting-out, he cited [Board Policy 6235](#), regarding controversial issues, which states: “Students may not opt out of the study of such topics except for where provided by law.” He added the policy instructs teachers to contribute their own thoughts and also be prepared to learn.

SR thanked LTF and JOC and noted that she is a neuropsychologist and university professor, that SEL is not new, that there is considerable research that shows it reduces

bullying, preventing violence, reducing mental health problems, suicide attempts and also improves academics. It also has helped children during the pandemic feel less isolated. SR also thanked the Board for listening to experts and “Not just going along with any particular group of parents who may not have all the information at their fingertips, or may be reacting to lack of information.”

SR revealed she has a child who graduated from WHPS and is a sexual minority youth. She said her child’s biggest complaint was the lack of recognition of sexual minority youth during their time in our schools.

SR noted one of their child’s complaints was that health class was heteronormative and that the dress code was very binary, even to costumes for concert performances. She also asked for clarification if the curriculum is in fact new to WHPS.

LTF responded that the curriculum is not new, “it’s enhanced,” and that while the board is aware of some complaints about binary dress codes and costumes, and wants to hear more, but repeated what JOC said about the Board of Ed being the governing body and setting policy while the administration is in charge of actually managing the schools day to day. LTF said archaic policies like dress code can be revised, within state and federal mandates, and welcomed parents and community feedback.

JOC noted [policy 5535](#) addresses clothing and does provide support for gender expression. He added that in cases when students are bullied or harassed for their expression that is exactly why SEL is needed and is age appropriate.

JOC responded to SR’s question about health class and said last year’s middle school human health and development module appeared to be based on an ad for deodorant and had leaned on something outdated, but thanks to parents raising gender diverse identities, the curriculum was changed.

JOC noted there is an important distinction between sex and gender and that the current curriculum is far more inclusive and more scientifically accurate. DE noted in the WebEx chat that is part of the public record that sex is what’s between our legs, and gender is what’s between our ears. Or put another way, sex is who someone wants to have an intimate relationship with, and gender is who someone wants to have an intimate relationship as.

SR followed up that the health class her child attended was “all condoms, all the time,” and wish it had included lessons on how to be safe if that’s not what you’re doing.

EB introduced TDE who identified herself as African-American and said “Shame on us for not implementing SEL before now.”

TDE explained she saw bullying as a result of children being disoriented from what they consider “normal,” and that what was needed to give children the skills to recognize

what to do when they experience that disorientation and thanked JOC and LTF for introducing this curriculum and their presentation.

TDE asked if the curriculum recognizes that the world is not static and how is it being updated?

LTF responded that the curriculum is about how to recognize their own identity and how to respect others who may be different. LTF added that the curriculum may be different down the road.

EB introduced a member of the public, Liz Santo, who identified herself as a parent of three children, two of whom graduated from WHPS and her third is a junior in one of the high schools.

LS noted that the SEL curriculum is being introduced in her son's English class, and that more credits will be required for her son to graduate, from 22 to 25. She expressed concern about that, and although she said "I see some benefit from this," she said she was not sure she would agree it should be taught during a core-required class. LS said the inclusion of this curriculum was shortening other subjects taught on Wednesdays and was concerned about that, and whether it belongs in the classroom. She said she thinks: "A lot of this dialogue should be included at home" as opposed to in public school. LS also noted: "If my student is uncomfortable during some of the discussions, I was told they don't have to participate, but I don't know if that impacts grading at all, you know, the outcome of his performance in the classroom."

JOC thanked LS for sharing her experience and responded to her concerns by advising she contact the teacher and also the high school principal and said the discussions in the Community sessions at the high schools are included in the curriculum in a conscientious way that reflects on learning throughout the week.

LS followed up that she would like to give her student permission, that "if the discussion is offensive in any way, or he chooses not to participate, I really needed to be reassured that it's not going to impact his performance in class, because as we speak about equity, it's equity for every student, and he's part of that equation. And should be considered so."

LS noted she has followed up with both the teacher and principal and wants to see the presentations being shown, and wants to know if there are surveys involved, and again said she wanted to know if he could opt-out "if he were offended by any of the information." She asked JOC and LTF if that was possible.

