

# The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Public Schools

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In the wake of the killing of George Floyd on Memorial Day 2020, members of the SPF community came together for a courageous conversation about racism and the diversity and equity initiatives within the school district on June 8, 2020.

More than 50 questions were posed during the virtual presentation and discussion. A thematic analysis of the questions yielded the following ten categories:

- Curriculum Revisions and Selection of Instructional Resources
- Teaching the History of Diverse Peoples
- Diversity in Literature
- The Role of Parents/Caregivers and Students in Revising Curriculum and Selecting Instructional Resources
- Professional Development
- Classroom Discussions – Students’ Experiences
- Students’ Experiences/Microaggressions and Racism in School/Protecting Children
- Diversity Statistics – Student population, Staff, Hiring Practices
- Resources to Use at Home/Responses to Children’s Questions
- Parent/Caregiver and Community/School Partnerships

This document is intended to provide those who participated and all those interested with responses to the questions within each category.

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## Curriculum Revisions and Selection of Instructional Resources

*Many participants asked questions about how the district plans to address matters of diversity and racism through the curriculum. Some of the specific concerns included:*

- *Differentiating between bullying and racism*
- *When do students learn about systemic racism and white privilege*
- *How can we teach children about people of color who have contributed to our society in so many ways, beyond the Civil Rights Movement? When will students learn about African American inventors, for example?*
- *In addition to learning about African-American people, history and culture, when will students learn about Asian-Americans, Latinx people, etc.?*

- *How do students learn about immigration and immigrants and how is that study connected to these other topics?*
- *How can issues of diversity and racism be addressed across the curriculum, not just in social studies? How can we do this in a way that is naturally integrated and not just “spotlight” or “special” lessons?*
- *How is the strategic plan created, implemented and progress assessed?*

As per [Board of Education Policy 2210](#), curriculum is reviewed and revised in an ongoing process that is based on many factors ranging from changes to the NJ Student Learning Standards to current research from professional organizations. When the curriculum for any course is revised (whether it be first grade social studies or high school calculus), administrators and teachers work together to review such documents to determine what must be taught according to the standards and legislative mandates, and what we believe must be taught based on the district’s mission and strategic plan goals. We utilize focus groups that may include parents/caregivers, students, community members, and experts in the field, so that we can ensure that multiple perspectives are taken into account when creating a new course or when revising an existing curriculum.

We believe that the curriculum must provide both windows and mirrors for students - that they should both be able to see themselves in the curriculum while they learn about others with whom they share their community and world. Perspective consciousness is the ability to recognize one’s own perspective while also recognizing that each person has a unique perspective that shapes the way they see and interact with the world. This concept has been an area of focus for curriculum revision in many content areas over the past several years; this work grew out of a past Strategic Plan that identified global awareness as a critical goal of education.

We recognize that there is work to be done in the areas of diversity, race, and racism in the curriculum and while some of that work has been done over the past few years, we continue to identify areas where we can intensify that work. For example, we have incorporated lessons about bullying, developed by the New Jersey State Bar Foundation, into our elementary classrooms, but we recognize that those lessons do not explicitly focus on bullying that might be rooted in stereotypes and prejudice. This is a part of our curriculum that we are actively reviewing and revising to include those concepts explicitly.

Throughout the preK-5 curriculum, students have various opportunities to study people (both historical and contemporary) who have made positive contributions to society, and they study the concepts of cultural universals to be able to understand what diverse cultures have in common and what makes them unique. Throughout those areas of study, students may learn about any number of individuals who have made positive contributions (such as African-American

inventors) and they learn about various cultures around the world. However, we recognize that in order to ensure all students are provided with an experience that explicitly addresses racial identity and truly develops an understanding of and appreciation of diversity, we need to incorporate these topics more specifically into the curriculum. One way we will begin this work is to identify the places where specific teachers or teams of teachers have done this successfully and we will use their best practices as a starting point for revising the curriculum that all students experience.

The questions about how such content can be naturally integrated into the curriculum across all content areas is one that we have been working on and will continue to do. The district supervisors in each content area are working to address this issue through professional development, resource identification and curriculum revision. The questions regarding how marginalized groups (including people of color, indigenous peoples, immigrants, LGBTQ people, people with disabilities, and women) can best be represented in the curriculum is another one that has been part of our discussions and our ongoing work.

Over the next two years, the K-12 social studies curriculum will undergo a comprehensive revision based on the [newly adopted NJ Student Learning Standards in Social Studies](#).

In addition to [Board of Education Policy 2260](#), which guides curriculum and classroom practices, there are three legislative mandates that also influence the curriculum in social studies and other content areas. They include:

**Amistad Law: N.J.S.A. 18A 52:16A-88**

Every board of education shall incorporate the information regarding the contributions of African-Americans to our country in an appropriate place in the curriculum of elementary and secondary school students. To review how our curriculum currently addresses this mandate, [please see this document](#).

