

**AY 2021-22
FINAL REPORT**

Building a Community of Trust Through Developing
Equity Awareness and Action:
Paving the Road to Sustainability
in Eanes Innovative School District

PRESENTED TO:
The Board of Trustees
&
Dr. Jeff Arnett
Superintendent of Schools
Eanes Innovative School District
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Table of Contents

Brief Background	3
Unite. Empower. Inspire	4
Unite	6
Substantiation	6
Round 1	7
Round 2	8
Round 3	8
Empower	9
Substantiation	11
Inspire	13
Substantiation	14
Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Priority	14
DIP and CIP	15
Board Trainings	15
DEI Advisory Committee District Accomplishments	16
DEI Advisory Committee District Shortcomings	17
Conclusion	19
What Have We Accomplished?	20
What Have We Learned?	21
Where Do We Go From Here? (Recommendations)	21

Brief Background

Eanes Innovative School District (EISD) has remained committed to its main goal of meeting needs of each of its students. Accordingly, the district offers a comprehensive curriculum supplemented with a variety of enrichment opportunities designed to fulfill the important commitment of meeting the needs of all of EISD's students. Being ever committed to improvement, EISD has taken up the difficult but imperative goal of establishing itself as a high-performing school system by recognizing that a relevant component of providing an excellent education involves the objective of addressing issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).

While some work in culturally responsive leadership began in EISD in 2019, the need to systematically address this crucial component was heightened more directly in Spring 2020 when some alumni, parents, and community members presented narratives that they or their children had experienced a racist or biased climate within the district. These early reports pointed to issues that were corroborated in news accounts that included narratives from EISD students, Open Forum Comments at Board Meetings, and other types of input from community groups, parents, alumni, and concerned citizens who provided their accounts.

The EISD Board concluded that evidence of racism resulted in some students of color feeling excluded and/or unwelcome in the district. Initially, Dr. Mark Anthony Gooden was recruited as a partner to help the board develop a plan to address these issues throughout the 2020-21 academic year. The results of that work can be found in the 2020-21 report: *Building a Community of Trust Through Developing Racial Awareness: An Assessment of Climate, Challenges and Opportunities in Eanes ISD*

The report's results revealed some major points which are summarized here. Notably, it confirmed that charges of racism and use of racist and biased language were warranted as it

found instances both past and present. This finding bolstered the decision and the need to start this equity work.

The report also found students feeling that once they left the Eanes school district and the Westlake community they were uncomfortable in culturally diverse spaces because they had been insulated from relevant aspects of the broader diverse world. For example, they recognized limited exposure to diverse authors and experiences. The “Westlake bubble,” as it was often called by interviewees, prevented students from “being ready” to respond to a wider world adequately and appropriately in terms of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

To address this concern, the report called for an increase in concrete steps to build leadership capacity of staff and students while continuing to build community. For instance, the 2020-21 report encouraged continued dialogue among district staff and students and with community members about equity and what it meant for Eanes ISD in a changing world. It also encouraged the planning and executing of related and focused action steps, including anti-bias and antiracist training for staff from the start. There also was a clarion call for richer and more frequent inclusion of student voice, especially from students whose contributions may have been minimized because of their social identity.

Unite. Empower. Inspire

At the June 22 meeting in summer of 2021, the EISD Board maintained its commitment to continue equity-focused leadership by creating a new contract with Valeo, LLC. The board’s decision was based on the results summarized above.¹ Markedly, a similar viewpoint was captured by a Westlake High School sophomore in her quote at that same June board meeting.

¹ Please review a copy of the full report for a list of all recommendations.

She stated, “Increasing diversity education is important in a district that is becoming more diverse. It’s important to make clear we’re making an active effort to move forward (Hooks, 2021, p. 7).”²

Though the board’s decision garnered the support from a large bloc of community members, it raised questions for other Westlake residents, and even attracted a subset of citizens who wanted all DEI work to cease. The board was aware of this tension and was eager to address it. So, it agreed with the report’s results highlighting the need for more Westlake community members with diverse viewpoints to come together to increase understanding of DEI efforts.

