

**NEW TRIER TOWNSHIP HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT 203
SPECIAL MEETING SESSION OF THE BOARD OF EDUCATION
September 8, 2021
New Trier Township High School
7 Happ Road, Northfield, IL 60093
Room C234**

A **Special Meeting** of the Board of Education of New Trier Township High School District 203, Cook County, Illinois was held in-person on Wednesday, September 8th, 2021 at 4:30 p.m.

Members Present

Ms. Cathy Albrecht, President
Ms. Kimberly Alcantara
Mr. Avik Das
Mr. Keith Dronen, Vice President
Ms. Jean Hahn
Ms. Sally Tomlinson

Administrators Present

Dr. Paul Sally, Superintendent
Mr. Christopher Johnson, Associate Superintendent
Dr. Joanne Panopoulos, Asst. Supt. for Special Education & Student Services
Mr. Peter Tragos, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum & Instruction
Mrs. Denise Dubravec, Principal – Winnetka Campus
Mr. Paul Waechtler, Principal – Northfield Campus

Absent

Mr. Brad McLane

Also Present

Dr. Michael Marassa, Chief Technology Officer; Ms. Niki Dizon, Director of Communications; Dr. Chimille Tillery, Director of Curriculum and Instruction, Ms. Pat Savage-Williams, Special Education Department Coordinator and Equity Team Co-Chair; Ms. Dee Molinare, Director, Field Services, IASB; Ms. Lindsey Ruston, Board of Education Secretary; Mr. Mike Hill, Technology Department; Mr. Eric Johnson, Technology Department; members of the press and community.

BUSINESS MEETING

I. CALL TO ORDER – 4:30 p.m. – C234

Ms. Albrecht called the Special Meeting of September 8, 2021 of the Board of Education to order at 4:31 p.m. in room C234 at the Northfield campus.

Roll call was taken, and all members were present except for Mr. Dronen and Mr. McLane. Mr. Dronen joined the meeting at 4:38 p.m.

II. Communications

Ms. Albrecht invited anyone from the audience who wished to address the Board to come forward and fill out a yellow communications request form and give it to Mr. Peter Tragos, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction. There were two requests for public comment. Ms. Albrecht reminded those speaking to keep their comments to three minutes or less per Board Policy 2:230.

1. Mr. Greg Robitaille, community member, shared comments about the approach to equity as outlined in the book *Belonging Through a Culture of Dignity*. His comments included an appeal that the Board be very careful when applying some of the concepts in the book to New Trier’s academic leveling system and his thoughts on the use of the term “equity.”
2. Mr. Paul Traynor, parent, shared comments about a documentary he created four years ago entitled *Tip of the Spear* which chronicled a group called Parents of New Trier. He shared further comments around a group of neighbors who are looking to ban any discussion of systemic racism in American history. He went on to share other comments regarding New Trier Neighbors, calling on the Board to reject these divisive politics.

Ms. Albrecht asked for a motion to recess until 5:00 p.m. as there was no further public comment. Dr. Sally explained that Dr. Cobb was not available until 5:00 p.m., but the District wanted to make sure there was time for public comment. Ms. Hahn moved, and Ms. Alcantara seconded the motion, to recess until 5:00 p.m. Upon a voice vote being taken, all members indicated they were in favor. Ms. Albrecht noted that the meeting stands recessed until 5:00 p.m. At 5:00 p.m., Ms. Albrecht called the meeting to order as the time of recess had expired.

III. Special Orders of Business

A. Discussion with Dr. Cobb author of *Belonging Through a Culture of Dignity*

Dr. Sally shared some initial comments, noting that the District’s work in this area is important and has been a focus for several years. There are two main principles regarding this work, the first is that every student needs to feel like

they belong at New Trier and second, every student needs to be prepared to listen to other perspectives and try to understand the experiences of people different from themselves while at New Trier and after they graduate.

Dr. Chimille Tillery, Director of Curriculum and Instruction, introduced Dr. Floyd Cobb and provided his curriculum vitae. Dr. Cobb is the co-author of *Belonging Through a Culture of Dignity*. The book focuses on dignity as a key component of equity implementation. Dr. Tillery noted that the Board will collaborate with Dr. Cobb to build a community committed to belonging and dignity as the foundation of equity and inclusion. In addition, Dr. Tillery noted that they will build a shared language and understanding – both conceptual and operational of dignity, belonging and inclusion as the keys to equity. They will identify areas where Board members can partner with District leaders in support of strategies to address areas of improvement in the District. The Board will be supported in developing a process by which they can apply an equity lens in the construction or revision of current and future policies.

Dr. Cobb thanked Dr. Tillery for the introduction and noted he wanted to provide an overview of the book and how he and co-author, Mr. John Krownapple, arrived at some of the ideas that are associated with it. The book came from what they were both seeing at the local level regarding concern that was expressed related to how diversity trainings were being presented. That led them to want to identify what they thought were elements missing in the conversation to help create better environments for everyone.

