

# THE FNSBSD DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION ACTIONS STEPS

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*“Teach young people early on, that in diversity there is beauty and there is strength.”*

*~ Maya Angelou*

## Introduction

In support of our students and community, the Fairbanks North Star Borough School Board and district leadership renewed the strategic plan and established equity and inclusion as a strategic goal in the FNSBSD's SY202-25 Strategic Plan. This five-year plan identifies the highest priorities for the district, and becomes the foundation on which the Board and the District build plans and measure success. The FNSBSD is respected locally and statewide as an organization that identifies and reaches the goals set forth in their strategic plan.

## Strategic Goals

1. **STUDENT SUCCESS:** Increase academic achievement and social emotional well-being for all students.
2. **EQUITY & INCLUSION:** Provide equitable opportunities and an inclusive environment where all students and staff are respected and feel welcome, safe, and supported.
3. **COMMUNICATION & ENGAGEMENT:** Ensure students, staff, families, and the community are informed, connected and engaged with the District.
4. **WORKFORCE & ORGANIZATIONAL EXCELLENCE:** Create an environment that supports the strengths and needs of staff so they can create a safe climate where students thrive.

When the District refers to diversity, equity and inclusion, we mean more than race, gender, heritage and sexuality, we mean to include categories such as those differently abled, from varied socio-economic backgrounds, unhoused, migrants, and English Language Learners. To create a place where everyone is welcome requires addressing barriers within the District at the systemic and at individual levels.

Recognizing the need for specialized training in Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, commonly referred to as DEI, the district has partnered with the National Coalition Building Institute, or NCBI since October of 2018. NCBI is rooted in a philosophy that people learn best when they feel accepted and appreciated.

The District's multi-year relationship with NCBI has helped us build our own local group of NCBI affiliated trainers, the Fairbanks Coalition Builders or FCB. An important member of the FCB Team is Rodney Gaskins of RMG Business Consulting who was asked for a thorough, independent audit of our Districts diversity practices and needs. RMG presented the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Audit Report to the School Board on August 18, 2020, identifying five key Impact Areas to strengthen the district's commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion practices.

## **Five Key Impact Areas**

1. *Leader and Staff Professional Development,*
2. *Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Curriculum,*
3. *Recruiting, Hiring, and Retaining minorities,*
4. *Communication and Community Engagement, and*
5. *Measuring and Benchmarking the effectiveness of DEI.*

This report provides the board with an update of the actions taken and the progress made on each of these Impact Areas by the Fairbanks Coalition Builders, Human Resources, Teaching & Learning, Student Support Services and our Communication and Engagement Department.

### **Impact Area 1: Leader and Staff Professional Development**

How people treat each other at work, and how teachers and staff demonstrate acceptance and positive regard for each other and their students plays an essential role in creating a safe and supportive learning environment for students. Expanding educator knowledge and understanding of their own and each other's diverse yet universally human experiences is critical in shaping the school's culture. A positive and welcoming school culture sets the stage for positive outcomes for the student.

Successful organizations strategically and specifically develop a positive culture, and DEI training helps ensure that everyone in an organization understands how to treat each other with respect, dignity and kindness. As simple and universally agreeable as these concepts are, learning how to treat everyone we encounter in public service with respect, actually takes learning and practice. It is helpful to examine one's own beliefs and social behaviors and identify factors or situations that increase or hinder their ability to connect, learn, and grow. Quality DEI training, such as that provided by NCBI, creates the space and opportunities for self-reflection and a professional learning structure that equips participants to create more welcoming and respectful communities.

The very idea of diversity, equity, and inclusion training can make some people nervous. No one wants to sit through training where they are blamed or singularly burdened with all the wrongdoings of society. Nor does anyone want to be singled out as the spokesperson for an entire identity group. The National Coalition Builders Institute (NCBI) process and philosophy is to create a safe environment where no one is shamed or blamed and which connects people through information, exercises, and personal stories. The goal is to bring staff together and deepen appreciation, empathy, and trust. The Fairbanks Coalition Builders understand that it may be uncomfortable for some people to share, so we instruct participants to engage at their own comfort level. Although we encouraged participants to share, everyone is in control of their own experience and engagement.