**Holocaust Law: N.J.S.A. 18A:35-28**

Every board of education shall include instruction on the Holocaust and genocides in an appropriate place in the curriculum of all elementary and secondary school pupils. The instruction shall further emphasize the personal responsibility that each citizen bears to fight racism and hatred whenever and wherever it happens. To review how our curriculum currently addresses this mandate, [please see this document](#).

**LGBT and Disabilities Law: N.J.S.A. 18A:35-4.35**

A board of education shall include instruction on the political, economic, and social contributions of persons with disabilities and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender

people, in an appropriate place in the curriculum of middle school and high school students as part of the district's implementation of the New Jersey Student Learning Standards (N.J.S.A.18A:35-4.36) A board of education shall have policies and procedures in place pertaining to the selection of instructional materials to implement the requirements of N.J.S.A. 18A:35-4.35.

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## **Teaching the History of Diverse Peoples**

*There were several questions specifically addressing how the history of diverse groups of people are taught, or can be taught across the K-12 curriculum.*

- *When do students learn about the contributions of diverse people such as African-American inventors?*
- *When do students learn about the history of diverse groups?*
- *How much flexibility do teachers have to address these topics?*
- *How can black history be taught without focusing solely on slavery and/or the Civil Rights Movement? How can students learn about the history of African cultures prior to enslavement?*
- *How will you ensure that content that was missed during the 2019-2020 school year due to At Home Learning is provided to students in the future (e.g. 5th grade did not learn about the Middle Passage as they normally would)?*
- *How can we ensure that the content and resources used (especially for Black History Month) are updated and refreshed?*

The social studies curriculum is designed using essential questions that address universal themes from across time and place. Specific content is studied through the lenses of those questions. Questions such as “How are people alike and different?” or “How can I make my community a better place?” are explored by students in grades K-4 using content about global cultures or diverse individuals and groups of people who have made positive changes in their communities. Teachers have some flexibility in the specific examples and case studies they use in these units of study while ensuring all students have an opportunity to wrestle with the essential questions in a meaningful way.

Moving forward, we will identify specific examples and case studies that highlight the many issues raised by these questions. For example, Black History Month will be taught within the context of meaningful questions like “How have people made their communities better places?” as students explore the ways that African-American inventors, scientists, artists and activists have contributed to society, both past and present. We will continue to identify and procure

resources that support this study in a way that ensures students understand that people of all race and ethnicities have contributed to our society in a range of ways. This is an area where we must ensure that the resources students encounter and the specific content they study function as both windows and mirrors for all students.

Some critical content was missed during the 2019-2020 school year due to the COVID-19 closure of schools, and we have recognized that and will ensure that this content is addressed and emphasized in the coming years. Topics like the Middle Passage and slavery in the Americas would have been difficult to teach to young children in a virtual environment; we understand that these topics can evoke strong feelings among children that would best be addressed in an in-person setting. We will ensure that this content is emphasized in future grade levels for students who would have otherwise studied it this spring.

School-wide assemblies is another vehicle for learning and a strategy for making sure that all students receive a message the same way. Each of our elementary schools have had assemblies over the years that teach important messages of treating everyone kind and with respect, accepting differences, etc. Some of our elementary classrooms have hosted guest speakers and guest readers from our community (including students from the SPFHS Black Student Union) to discuss these issues; as we identify experiences like these that are beneficial to our students, we will work to make those experiences a part of each child's education. We recognize now, more than ever, that these types of assemblies and messages to our student body is extremely important and we plan to make an effort to continue with this practice.

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## **Diversity in Literature**

*Participants noted that having access to diverse literature for children is critical.*

- *Do you have any statistics / data regarding the diversity of the literature that is available in the classroom across various grade levels?*

We do not have any statistics at this time related to the levels of diversity in the literature in classrooms, but we can share that over the last 2-3 years there has been a stronger commitment to increasing the number of books with a character of color. This has begun to happen in all grade levels, in all buildings and has also been happening with our library media specialists. We are committed to continue with this initiative at a faster pace. In the future we will be able to share more solid data related to this. Please click [here](#) for further information regarding diversity statistics in publishing.

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## **The Role of Parents/Caregivers and Students in Revising Curriculum and Selecting Instructional Resources:**

- *How can parents/caregivers, students and community members contribute to curriculum work?*
- *Can teachers share with parents/caregivers resources throughout the year?*
- *Can teachers inform parents/caregivers when lessons or discussions are happening, so that they can engage in follow-up discussions with their children?*
- *How is the District partnering with Diverse groups of parents/caregivers or students to gain perspective and influence change where it is needed?*
- *How can you leverage black parents/caregivers and students help non-black parents/caregivers in understanding the complexities of our experiences as a race?*
- *Will there be ongoing community opportunities for these conversations going forward?*

All members of the SPF community will be invited to participate in the Strategic Planning Process this coming year. During this process, parents/caregivers, students, teachers, administrators and community members share their ideas about the areas that the next five-year plan should focus on. In creating the Strategic Plan, we take into consideration everyone's thoughts about who we are as a district and who we want to be. The goals that come from the collaborative planning sessions are then used to guide the work of faculty, staff and administrators each year. The goals also help us to prioritize our resources including the time we have for professional development and staff training. Each spring, the Superintendent then reports to the Board of Education on the progress made on each goal. To see the [Strategic Plan from 2017-20, click here](#).

