

To: Board of Education  
From: Paul Sally, Superintendent  
Re: New Trier 2030: Culture, Climate, Equity, and Belonging Update  
Date: 4/15/2024

## **Introduction**

When the District launched our strategic plan, New Trier 2030, in 2019, we developed six areas to use as the framework for communicating plans and reporting on progress. One of those areas was Culture, Climate, and Equity, and this month I want to share with the Board and community our progress since 2019 and begin to outline our plans for the 2024-2025 school year. While we have not officially changed the name to Culture, Climate, Equity, and Belonging, our emphasis on the importance of belonging is best represented by adding it to the name. While we have many initiatives described below, they basically fall into one or both of these two overarching goals: (1) all students should feel like they belong at New Trier and (2) all students should learn about perspectives from identities different than their own.

In service of these two overarching goals, we have a number of foundational documents that guide our work. These documents are:

1. Our longtime motto which was adopted as the mission for our strategic plan: "To commit minds to inquiry, hearts to compassion, and lives to the service of humanity."
2. Our vision for New Trier 2030: "By creating a culture in which students discover purpose in their intellectual, creative, social, and interpersonal endeavors, we will develop in every graduate the skills and dispositions to lead meaningful, compassionate, and impactful lives."
3. The Board approved District Equity statements which establish our commitment to these important efforts and can be found on our *Commitment to Equity* webpage.
4. Our Culture, Climate, Equity, and Belonging Framework, which sets out our core values and goals in this area for our strategic plan.
5. Our *Civil Discourse and Critical Thinking* statement which establishes our commitment to critical thinking, respectful dialogue, and openness to multiple perspectives.
6. Our *Characteristics of a New Trier Graduate* which state our goals for the skills and dispositions we hope our graduates will develop at New Trier beyond their academics.
7. Our *Be Brave, Be Kind, Be Proud* initiatives which aim to operationalize an environment that is respectful to all and allows each student to be themselves.

In talking with many different groups within the school community, it has become clear that the understanding of what equity and belonging mean can vary widely from person to person. At New Trier, our definition is clearly stated in the documents mentioned above and specifically in our strategic plan's core values and beliefs for this framework, which center the student experience at our school. Our definition of equity and belonging takes into account the whole

child and how they may feel defined at New Trier, including by academic levels or ability. These guiding beliefs and values for Culture, Climate, Equity, and Belonging at New Trier are:

- We believe an equitable, safe, inclusive, and welcoming climate is not only necessary for students to learn and supports student growth but is ethically in alignment with our mission.
- We believe that an equitable, safe, inclusive, and welcoming climate:
  - creates the conditions that allow individuals to reach their full potential.
  - is built upon respect and the appreciation of differences.
  - holds individuals accountable for their actions and creates access to justice.
- We believe that all students, no matter their race, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, innate abilities, or academic levels, have the right to equitable opportunities to pursue their interests and have the right to a rigorous and rich curricula and inspiring instruction that promotes intellectual growth, exploration, and risk-taking.
- We believe what makes our school better for the most vulnerable students makes the school better for all students.

Keeping in mind these core values and beliefs, the initiatives in our Culture, Climate, Equity, and Belonging work are:

- 1) Departmental Equity Goals
- 2) Monthly Observances
- 3) Professional Learning
- 4) Student Affinity Groups
- 5) Hiring an Exceptional and Diverse Staff
- 6) Sender School Connections
- 7) Restorative Practices
- 8) Other Initiatives

The progress we have made in these areas is the result of dozens of faculty and staff members doing their part. Many of these initiatives have been overseen by four people: our three equity liaisons, Pat Savage-Williams, Kiran Subhani, Tim Hayes and Chimille Tillery, our Director of Curriculum and Instruction. Our equity liaisons have helped us stay true to the overarching goals mentioned above and our students from underrepresented communities are more visible and better supported in their high school experience because of the work of Pat, Kiran, and Tim.

What follows is a brief description of our work in these threads along with a preview of additional directions for next year.

### **Culture, Climate, Equity, and Belonging Strategic Plan Threads**

#### ***1. Department Equity Goals***

From the outset of New Trier 2030, we were committed to ensuring students see themselves in the curriculum, see perspectives other than their own in the curriculum, and experience classroom environments that promote belonging for all students. All departments are looking at their curriculum and instruction from this perspective - the following examples help to illustrate the type of work being undertaken. The English department has made changes to their booklist, while maintaining their high standards for literature. Through this work, the department has

significantly increased the diversity of voices our students read. Examples of new texts and/or films include: *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, *Five Days*, *The Namesake*, *There, There: A novel*, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, *Petite Maman*, *The Bluest Eye*, *Man's Search for Meaning*.