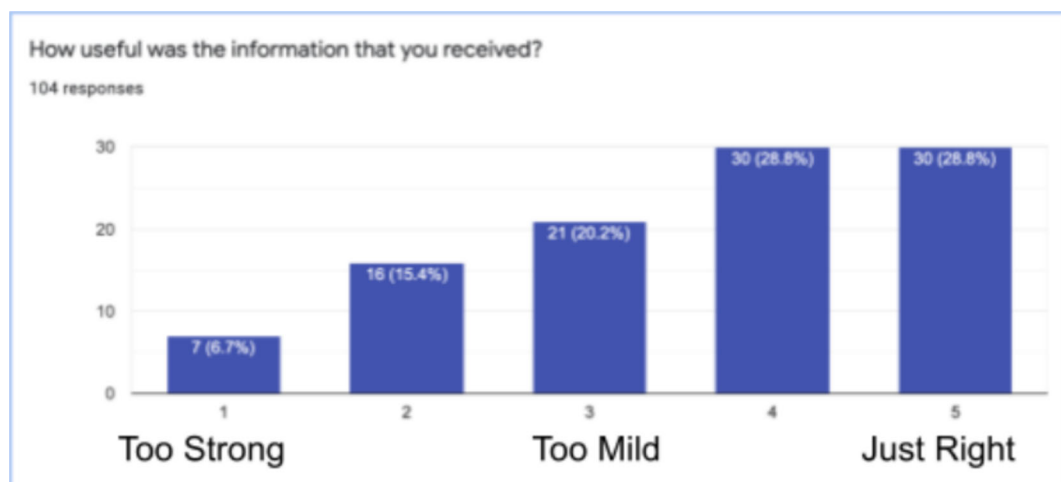
To support the District in reaching their diversity, equity, and inclusion goals, the Fairbanks Coalition Builders team developed a 3-hour interactive training. Some of the skills covered in the workshops included:

- *Welcoming similarities and differences in all groups*
- *Examining Unconscious Bias*
- *Conflict Resolution*
- *Learning how to be an ally to all groups*
- *Structuring respectful dialogues on controversial issues*

Spring semester, schools were offered the option of either two 1.5-hour sessions or a single 3-hours training. At the time of this report, 16 trainings have been completed for individual schools. Additional trainings are scheduled for next school year and FCB plans to host several training workshops over the summer.

Following each training, the FCB sought feedback from the training participants and met to discuss and adjust in order to increase the quality of future training. Feedback is very important to ensure that the experience meets the needs of schools and to learn what is most effective from the individual perspective. The FCB teams used the feedback to emphasize the parts of training that resonated the best with people, and adjust the components that cause the most discomfort or misunderstanding. Although the feedback varied it was predominantly positive. In general, people's responses fit into three basic groups:

- **Group 1 “Just Right”** : The “Just Right” group felt the training was enough to make people think, create new understandings and develop a desire for more discussion.
- **Group 2 “Too Mild”** : The “Too Mild” group thought the training didn’t go deep enough, and wanted more training with more explicit information.
- **Group 3 “Too Strong”** : This group either questioned why the training was happening, or expressed feeling uncomfortable with the level of sharing in their work environment.



It is significant to notice that the highest percentage of respondents felt the training was useful as seen in columns 4 and 5 of the survey graph. Most participants were in favor of the training, and felt that the FCB team training and methods are the correct starting place for the District.

The FCB team was asked to conduct 9 training sessions for the City of Fairbanks, further indicating the level that our District is seen as a leader in the field of workplace inclusion practices. FCB has continued to offer Community Open Circle Events to provide a platform for conversations around topics of equity and social dynamics of diversity.

Recently the FCB team has started Affinity Caucus groups. The purpose of caucus groups is to provide a safe, judgment-free learning space for similar identity groups to reflect on their identities, understandings, and actions as they strive to be more supportive and understanding of others. Caucus groups engage in discussion and learn how to identify and confront mistreatment in our schools, our lives, and community. The overall goal is to support teachers, counselors, paraeducators, librarians, and others on their quest to become aware of inequities and empowered in ways to address them.

Needless to say, the FCB has been busy this year; providing training for so many schools has been a massive undertaking for our team, made up primarily of district educators and support staff. On behalf of the District, FCB and RMG have opened lines of communication and helped identify and take collaborative actions. We are incredibly proud of these accomplishments, which reflect favorably on the District and place us at the forefront of diversity efforts in our community.