Dr. Cobb went on to speak about the dysfunctional cycle of equity work and the pattern that emerges. Usually, he stated, there is an incident that emerges or a catalyst. It then creates a focus on the ideas of inequity, injustice, and exclusion. Dr. Cobb shared that typically what follows are statements from leadership about the incident or one's perspective on it. He noted that often with these statements or the work in general, it is framed in terms of what people are against as opposed to having a clear picture of what they are for. If people are going to be for something, there must be shared agreement. When there is not a clear vision, problems with implementation often emerge. Committees are then developed but are usually filled with people who, while either impacted or interested, may not have depth of knowledge regarding how these things work. He shared that people then typically go to predictable places such as mandatory unconscious bias training. While important work, the research is becoming clear that these trainings do not have the positive effect on the professional development experience that those leading it think that it does. Dr. Cobb shared that attendees often leave these trainings with the feeling that they are the problem themselves. He also shared an example of when organizations bring in speakers. When these are conducted without a focus on dignity, what happens, according to Dr. Cobb, is that participants leave feeling blamed and shamed. Dr. Cobb shared patterns that emerged after these trainings or guest speakers. They often lead to myths and misconceptions about a group of people, and once this happens, along with division that has emerged, the initiative begins to fade away and stays this way until there is another incident or catalyst. The cycle begins again, but this time people have experiences and emotions with it which leads to conflict, noting that there are often lessons to be learned by the criticisms being levied. This cycle has led to his work with Mr. Krownapple in identifying what is missing, which he went on to share and elaborate on.

Dr. Cobb noted that he and Mr. Krownapple believe what is needed for these initiatives to succeed, is a focus on fostering a sense of belonging and dignity for every person. He then spoke to the work that New Trier is doing, particularly focusing on the Strategic Plan, noting the coaching support that he provides is in direct alignment with the District's core values and goals.

He shared the three keys to this belief system: inclusion, belonging and dignity. The first key is a shared vision of inclusion. He further explained using the dimensions of difference graph from the book and the four quadrants consisting of excluded, segregated, integrated, and included. The quadrants are based on the amount of belonging one feels and the amount of access one has.

Key number two is assessing the climate for belonging. Dr. Cobb shared Professor John A. Powell's definition of belonging, which he defines as "being fully human...and entails being respected at the basic level that includes the right to both co-create and make demands on society." Dr. Cobb shared his and Mr. Krownapple's definition of belonging which is slightly different and is defined as "the extent to which people feel personally appreciated, validated, accepted, and treated fairly within an environment." Dr. Cobb noted that they have identified this in terms of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, where one need precedes the other. He shared that step four was changed from esteemed to achievement. He went on to share that there are gaps in belonging when students struggle and how

those gaps can be addressed. Dr. Cobb then described the three structures to educational belonging – interpersonal, institutional, and instructional belonging.

The final key is taking action to honor dignity. Dr. Donna Hicks, a professor at Harvard University, defines dignity as “our inherent value and worth as human beings...with the recognition and acceptance of the value and vulnerability of all living things.” Dr. Cobb explained that Dr. Hicks speaks to the fact that while we are all born with dignity, we are not all born with the ability to treat one another with it. She is also careful to distinguish it from respect. Dr. Cobb then shared another quote from Dr. Hicks: “good people with good intentions can harm others if they are not conscious of dignity.” He noted it is a concept to keep front of mind. To capture these ideas, a framework was created, entitled, “The Dignity Framework for Educational Equity,” which he explained. Dr. Cobb’s and Mr. Krownapple’s guidance and support is to remind those engaged in this process that they need to come to this work in the form of a partnership and togetherness, and not of attack. When this is done, he noted, everyone has something in common, which is to ensure that children have the greatest experience possible in school. Dr. Cobb then invited questions and comments from the Board.

Ms. Albrecht shared that next week Dr. Cobb will work with administrators, the equity liaisons, and association presidents. He will also join the November Institute Day with faculty and staff.

Ms. Hahn thanked Dr. Cobb for his presentation, noting that what stood out to her was the notion of belonging to achieve versus achieving to belong. She noted the potential it has to transcend beyond equity work, particularly at a school like New Trier. After further comments, she stated how she sees this as an investment of the District’s time and resources. She inquired how those at New Trier will measure progress in this work without falling into the trap of measuring achievement as how the District measures progress. Second, she commented on the quadrants, and about moving into the quadrant where access and belonging are maximized. She inquired, along with referencing a public comment from earlier this evening, how that is compatible with the level system. She then shared further comments that included referencing part of the book and noting that she will be curious to see how that integrates with current systems at New Trier. Lastly, Ms. Hahn shared her thoughts that this work transcends the concept of inherent dignity and belonging, and inclusion transcends equity work. Noting culture and climate, Ms. Hahn questions if equity is the right term, wondering instead if it should be belonging. She shared additional thoughts around this.