Another example of curricular change comes from the Social Studies department. Their changes include introducing AP African American Studies, conducting a curriculum audit of what perspectives are being represented, and enhancing curriculum based on that audit. Another focus of the department has been examining the primary and secondary sources used in various courses. Although this work is by no means complete, the result has been a significant shift in primary source use to a much more diverse set of authors and actors. This change provides our students with a more holistic historical narrative giving voice to many of those involved in these events, including those in traditionally marginalized groups.

The department has also undergone more specific curricular updates, some of which are driven by state mandates. The addition of AP African American Studies to senior elective APs creates an opportunity for all students to develop their interest and understanding of African American culture. In individual courses, additional units have been added on genocide and the Holocaust. There have been other state mandates in the past three years including units on LGBTQ+ history, Asian American History, and Native American history. These are all areas that the department was already deeply engaged in teaching, but the department has used the mandates as an opportunity to strengthen their materials. Throughout this work, the department has stayed focused on providing our students with a rigorous education in the facts, concepts, and dispositions used in the study of history.

Finally, ensuring that the classroom environment throughout the school promotes belonging is essential to helping students thrive academically. To do this we need to ensure that we set high expectations for all students and that all students have access to the rich and rigorous curriculum where they will learn the most. To accomplish the former, we have offered an *Unconscious Bias* workshop to our faculty each year to help them reflect on the hidden assumptions we all make. To accomplish the latter, we are continually reviewing our prerequisites and avenues for support while opening up new classes such as Post-Colonial Literature, AP African American Studies, Geometry and Construction, and expanding opportunities for students who best learn in the structures and approach provided by our level 2 classes.

Hand in hand with equity goals promoting a sense of belonging for all students, comes our commitment to teaching students to engage in Civil Discourse and Critical Thinking. As our teachers introduce new perspectives into the curriculum, they also guide students in classroom discourse that allows for diverse viewpoints. Exposure to these types of discussions in a teacher-guided environment builds our students' skills in these areas. We will continue to present examples to the Board and community of this work, but I recommend watching these Board presentations from departments on this topic: Social Studies (September 20, 2021),

Modern and Classical Languages (December 13, 2021), English (April 18, 2022), and Mathematics (October 17, 2022).

*Next year preview: increase visibility of each department's equity goals and produce a comprehensive list of topics in our courses that support various identities and other aspects of our Culture, Climate, Equity, and Belonging work.*

## **2. Monthly Observances**

Another goal we had in the area of Culture, Climate, Equity, and Belonging was for students to see themselves in the hallways around the school. In 2021-2022, we began our monthly observances to help students feel represented in the school and learn about cultures, religions, and perspectives other than their own. The events in a monthly observance include hallway monitor displays, posters, a "LibGuide" on the library webpage, lunch and learns, and many resources for teachers and advisers to help make curricular connections. This work has helped our hallways better represent the diversity in our school and community.

*Next year preview: increase curricular connections and accessibility of resources to teachers.*

## **3. Professional Learning**

We know that our teachers play an important role in all aspects of our students' experience at New Trier. To that end, it is imperative that our teachers engage in continual professional learning to improve their practice. Some of these programs focus on helping teachers develop an understanding of the variety of identities and perspectives in their class. We continue to consistently offer three opportunities for our staff: *Beyond Diversity*, *Seeking Educational Equity through Diversity (SEED)*, and *Uncovering Unconscious Bias*. We also have a number of teachers taking part in learning collaboratives that help us meet our goals in this area including *Designing Culturally Relevant Curriculum*, *Promoting Critical Thinking and Active Listening through Civil Discourse*, and *Restorative Practices*.

New teachers, new administrators, and new department leaders have sessions on our equity goals as part of their orientation, onboarding, and mentoring. We also have used our Institute Days to engage all staff in professional learning around topics such as belonging through a culture of dignity, civil discourse and critical thinking, supporting our LGBTQ+ students, and supporting students with learning differences.

*Next year preview: continuation of Learning Collaboratives, a township-wide institute day in February 2025, and ensuring we have a set of professional learning programs that focus on supporting students in all areas of difference.*

## **4. Student Affinity Groups**

Affinity Groups are a space for students with a particular identity to meet for support and discussion. These groups are voluntary and run by a sponsor with the same identity when possible. We currently have affinity groups for these students: Asian, Black, Jewish, Latinx, LGBTQ+, Mixed Race, Muslim, Transgender, and White Anti-Racist. These groups are student

driven, and we have requests from students to look into adding other groups next year. These spaces are important for our students because our students share common experiences, and it helps them feel like they belong and can thrive at New Trier.