## **Impact Area 2: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Curriculum**

Examining the curriculum and the selection process through the lens of diversity is one of the best ways to ensure that multiple perspectives, histories, music, art, and literature are included. Ensuring diverse perspectives involves more than just placing books, or artworks into a classroom, and has a more important impact than just representation. Although, these can be included, to achieve the best outcomes for students, schools need to build a positive school climate and culture, explicitly teaching strategies for examining alternative points of view along with an array of academic skills. Through our curriculum, students should be introduced to a wide range of perspectives and given ample opportunities to listen, gather information to form, examine and explain their own perspectives.

To address the suggestion in the DEI Audit, the Teaching & Learning Department made the following efforts to examine their curriculum selection process through a lens of diversity and with an eye on teaching practices and instructional methods that support equity and inclusion:

- **Materials:** In the 2019-2020 school year, the District adopted new Social Studies and 9th/10th grade ELA materials that better reflect its students' diversities and histories. In the fall of 2020, the school board voted to adopt the new 11th and 12th grade ELA curriculum, which centers diverse voices in every literature course and provides students from many backgrounds the opportunity to see themselves and their stories in various texts. Through this adoption, students can fulfill their graduation requirements by enrolling in courses that focus on narratives written by and about peoples who have been historically marginalized, including African American Literature, Native American Literature, World Literature, and Social Themes in Literature. These courses will be available to students beginning in the Fall of 2021.
  
- **Curriculum Process:** The Teaching & Learning Department is currently working to review and revise the six-year curriculum cycle to ensure that participants in this cycle take time to reflect on the state of DEI in the curriculum by:
  1. Considering student learning data to identify any gaps that might exist in terms of access to classes, performance in those classes, and the learning climate in general; and
  2. Gathering and reviewing feedback from educators, students, families, and community members about the learning opportunities available. This articulation of the curriculum process will ensure consistency across all subject area/grade level adoptions. It will allow us to gather and use feedback from all stakeholder groups to continually improve the process's impact on ensuring equitable learning outcomes across our schools.

### **Impact Area 3: Recruiting, Hiring, and Retaining minorities**

Building a diverse workforce that reflects the FNSBSD student population and community begins with our culture and image. Living up to our Mission as a District that values each and every person is one of the greatest recruiting tools we have. In this age of Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and SnapChat, each member of our community is potentially helping or hurting our recruiting efforts. What we say about ourselves and what others say about working for us matters. It is especially important how under-represented populations within the District speak of their experiences working for the District and living in Fairbanks.

Young professionals increasingly prioritized personal values in deciding where to work and live. Perspective employees, especially in hard to fill positions, make decisions about where to work based on the community and districts commitment to sustainability, philanthropy, social-justice impact and work-life balance. They want employers who are committed to upholding a high standard for social justice and equity. This includes hiring a diverse workforce, helping under-represented employees find career advancement, giving them more decision-making

power, and facilitating uncomfortable conversations about systemic inequities. Mission statements about racial justice and prompt responses to current events are also important, but employees are looking for a demonstrated commitment to diversity.

In recognition of this need to clearly demonstrate our commitment to diversity, the FNSBSD Human Resource department has incorporated many of the audits recommendations. A few of the activities or efforts are:

- **Reviewing job descriptions to evaluate any unintended barrier**
  - evaluate job descriptions to properly reflect essential qualifications
  - identified and eliminated unintended barriers
- **Increasing the skills and knowledge of hiring committees**
  - Developed and provided “Diversity in Hiring”
    - *What diversity means*
    - *What characteristics create a diverse workplace*
    - *How lack of diversity in the workplace negatively impacts an organization*
    - *Legal “dos & don’ts” during interviews and hiring process*
    - *Bias in hiring practices*
- **Support and feedback for applicants**
  - HR offers free, one-on-one interview coaching, resume/cover letter assistance, and FNSBSD job application assistance.
- **Working to increase a diverse applicant pool**
  - Re-established a partnership with the Fairbanks Job Center to become a Preferred Employer, which leads to higher visibility during job searches.
- **Partner with the Job Center to host employment workshops**
  - The Job Center will assist with outreach to diverse audiences and provide support in resume writing, application assistance and interview preparation.
- **Establish a recruiting and outreach committee**
  - The committee will assist in outreach to universities, teacher groups, and educational associations that have a high minority population.
- **Partnering with Community Affinity Groups to host hiring workshops**
  - Recent collaboration with NAACP to host a job recruitment workshop.
- **Developing recruitment material and video that communicates the FNSBSD's commitment to hiring diverse and culturally competent candidates**
  - A public campaign highlighting employees telling why they love their school and like working for the FNSBSD.