A second important board action at that meeting was a vote to adopt a new mission statement for EISD. Several district constituents, including the DEI Advisory Committee among many others, had provided significant input in the development of the statement, which took more than a year to create. The new statement was expected to better reflect EISD’s comprehensive education by focusing on academic studies *and* promoting students’ social and emotional learning. Seeming to positively point toward a better future in support of educating the whole child, appropriately, the final mission statement became: “Unite. Empower. Inspire . . . Every Person, Every Day.” The board’s commitment to update the mission statement, like its charge to engage in DEI work, suggested trustees were interested in exploring bigger questions about the future. Accordingly, the next part of the report builds from EISD’s new mission statement.

² Hooks, C. (2021). Critical Race Fury: The School Board Wars Are Getting Nasty in Texas. Texas Monthly.

Unite

The mission statement would become an anchor for the DEI's constant north star of building community, especially during the second year as a move toward developing broader understanding of how equity work supported the excellence that exemplified EISD's commitment to a comprehensive education. In the first part, "We unite our community through respectful relationships, creating a sense of belonging for all", there is a clear reference to community. As noted below, the suggestion is that "community" is inclusive of people beyond the school district staff and students.

As shared above, board members were committed to increasing the education of the community about DEI work in order to unite members of the Westlake community where possible. While district leaders relied on research, personal learning, and growing understanding to guide and confirm their beliefs about firmly focusing on DEI, they never lost sight of the need to bring together more community members around the goals and priorities that the board had set up the year before. Below is substantiation of how the theme of Unite was planned and executed the second academic year.

Substantiation

Educating the broader community was seen as a key extension of educating the Eanes ISD community, including staff and students. That collaborative learning process would increase possibilities of building community and could be facilitated through the implementation of the small group community meetings. During the first year, two such meetings were held via the Zoom webinar format. While not ideal, the format maximized safety over an in-person meeting during a high point of the pandemic. The design of the meetings included brief updates presented

by Valeo and the DEI Advisory Committee members followed by a question-and-answer period. Two meetings were held during the 2020-21 academic year.

During the summer, the board emphasized the need for more small-group community meetings in the upcoming year. Valeo engaged in the co-planning and delivery with district leadership of these small community meetings. The first meeting was held in February and was largely regarded as a success. Afterwards, seven other small group meetings were planned and delivered in March or April. Thanks to an easing of the intensity of the pandemic spreading, all of the 2021-22 meetings were able to be held in person in an improved interactional format.

The design of each 2.5-hour small group session included a very brief overview of the district's DEI work along with the agreements (rules of engagement) as outlined in Five Practices book. Though the format evolved a bit from the first February in-person session, the essential approach was to organize participants into diverse groups of parents, community members, students, staff, and board members around a table with a large tablet to capture ideas and responses to questions. Students and/or DEI Advisory Committees members facilitated several conversations but not all of them. Six questions were presented in three rounds. There was a debriefing after each round and a question-and-answer session at the end. Responses were collected during the session and later analyzed. Questions and response themes are shared below.

Round 1

How do you define school climate?

- Schools have multiple climates and can describe individual feelings in context interaction with peers, broader environment and combination of both
- Climate is a feeling that tends to be more personal and how an individual experiences an environment broadly

- Culture is the way we do business and involves norms, values, and processes
- Culture influences how individuals perceive the environment and thus describe the climate

To what extent has Covid impacted the school climate and our progress in this area?

- Creation of “silo” groups amplified by more time on social media
- Traditional school culture disrupted (e.g., experience of being a freshman, etc.)
- Parents lost the opportunity to engage with each other
- Behavioral development frozen or suspended

Round 2

Do you believe that some students in Eanes feel marginalized because of their skin color, gender identity, faith, culture, ability level, or family income? What examples of this are particularly apparent to you?

- Yes, Ability (academic and athletically) and economic status separates and sorts students
- Gender identity and race

How do we tackle this as a school and as a larger community?

- Engage student voices more
- Celebrate differences and share DEI accomplishments via newsletters
- Connect with parents more by increasing number of small group conversations like these
- Acknowledging that “fitting in” or “tolerating” is not the same thing as “belonging”

Round 3

What are our biggest challenges in creating a climate that is accepting and welcoming for all?