*Next year preview: ensure consistent expectations for roles and responsibilities of student affinity groups and sponsors, establish consistent communication between these groups and administration, and look to add groups based on student need.*

### **5. Hiring and Retaining an Exceptional and Diverse Staff**

In 2021 we re-energized our efforts to recruit and retain an exceptional and diverse staff. We have used a number of strategies including developing relationships with a broader array of universities, changing some hiring processes to ensure we capture a wide group of candidates, attending job fairs that attract diverse candidates, and working to make New Trier feel like a place where teachers of any identity can belong. This work has begun to pay off. Over the past three years, 36% of our new teachers have been people of color.

*Next year preview: continue these efforts and expand the schools and organizations with which we are making connections.*

### **6. Sender School Connections**

One of our new initiatives over the last few years has been connecting with the elementary districts in our township to start looking at equity and belonging K-12. Last summer, our equity liaisons along with some teachers and administrators from each district developed a Summer Equity Summit in which about 150 participants engaged in workshops on a wide variety of topics.

This K-12 work is important because our six elementary districts range widely in their student demographic profiles, and students from all six districts come together for the first time freshman year at the Northfield Campus. For this reason, we will expand some of our Culture, Climate, Equity, and Belonging efforts on the Northfield Campus. We want to use the monthly observances to celebrate the diversity in our community and enhance our lessons on responsible decision making to bring a focus on helping our students better understand how to identify and combat all forms of antisemitic, anti-Muslim, racist, sexist, and homophobic hate speech and acts.

*Next year preview: Township-wide Institute Day in February 2025*

### **7. Restorative Practices and Other Initiatives**

Our work on restorative practices continues as one of the focus areas for our Graduating Class Teams. The goal of these practices is to restore relationships and sense of belonging and community when it has been disrupted or broken by an incident. As part of our work, it is important for us to engage proactively, not just when an incident happens. The teams are working on the direction for 2024-2025 which we will present at the May or June meeting.

We have two other initiatives that have had an impact on this part of our strategic plan. First, we started our Mixed Gender Adviser Rooms in the 2022-2023 school year, giving students a choice of being in a single gender male or female Adviser Room or being in a Mixed Gender Adviser Room. We are continually evaluating the effectiveness of these changes for students and the Adviser Program, and we will continue to study this change as the first set of groups graduate in 2026.

Another important addition is our [Religious and Cultural Holiday Calendar](#). This calendar has some of the most important holidays for members of our community. We provide this calendar for our teachers so they can be sensitive to students who are spending time with their families who celebrate these days. For these students, we work together as a school community to be sensitive, understanding, and flexible. We ask teachers to consider what assignments can be forgiven, and if assignments must be completed. Teachers must work with students to determine an appropriate deadline for work that must be completed.

### **Additional Directions for 2024-2025**

The design of our strategic plan allows us to review our progress each year and determine initiatives that we should continue, ones that we need to change, and ones that we need to add. This structure allows us to continually improve our work towards our strategic planning goals. In the Culture, Climate, Equity, and Belonging framework, we want to expand opportunities for more staff members to be involved in leading this work and determining the District's needs and priorities each year. One task of any leadership group will be to analyze student data to ensure we have equitable opportunities and expectations for all students no matter their identity. In addition, to continue ensuring that students are at the center of this work, we will be forming an advisory group of students, similar to the staff group.

We will also be implementing specific Northfield Campus initiatives. The freshman campus is the place where all of our different communities come together. While our communities share a great deal in common, a student's middle school experience is varied, due in part to differences in demographics. These freshmen-specific initiatives will add to our focus on bringing this new community together by emphasizing respect for difference, responsible decision making around language use, and enhancing student learning about celebrating and embracing different identities vs. using them as a basis for division.

### **Conclusion**

Our work in the areas of Culture, Climate, Equity, and Belonging and Civil Discourse and Critical Thinking has come a long way in the last five years. That being said, we know there is more to do over the next five years of the strategic plan, and we have built the foundations that will allow us to continue to make good progress toward being a school in which each student feels like they belong at New Trier and learns about perspectives from identities different than their own. At our May and June meetings, I will present comprehensive details about our 2024-2025 Annual Plan in Culture, Climate, Equity, and Belonging and other parts of our strategic plan. I look forward to Monday's presentation and discussion.