The HR department has ramped up its community outreach to local agencies for service opportunities. So far, HR has partnered with Fairbanks Children’s Museum, Animal Shelter, Food Bank, Fairbanks Rescue Mission, and the Interior Alaska Center for Non-Violent Living on

specific community service projects. These outreach events have a return investment by increasing our visibility in the community, and creating a positive reference for the district.

#### **Impact Area 4: Communication and Community Engagement**

Schools are social places where individuals from all identities come together and learn how to form a community. In classrooms students learn to communicate their thoughts and feelings, connect to their own values, navigate differences, and resolve conflicts. The District creates partnerships with families to support each child's academic and social development, and thus our community becomes immediately and forever intertwined. What happens in our community affects our schools and what happens in our schools affects our community. If this year has taught us anything it's that we are all interdependent on this social-ecosystem.

Therefore, collaboration between families, schools, and the community in which we all live, is essential to building a strong school system that supports student development. The Fairbanks Coalition Builders embrace a community-wide vision for supporting diversity. Establishing this shared vision helped motivate our team of trainers to provide Open Circles, and to collaborate with the City of Fairbanks and the Interior Rotary Clubs for workshops and training. Our team has also met with Tribal Consultation to provide information about the training with hopes of future collaboration. Demonstrating a commitment and positive attitude toward equity and inclusivity elevate our district in the community. The Communication and Engagement Department has also updated the District's website to increase the visibility and accessibility of diversity related content. The new Diversity page allows users to navigate the website more intuitively. The page identifies the various programs, practices, data sources, and events.

#### **Diversity page topics included:**

- o DEI Data and Statistics
- o DEI Board Resolutions
- o DEI Board Committees
- o DEI Community Engagement
- o DEI by Program & Practice

#### **Impact Area 5: Measuring and Benchmarking the effectiveness of DEI**

Measuring the effectiveness of diversity, equity and inclusion training can be challenging as it's hard to establish a baseline on culture. School climate and culture stem from people's experiences of school life. Climate can be viewed as the shared "mood" of the school. Climate can vary based on events and changes in the school environment and is influenced by school culture. Culture is a product of relationships among individuals, school social norms, and the expectations individuals have for themselves and others. School culture encompasses issues related to equity, including the physical and emotional safety of students and school staff, the

orderliness and welcoming nature of classrooms and public spaces, and the degree to which a school embraces diversity, equity, and inclusion. Currently the District measures its culture through the annual School Climate Survey. HR also conducts exit interviews, and principals and teachers review parent and staff feedback forms and comments made through Let's Talk.

The impact of the FNSBSD's DEI program, therefore, can be seen and measured across the district in the culture of each school and how our district is viewed by staff, students and families. Creating an environment that welcomes diversity, creates equity and promotes inclusion does not simply happen by making it a goal. DEI must be part of a well-thought-out, intentionally implemented, and consistently revised strategy to achieve sustainable outcomes, as outlined in the FNSBSD Strategic Plan. In the simplest of terms, employees, staff and students who feel seen, supported, appreciated, and welcome, establish and reinforce their own positive school climates and culture.

To this end, the District has deployed many equity-based approaches to better accommodate the needs of students. The District has become a leader in the state for addressing social-emotional needs, becoming trauma-informed, culturally responsive, incorporating personalized learning, and learning about restorative practices. Each excellent practice, when combined and conducted with the awareness of DEI strengthens our ability to deliver on our promise to "provide an excellent, equitable education in a safe, supportive environment".

## **Conclusion**

In the past year many organizations have made very public statements of the importance of diversity, equity and inclusion, rushing to establish their commitment to elevating the causes of marginalized groups. What sets the FNSBSD apart is its longstanding commitment to our students' diversity which has been part of our mission statement for years. However, In the words of boxing great, Mike Tyson, *"Everyone has a plan until they are punched in the mouth."* This year, when everyone had to face a world turned upside-down by Covid, some organizations' commitment to DEI took an immediate back seat. This only makes the accomplishments of the FNSBSD, and our demonstrated commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion, all the more notable. At a time when many would have understood the financial pressure to back away from a moral obligation, our district stayed firm in its commitment to serve the community and our students.

***If we all believe that equitable schools are necessary, obtainable, and worth putting resources toward, then it can be achieved because our actions follow our beliefs.***

*~ Rodney Gaskins*