- Finding the time and space for staff to connect with students and build relationships

- Not having a common ground or sense of what we are about

What recommendations do you have for addressing these?

- Engage student voices more as they own the climate
- Truly build empathy and understanding
- Celebrate differences

Generally, the turnout at the meetings was good. To recruit participants, each school's PTA President was contacted and asked to provide suggestions of participant parents. DEI Advisory members recruited as well. In all cases, recruiters were told to search for people with a range of viewpoints, and not just pro-DEI participants.

Empower

We empower students, providing an exemplary education that develops curiosity, creativity, and individual talents. Eanes consistently provides an exemplary education in the context of academic achievement, but the district recently recognized the importance of empowering students through a focus on their social and emotional learning. To embrace this approach fully meant the board was advocating for emotional and psychological safety for all students. To achieve this goal, students needed to be empowered to feel and be safe from attacks on their identity and permitted to be curious and allowed space to be creative as they explored their individual talents.

But educators also needed to be empowered to learn how to be more empathic, to make honest mistakes in their learning, and be supported as they advocated strongly for all of their students in pursuit of an exemplary and comprehensive education. As one board member has noted, is imperative to recognize that a key objective of engaging in DEI work from the start of

this project was to empower staff members to be more confident educators willing to defend equity.

Additionally, the quest to empower both students and staff through the DEI initiative was complicated by two palpable forces. The last two academic years were impacted adversely by the pandemic and its concomitant restriction on broad human interaction. First, the national political context of whether to mask during the pandemic also spilled into public education. Second, while degrees and manners of engaging in social and emotional learning varied during the height of the pandemic, staff and students cited instances where they felt more isolated and disconnected from the traditional process of schooling. Some students who were interviewed reported feeling a sense of relief by the reduced amount of in-person interaction due to social pressures, which were more pronounced in person for them.

Though the first year of DEI work provided some opportunities to grow and become more exposed to issues of race, culture, class, gender identity, and sexual orientation, educators indicated that more was needed in terms of how to integrate DEI into their teaching and leading. Notably, teachers admirably showed up consistently to work as the district transitioned back to in-person classes and as incidents related to the pandemic adversely impacted the climate making it difficult to do their jobs. For example, as Eanes returned to school at the start of 2021, one parent [purportedly removed a teacher's mask with force](#) while another yelled at a masked teacher claiming they could not understand her.

Such incidents heightened EISD educators' need for more support on how to integrate social and cultural differences into their classrooms and school buildings. The highly politicized context left even the most committed teachers uncertain of how to proceed with caution. While small-group community building meetings were being planned during the fall of 2021, educators

were facing stern criticism from some parents who had not yet come understand the need for DEI in the district. So, teachers rightfully worried about how they might be perceived, and they aspired to navigate these issues with more ease. In short, they expressed a need to feel more empowered and supported in the classroom. Below we share instances of what that looked like and how it developed over the year.

Substantiation

In the first professional learning session held in August, district teachers started to examine questions around how they could implement DEI into their classroom practice and team leadership. Teachers clearly emphasized they wanted more practice with DEI. This articulation precipitated designing a session where the teachers could generate content based on vignettes that stemmed from their actual experiences. Elementary teachers engaged in the first such session in September while secondary teachers came together to generate their vignettes in October.

Because teachers, especially, were feeling pressure of the tense climate which increased questioning of their practice, many found it very difficult to do the jobs they love, leaving them uncertain of how to proceed on DEI issues, which naturally raised anxiety. Therefore, a key component of the session provided time for educators to reflect on why they started the journey of becoming educators. The session also reiterated reasons teachers would commit to integrate DEI principles in the face of the strong societal debate.

In order for students to learn in this area, educators had to be willing to learn as well. They needed support and professional development and Valeo facilitated learning from each other in the session. Teachers generated rich vignettes and used Padlet to post, share, and offer feedback on the crafted vignettes.