DE asked LS to clarify by what she meant by "offended." "What would you be offended by? What would he be offended by?"

LS said "That's a strong word, but maybe just 'not comfortable' in sharing and discussing information."

JOC said this is an area best addressed by her student's teacher.

TM said he wanted to clarify to LS that the [Board Policy 6235](#), which JOC said does not allow her or her son an opt-out, does actually provide one. TM noted that it states: "Students may not opt out of the study of such topics except for where provided by law." TM told LS that the constitutional right to free speech, freedom of expression, would be covered in LS's circumstance.

EB thanked TM and thanked JOC and LTF for joining the commission. Dr. Thomas-Farquharson can be reached via email at lorna_thomas-farquharson@whps.org and Dr. Chang can be reached via email at jason_chang@whps.org

Next meeting of the Board of Education is Tuesday, Dec. 7 at 7 p.m. in the Legislative Chamber of Town Hall, in Room 314, at 50 South Main Street. It is also streamed live by WHCI.

UN Human Rights Declaration and Town of Compassion Awards

EB introduced SR to report on the United Nations Human Rights Declaration and the Town of Compassion Awards.

SR said we have received all of the videos that at DE's suggestion were provided by WHPS students. She credited Roszena Haskins and Craig Diamond of WHPS for their amazing work, as well as Pramod Pradhan for working with the Mayor's Youth Council in recording their contributions. SR noted the preamble will be read by a group of children with disabilities via Zoom on Saturday, Dec. 4, 2021. The complete video will be televised by WHCI on the anniversary of the declaration, Friday, Dec 10, 2021, at 8 p.m. and has an estimated run time of 30 minutes.

PP promised to send SR remaining videos.

DE also thanked Bristow principal Chad Ellis for providing edited videos of his students who participated and noted former co-chair and newly-elected town councilor Adrienne Billings-Smith and her family also recorded a video featuring herself, her wife and their child. "Ace" and her wife, Susie, are the only adults featured in the video.

SR reported that she had a conversation with Mayor Shari Cantor, and that she agreed with her suggestion that to avoid anyone feeling excluded, that the Town of Compassion Awards be reimagined as the West Hartford Town of Compassion or Human Rights Heroes or Honor Roll.

ES stated that he agreed as did KS and DE.

SR noted the Honor Roll could exist at town hall or online and that it'll be up to WHHRC to determine how many will be included, but it would not be happening by Friday, Dec. 10.

SR said the mayor had agreed that the Town will send out invitations and other paperwork on Town letterhead.

ES suggested March 1 as a date to consider for the awards. DE suggested it had to be after the holidays. SR proposed sending out information on Jan. 1, nominees due by Feb. 1, meet on March 1 to decide the honorees and announce them on April 1.

SR revealed she has another year to her term as a commissioner on the Human Rights Commission.

School Resource Officer (SRO) Event:

DE noted AM, who in her capacity as a lobbyist worked on this event with Rep. Jillian Gilchrest as her client in the Connecticut Justice Alliance (CTJA), had emailed commissioners some resources to review regarding last month's gathering. Those resources are [here](#) and [here](#).

TM's report on the event was that following its conclusion, that he engaged in a discussion with AM and other members of CTJA, and he was joined by other attendees from West Hartford, in pointing out that unlike Waterbury, that in West Hartford "all the families and all the parents and all the students are in favor of the SROs," and what might work in one town isn't necessarily going to work in West Hartford. He added that as a coach and as resident, the feedback he's received from people in town across the political divide is that they support SROs.

SR asked TM to clarify what data he had that the majority favored SROs and they agreed he meant the people he's spoken with. SR said the people she's spoken with are not in favor of SROs.