Dr. Cobb responded to Ms. Hahn about the measurement piece, noting that it becomes a decision for each local community and board. He went on to share about leading indicators and lagging ones with achievement being a lagging indicator. He then shared further comments around measuring how this is progressing. Dr. Cobb noted that Harvard University has a good example of how they engage in measurement across their university. Regarding the leveling conversation, it is a difficult one to have as by the time a student gets to high school much of their academic trajectory has been established. Dr. Cobb thinks that if opportunities are provided for students to be able to pursue the experiences that are the most appropriate for them that is the best place to be able to go. He noted that in terms of leveling, it becomes more of a community-based conversation that extends beyond the high school. He shared his experience that if the conditions are not set up for everyone to feel like they belong, students will find a way to self-select out. He went on to share more about this. Finally, regarding if equity is the right term, Dr. Cobb said it has been an on-going struggle and conversation between he and Mr. Krownapple. He shared his thoughts on the word as well as how to encourage people to think differently in terms of the general idea of continuing to work hard at ensuring education and schools are as dignified spaces as possible with everyone feeling like they belong.

Dr. Sally shared comments about the work New Trier has done. The District uses the CSCI, a climate survey, and looks at various groups within that. He noted that using the historical data in the right way is important. Dr. Sally also noted that he and Dr. Panopoulos, Assistant Superintendent for Special Education and Student Services, have been in discussion about this as it is part of the Strategic Plan. He noted that the question about one’s sense of belonging is a critical one. The District is looking at some instruments to get a better idea of that sense of belonging. Dr. Sally noted his appreciation for Dr. Cobb’s comment about the level system and access to opportunities, which he spoke about further. Ms. Albrecht built on that, noting that the District has different levels so students can feel success in their classes. She referenced Mr. Tragos’ report, noting that most students take classes across levels while it is a tiny percentage of students who take classes at one specific level. She noted that this is so students feel they can achieve to their abilities.

Ms. Alcantara thanked Dr. Cobb, noting she enjoyed the book. She went on to share the definition of equity as found in Dr. Cobb's book and while it may be the working definition, the word equity may mean a lot of different things to a lot of different people. Ms. Alcantara noted that the idea of getting to this type of definition of equity based on the book's premises are dependent on achieving for students, faculty, and the school community a sense of belonging, a sense of dignity and inclusion. She asked for Dr. Cobb's feedback if those goals of belonging, inclusion, and dignity are inconsistent with a school environment that offers different academic levels to students, sports that have tryouts, performance groups who have auditions, or national honor society that has academic admissions. She inquired if those types of system-wide structures or attributes are intended to say those things are not consistent with achieving the District's definition of equity. Dr. Cobb responded that the question is specifically about trying to find out within the school if it is finding a place of belonging for students. He noted there is a natural reality about tryouts for performances or sports, as there are inevitably limited spots and opportunities. Dr. Cobb shared that he thinks about this as once people are part of these groups that they know that they belong and will be treated with dignity. He went on to share additional comments around this.

Ms. Alcantara inquired if critical race theory is part of Dr. Cobb's advocacy or teaching with respect to this book and the kind of work that he is doing with schools. Dr. Cobb said no, not at all. Critical race theory as a concept does not have any particular use in terms of K-12 education or anything that he is doing with this book or related to educators in general. He went on to note that what can be challenging, like equity, is these definitions get co-mingled and crossed. He shared additional details. Dr. Cobb stated that critical race theory is not a part of this book and is not a part of anything that he coaches on with respect to this book.

Mr. Dronen asked for Dr. Cobb's thoughts on the pros and cons of an equity audit and what has to be in place before one is performed. He responded that the hard part of an equity audit is that it looks for things that are wrong instead of looking for things that are right. It creates an opportunity to focus on a negative frame as opposed to getting a clear definition of where one wants to go. He went on to share further thoughts on this, emphasizing a continued focus on the positive.

Ms. Tomlinson noted she is an enthusiast of Maslow's Hierarchy. She shared that she buys into Dr. Cobb's premise of the power of inclusion and belonging as a critical step in getting there. She then inquired where the District is right now, noting that graduated students have been asked about climate, but shared that the District needs to make sure staff and faculty are included, perhaps even asking parents as well. The District knows where it wants to go according to the 2030 Strategic Plan. Ms. Tomlinson then inquired how the District gets there and how is it measured. Dr. Cobb responded part of it is getting clear in terms of looking at the data that Dr. Sally previously mentioned and elaborated on that. Once a clear understanding of the current state is determined, next would be a clear understanding of the desired state.