The theme of empowering through capacity building continued as teachers considered reasons to continue doing DEI work in support of student learning. These reasons, some of which are outlined below, provided perspective on curriculum recommendations to ensure that EISD students have access to information that will prepare them to meet the goals in the EISD Graduate Profile, including:

- Valuing cultural and linguistic diversity
- Working collaboratively with persons of varied beliefs, interests, and backgrounds to build consensus
- Respecting self and others equally
- Understanding the interconnected nature of our global community
- Respecting differences
- Understanding world issues and current events

The theme to empower by building capacity manifested in professional learning meetings with elementary principals who started to implement Equity Leadership Team meetings in their respective buildings in fall 2021. The elementary principals also received support from the secondary principals who were starting their second year leading equity teams. Though Valeo organized, designed, and supported the session, the secondary principals were now able to share their lessons learned so they did, and by doing so they increased their own capacity as they supported.

Finally, at the start of the 2021-22 academic year, the DEI Advisory Committee members were starting to organize in topic groups to focus their inputs and exploit their talents as they emphasized building capacity as well. As the 2021 report had suggested, these members along

with teachers and leaders at the start of AY 2021 were engaged in some nascent types of capacity building.

Inspire

We inspire each other to lead purposeful lives of empathy, gratitude, and compassion.

Because the challenge to address issues of equity is made difficult by a range of factors, including the dearth of multicultural conversations, many educators, parents, and community members recognize differences but feel it is inappropriate to examine them too closely, instead concluding it is better to avoid them. While often rooted in good intentions and even a desire to maintain a positive approach to teaching and leading, this method slows or precludes development of analytical tools needed to examine a broad range of diverse philosophical perspectives.

This sometimes-called color-blind viewpoint actually restricts conscious responses to these differences. Moreover, mistakes are made and consequences can be harsh when educators and leaders err. Consequently, educators would rather get it right than make such grave errors, or, more commonly, avoid such conversations and work altogether, thus destroying possibilities for change altogether. Therefore, it becomes very difficult to inspire educators to engage in learning more about DEI work and how it can improve their teaching and leading.

To motivate, the board smartly started with the goal of presenting a mission statement articulating “to inspire” as a goal. The board also commissioned a DEI Advisory committee and instilled it with a charge that positively looked at ways the board could become more proficient in DEI and become more equity-focused in their practice. While serving as foundations of direct inspiration, these two steps made clear the board’s mission on DEI so that as folks learn to

implement them, they could “inspire each other to lead purposeful lives of empathy, gratitude, and compassion.” So, the substantiation includes board priorities and goals.

Substantiation

The board presented refined goals after it held the 2022 Strategic Summit. This process was a great checkpoint after a contentious summer because it demonstrated at mid-year that they were still committed to equity-focused leadership. They engaged in a process of reviewing DEI as a strategic goal and that is the first point of inspiration. Ultimately, on March 29, 2022, the board took a significant step in equity leadership when it institutionalized DEI as one of its 2022-23 Priorities and Goals. See updated version below.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Priority

- Create a shared understanding of DEI through leadership training to build capacity and support sustainability
- Assess, monitor and work to modify the climate to ensure inclusivity for all staff and students
- Develop a system of equity-focused restorative practices in support of all learners
- Engage the broader community in a shared responsibility for DEI
- Provide a framework for curriculum and instructional resources that are representative, inclusive of and accessible to ALL students
- Increase personal growth and learning of students, staff, administrators and trustees to support DEI
- Align DEI goals and their integration with Board policies, administrative procedures and the Eanes ISD Graduate/Staff Profile (WHEEL)

DIP and CIP

Related to DEI initiative being institutionalized as a board priority is that it became part of the District Improvement Plan (DIP). These plans grow out of the Board's Priorities and Goals. They provide listings of specific goals including a timeline, responsible person(s) for completing each goal, resources, measures, and evaluation. For example, one actual goal on the DIP is "Provide support for Equity teams on all campuses in improving school climate".

Each school's Campus Improvement Plan (CIP) is approved by the Campus Leadership Team. District leadership develops the District Improvement Plan to fulfill the Board's priorities. Principals are responsible for using a similar site-based process to frame their respective Campus Improvement Plans that guide staff work on related activities throughout the year designed to achieve the priorities, goals and strategies of the plan. Though creating a DEI as a priority and making it part of a plan does not automatically get it done, it is certainly an inspirational and necessary foundational step that strongly supports influencing the work of staff each day. Note that DIP and CIP documents are available on the EISD website.