DE offered her reflections about how when she arrived at the meeting, an hour into the two-hour gathering, the attendees were split into three diverse groups, discussing a scenario involving a student involved in a violent act. In one corner of the room was a group focused on the racial aspect of the scenario and the criminal justice component, a second group in the room focused on counseling and other resources were available to the student, and the third group, gathered in a room across the hall, was entirely divided along racial lines, with people of color sharing that SROs were a source of discomfort and distress and the white people in that room included two white SROs from WHPD who each had master's degrees, who were trained in dealing with young people. DE noted in addition to racial issues, some students have issues with SROs in how they express or present their gender. DE noted she was split on this issue because of her experience covering the Sandy Hook massacre, and events such as the latest deadly high school shooting, this time in a Detroit suburb, where an SRO was on hand and helped apprehend the suspect. DE also said she recognized and respected the extreme discomfort that people whose skin is Black or brown, "enriched by melanin," in having SROs present on school property.

TM pointed out a lot of the people in attendance were from other towns, including Waterbury, based on conversations he had with them following the event.

TM said people are going to have bad experiences, including with cops, and that's part of life. He noted there are 3,000 students at Hall and Conard, and if 200 don't want SROs, "OK, you have 2,800 who do."

SR reminded commissioners of her plea to focus on the science and the data rather than our own personal reactions that we have, and how we feel, to read an article she shared with the commission that states the presence of SROs increases the likelihood of a fatality in a school shooting as opposed to those without SROs. [That article can be found here.](#)

SR noted we are a long way from fully understanding this issue and making any decisions.

ES noted that just in TM's hypothetical example of 2,800 in favor of SROs, that just because 200 of 3,000 students are against SROs, it doesn't necessarily mean everyone else is in favor. ES echoed SR's remarks that we need more study.

TM said he has not read the studies SR provided because he's only interested in what's happening in West Hartford, "Not L.A. or New York or somewhere else. West Hartford is not anywhere else," and concluded by saying we should not compare what happens in a place like L.A. to West Hartford as they are totally different places, in terms of issues and demographics.

SR said she agreed with TM in that we need data from West Hartford; Instead of stories, we need studies to be done in West Hartford.

ES noted he read the article SR shared about the increasing likelihood of increased violence when SROs are present, and wanted to understand if the violent statistics in the study were actually representative of a larger problem with violent crime beyond the schools. SR promised to send ES the original study, which she said does control for that. SR said a student who aims to commit violence with firearms goes to school more heavily-armed if they know they may face an SRO on campus. That study can be found [here](#)

EB noted the research he's done shows the data from North Carolina, Texas and two other states that SROs do not make students feel safer, and actually hurts the students' GPA than in schools without SROs and creates greater anxiety. The highest risk, EB said, was that this would increase the number of Black and brown students in the pipeline to the criminal justice system. While saying he of course loves West Hartford more than any place, EB agreed with SR that our town is not unique, but agreed with TM and SR that we need to see data specifically from West Hartford.

KS shared that being both Black and African-American, her experience at Conard high school was that ten friends refused to participate in after school activities because an SRO was present, because they were brown, and they were scared and didn't want to be around him. They wouldn't play sports, engage in clubs or do other activities. KS said her white friends would take part but not her Black friends, who would not. She said she agreed with DE that her mind is not made up on this issue.

DE directed a comment at TM's point about people at the SRO event who were not from West Hartford: "It doesn't invalidate a Black person's opinion or experience just because they're not from our town. If anything, West Hartford is full of people who have just moved here or moved here from somewhere else long ago or even if they grew up here, none of us is a native unless you're Native American. West Hartford is a town where people come from other places because it's so great, and it's not right to invalidate someone's opinions just because they're not from here." DE added that as TM said, the large number of people he invited to the event came with preconceived ideas and hopefully everyone went home with a better understanding of other perspectives.

Crime Petition

EB introduced TDE but she does not have a report on the Crime Petition.

TDE and DE noted it's TM who has a report on that.

TM reported he spoke to members of the Town Council who told him nothing's happened with that so far and it's going to be addressed in January, because of the election, the holidays and new committee members.

Announce Next Meeting Date:

EB shared that the next meeting date of the WHHRC will be Wednesday, January 5, 2021 at 7:00 p.m. and we would decide if the commission will meet in person or virtually.

Open Discussion:

None.

Adjournment: TM made motion to adjourn, and SR seconded. All voted aye.

Meeting adjourned at 9:05 p.m.