Mr. Das asked Ms. Albrecht to repeat the upcoming events that Dr. Cobb is participating in with the school. Dr. Sally stated that next week, Dr. Cobb will work with administrators and other equity leaders, a group of about 25, to talk about this approach and get into some of the details that have been brought up this evening. The action part of this is that the District has leaders in its departments and administration who can identify the steps that can be taken to improve a sense of belonging and dignity throughout the school. After other comments, Dr. Sally shared that Dr. Cobb is going to be a keynote speaker at the staff November Institute Day.

Mr. Das asked how Dr. Cobb envisions what progress looks like in the conversations he has with staff and the extent, to which, there is some possible nexus to this approach with the involvement of students, families, and the community. Mr. Das noted his comfort with the term equity and found compelling in the Strategic Plan, the strategy of belonging and focusing on dignity as a way to create a more equitable experience at New Trier. Mr. Das noted he has seen the dysfunctional cycle of equity work happen multiple times in his professional experience. He affirmed that this is a cycle that he is familiar with and sees.

What Mr. Das found most compelling were the quadrants of the four diverse environments. Mr. Das, who grew up in this community and presents as a person of color, looks at the quadrants and notes that New Trier on its best days is an integrated environment. At other times, it is an excluded or segregated environment. Mr. Das sees the aspiration and the good faith commitment of the leadership and the community to see how the school can move itself into that included environment. He noted that he is pointing out the connection between the cycle of dysfunction and the quadrants. Mr. Das noted that the audience that Dr. Cobb is speaking to might envision that the issues of inequity or not feeling as if a person belongs or has limited access is individual and not systemic, that it is

not something that the faculty or administration have to be committed to, especially if most of the folks belong. Mr. Das wanted to convey a perspective that he thinks the school is trying very hard to move from integrated to included and one of his concerns is that people believe that integrated is good enough and pretty much all those who deserve to be included are included. He is trying to understand how to include in the conversation faculty and the students, who might have a different opinion about where they fall in the quadrant.

Dr. Cobb responded that the work that he attempts to do is to be in service of helping to provide a different mental model for how one would think about this work. The work that he endeavors to do is to support adults in their work with students. To be clear, he does not mean that to say that this work should be taught to students. He is not creating K-12 curricula. What Dr. Cobb is attempting to do is offer a way of thinking about this conceptually that might be different than how it has been thought about in the past. Dr. Cobb then responded to Mr. Das' point about an integrated environment in terms of one's understanding. He spoke to the trajectory of public education and the efforts in terms of the desegregation process that took place across the country. The thought, however, is to say that yes access is important, but if people do not feel like they truly belong inside of that access then what is being asked of them is to give a lot of themselves and change who they are fundamentally in order to belong. He went on to share further thoughts about the work, noting much of it initially is making certain that everyone is familiar and clear with the ideas and terms regarding the frame and mental model. After additional comments, he noted that there is a lot of research that supports this, that the negative actions that take a school's attention such as underperformance or bullying, are typically outgrowths or reactions to students feeling like they do not belong. In response, more time is spent, and at a slower pace, engaging in dialogue and conversation about how one can think about how these ideas and concepts relate to how one goes about engaging and treating each another.

Ms. Albrecht shared that she liked the focus on "not what is anti" such anti-bias or anti-injustice along with the simple mind shift to think about what one is "for" without using shame or humiliation as tools. Ms. Albrecht noted that as a Board, their role is to look at the District's policies and make sure that they continue to reflect what the school is "for." She looks forward to hearing about the work occurring next week and looks forward to Dr. Cobb's involvement. Dr. Sally and the Board thanked Dr. Cobb for his time.

***IV. Closed Session – 6:00 p.m. – A303**

Ms. Albrecht asked for a motion to move to Closed Session. Mr. Das moved that the Board adjourn to closed session for the purpose of self-evaluation, practices and procedures or professional ethics, when meeting with a representative of a statewide association of which the District is a member. Ms. Tomlinson seconded the motion. Upon a roll call vote being taken, the members voted as follows:

AYE: Mr. Das, Mr. Dronen, Ms. Hahn, Ms. Tomlinson, Ms. Alcantara, Ms. Albrecht

NAY: none

ABSENT: Mr. McLane

The motion passed. Board members moved to Closed Session at 6:08 p.m.

***V. Recall to Open Session – C234**

Ms. Albrecht recalled the Special Meeting of September 8, 2021, of the Board of Education to order at 8:24 p.m. in room C234 at the Northfield campus. Roll call was taken, and all members were present except for Mr. McLane.

****VI. ADJOURNMENT**

Ms. Albrecht asked for a motion to adjourn. Ms. Alcantara moved, and Mr. Das seconded the motion, to adjourn. Upon a voice vote being taken, all members indicated they were in favor.

The meeting adjourned at 8:25 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Lindsey Ruston, Secretary

Cathleen Albrecht, President