Board Trainings

Leaders inspire others by demonstrating a commitment to address difficult goals. They can often inspire by showing vulnerability and demonstrating that they are lead learners. In the AY 21-22, the board committed to an initial deep dive equity training based on the *Five Practices of Equity-Focused School Leadership* book. The board completed this training in February 2022. They were so inspired by the training and their learning that that they requested and completed a second training session in the spring.

Students inspired more community members to get involved by their robust participation in small-group community meetings and their leadership of their own DEI sessions. For

example, the robotics team held meetings addressing DEI concerns. The students themselves were inspired by the empathy, gratitude, and compassion of more teachers as they started to speak out against racist and biased language in everyday happenings the classrooms.

The DEI Advisory Committee had a specific charge to assist the Board of Trustees in matters related to DEI. Therefore, the input of the members served as an important data point in light of the work they had done as a committee. For example, the committee had offered input on climate surveys and served as ambassadors who educated neighbors about DEI and promoted the goals of the district and committee. Importantly, this diverse group was not a monolith and did not always agree.

Consistently, the committee met and engaged in community building and grappling with key aspects of DEI work. They were asked to complete a promoter score and then provide major accomplishment of the work and what would need to change. Below, some of their feedback is shared from an end-of-the year survey. Weighted responses that were the most frequently occurring are listed at the top.

DEI Advisory Committee District Accomplishments

To summarize, the committee recognized that it was crucial that the board make DEI a strategic priority. However, the most impactful by frequency was the small-group community conversation which members strongly agreed they wanted to see more of those in the future. Other strong contenders, ironically, were the creation of the DEI Advisory Committee and the development of the equity leadership teams. Committee members enjoyed adding input to the district climate survey and emphasized the importance of student voice.

- 1) The Board made DEI one of their priorities.

- 2) Appreciative that Eanes ISD helped to facilitate community conversations that helped move the needle with DEI work in our district.
- 3) Creation of the DEI Advisory Committee.
- 4) Development of campus equity teams and richness of bond in some schools like pilots.
- 5) Revising student survey to include demographic questions and more questions on belonging.
- 6) The all-staff training with Dr. Gooden was good but more is needed, especially on restorative practices and how to handle specific situations.
- 7) Recognize a clear realization that we need to include student voice more.

DEI Advisory Committee District Shortcomings

Similar to above, it was a good idea to ask this diverse group of committee members where they thought there was room for improvement in DEI work. Unlike the high degree of agreement on some of the same themes above, the committee members provided a broader variety of items with much less coalescing. This fact confirmed their diverse thinking and highlighted some areas of disagreement.

In summary, a clear winner was repeated calls for more support for staff as they learn to get better at DEI work and develop resulting courage. The first four items are all related around this same idea with the final one advocating for marginalized faculty based on their sexual identity. Messaging was also quite frequent. There was general dissatisfaction with choices around messaging and responses to misinformation. Given the nature of implementation, naturally there were some disagreements on how some equity teams were working better than

others with concerns about so much was left to the principals at this point. Please see below to review them all.

- 1) Staff support by the district was generally found lacking (e.g., book removal and other issues like “Call Me Max” meant that lack of district action or nonaction left teachers and librarians feeling unsafe and unsupported).
- 2) Teachers and librarians must be treated with dignity and respect should further DEI issues arise.
- 3) Staff must feel included and celebrated for their diversity and not reduced to “taboo” or “controversial”, thus leaving out staff members who are LGBTQ+.
- 4) Communication and messaging in the community about what DEI is closely related to the need for more clarity from the start.
- 5) Finally, there was interest in improving the communication and meeting opportunities between DEI members outside of scheduled meetings.
- 6) Pushback from the community that came in the form of misinformation and misconceptions but no expectation of how to battle it exactly.
- 7) Equity teams: 1. lack of structure and consistency for different equity teams and levels to operate; 2. not operating at same level at elementary school; 3. Success driven by principals’ enthusiasm; 4. reports not being submitted to DEI Advisory Committee.
- 8) Lack of clear, consistent meaningful in-house data and communicating it in support efforts. (e.g., Ad Committee never saw quick reports, bullying investigation stats, etc.).
- 9) DEI Advisory Committee was not utilized as effectively as possible which pointed to an implementation question.
- 10) It [DEI initiative] introduced a confusing and divisive wedge in the district when all eyes and minds needed to be on the health and educational welfare of the students. The decision to

fund and facilitate the DEI initiative was made in haste with inadequate buy-in from the community.

11) Continuous training can support many of these efforts but there is more work to do here.

12) No progress on the hiring of a dedicated staff member whose sole job responsibility is to oversee DEI in the district

Conclusion

The data presented here have confirmed that EISD Board of Trustees and staff have identified several areas of accomplishment and some areas of growth as well. While this year's report was marked by more qualitative inputs than the 2020-21 report, it in many ways presented a stronger testament to the amount of work that the district has done to continue the DEI initiative this academic year and to identify clear points of future growth.

There is no need to go through all of the major accomplishments again but it is worth noting a few to illustrate the point that the DEI Initiative can be regarded as impactful. In fact, there are several motivational reasons to that suggest change is occurring and to continue positioning Eanes ISD as an equity-focused school district. For example, the Board institutionalized DEI as a Board Strategic Priority. Though the number is increasing, few boards can say they have successfully accomplished this important milestone. The Equity Leadership Team was established at every school, and while these are groups are at varying levels of development, they are still representing powerful supports for principals in making their school more equity-focused in alignment with the Board Priority. Also, the DEI Advisory Committee, which was created the first year of the initiative, became stronger, more active, and started a clear path toward its own capacity building as it supported the board this academic year. That

committee is made up of an intelligent and caring group of individuals and they are led by two powerful, compassionate, and active leaders.

In summary, this final report provides the Board of Trustees, Dr. Jeff Arnett, and all stakeholders with important information that illuminates some clear accomplishments, strongly suggests greater possibilities for deepening equity work and expanding it and reiterates that there are dreams yet to be fulfilled relative to the work. This two-year journey has garnered some bumps and bruises along the way but it thankfully survived to see a brighter day. The board, staff, students, and community members who signed on to learn and improve the district are likely better leaders now. The report suggests this fact in several ways, especially once we analyze the big themes.

Because the Board and the district leadership paid attention to preliminary data and took action at the start of 2020-21 academic year, that prompted the board to create and prioritize important DEI goals. The board built upon those goals this year and they are now strong foundations to build upon. Rather than end this report with only a set of related recommendations, we will present a variation of the content presented to the board. It summarizes major points and closes with a relevant set of recommendations.

What Have We Accomplished?

We Established a Culture of Engagement and Curiosity Around DEI Work as we:

- Facilitated Training and Professional Learning at Board and Staff Levels
- Sustained a Structure to Implement DEI Work Via the Equity Leadership Teams
- Continued and Improved the DEI Advisory Committee Structure to Support the Board
- Designed and Implemented Small-Group Community Meetings
- Increased Engagement with Student Leadership

- Supported Board in Institutionalizing and Refining DEI Goals
- Integrated DEI Goals in District Improvement Plan

What Have We Learned?

- Professional Learning at Board and Staff Levels Benefits from Planned Coordination
- Equity Leadership Teams Require Different Levels of Attention and Support
- DEI Advisory Committee is a Powerful Support Structure for the Board That Easily Connects to the Community
- Small-Group Community Meetings Should Increase and Expand to Educate Community
- Increased Engagement with Student Leadership Can Facilitate Connections to Broader Student Body
- Board Goals and District Improvement Plan Implementation of DEI Requires Consistent Monitoring

Where Do We Go From Here? (Recommendations)

- Leadership Should Intentionally and Clearly Think Through Sustainability of DEI Work
- Identify Person(s) who Can Monitor and Support Components Consistent with Board Goals
- Implement More Professional Development Opportunities for Staff and Leaders
- Support Principals and Campus Equity Leadership Teams
- Identify Co-Chairs of the DEI Advisory Committee (NOTE: three staff and one community co-chairs/coordinators have been designated to lead DEI in 2022-23)
- Coordinate Student Engagement and Community Involvement
- Review, Monitor and Implement the Board's DEI Goals, DIP, CIP, and other related objectives