The district is partnering with local efforts to address racism and prejudice in our communities. We are active partners with the Joint Committee for Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation and Social Justice Matters. Within our schools, we have partnered with organizations such as the Anti-Defamation League to empower students to share their stories and enact change. The student-led organization, No Place for Hate, has conducted presentations in US History classes over the past two years, and continues to be an organization that amplifies student voice. The Black Student Union and SAGA (Sexuality and Gender Acceptance) offer students the opportunity to work with other students to create an inclusive and safe learning environment for all.

As curriculum revision plans are formed, the input of focus groups with parents/caregivers, students and community members will be important to us. The comments and questions from this parent/caregiver session, in addition to the conversations being held by Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation, will serve as one mode of input for us. We will review the reflections from those conversations together as we do this work. Moving forward, the administrative team will work together to find additional opportunities for parent/caregiver, student and community input.

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## **Professional Development**

*Several participants asked about the type of training teachers have had and what training will be planned for the future.*

- *How will teachers be trained so that classroom interactions are supportive and affirming?*
- *How will teachers be trained for facilitating classroom discussions and engaging in courageous conversations with their students?*
- *How can we ensure all students are engaged in lessons and discussions about topics such as racism, without relying on the specific experience or comfort level of individual teachers?*

We recognize the need for ongoing and comprehensive professional development in this area. Over the past several years, some teachers and staff members have participated in various workshops and conferences offered by organizations such as the NJ State Bar Foundation and Facing History and Ourselves. We have also provided in-district training for some staff. Moving forward, we will look for the ways that such training can be provided in a more systematic way to ensure each faculty and staff member is supported in their professional growth in this area. Professional development will address topics including creating safe and inclusive school and classroom environments, learning the key concepts and information that is integrated into the curriculum, and how to identify and utilize classroom and professional resources that support these efforts.

Building upon the June Forum, our most recent Professional Development Day (9/11/20) was entitled, *Equity and Anti-Racism in SPF: Making Our Schools and Classrooms Sites of Social Justice*. Curated and Facilitated by the Administrative Team, the day was organized around a variety of resources with discussion groups that included all certificated staff members. This included the following (all staff members participated in two of these groups):

- [Uncomfortable Conversations With a Black Man](#)
- [Canonical Gatekeeping in the English Classroom](#)
- [The Truths To Kill a Mockingbird Tells About White People](#)
- [Reading Anti-Racist Nonfiction Is a Start. But Don't Underestimate the Power of Black Fiction](#)
- [Why talk about whiteness \(we can't talk about racism with out it\)](#)
- [Ally vs. Co-Conspirator: What it Means to Be an Abolitionist Teacher](#)
- [Reading Your Way to a Culturally Responsive Classroom](#)
- [4 Practices to Promote Equity in the Classroom](#)
- [Honing Teacher Sensitivity To The Success of Students of Color](#)
- [How to Recognize Your White Privilege and Use it to Fight Inequality](#)
- [Avoiding-Racial-Equity-Detours](#)
- [ANTI RACISM: 8 Ways to Raise Race Conscious Kids \(+ RESOURCES!\)](#)
- [A Kids Book About Racism by Jelani Memory](#)
- [We Need to Talk About an Injustice](#)
- [GLSEN Video #1: Transgender students](#)
- [GLSEN Video #2: Non-binary students](#)
- [Approaching conversations on the intersections of race and LGBTQ Identity \(The Trevor Project\)](#)
- [The Danger of a Single Story](#)
- [How to Overcome Our Biases? Walk Boldly Towards Them](#)
- [Let's Get to the Root of Racial injustice](#)
- [How Can I Have a Positive Racial Identity? I'm White!](#)

The day served as a vehicle to initiate our work this year.

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## **Classroom Discussions – Students' Experiences**

*Several questions were posed about students' experiences in the classroom -*

- *What instructional strategies are used to teach about these topics?*
- *What if a teacher isn't comfortable talking about these issues with students?*
- *How do teachers conduct and facilitate these discussions?*
- *How can we provide students with experiences to develop empathy and understanding?*
- *Are there any opportunities for students to act out/theatre opportunities to act social injustices so that students can start to put themselves in others shoes?*
- *What is being done to ensure students do not experience microaggressions from either teachers or classmates?*

- *How do teachers facilitate/teach about race when there is only one or no children of color in a classroom?*
- *Will you be highlighting the general importance of law enforcement? I think it is very important to make it known that not all police do these terrible things. Coming from a family of law enforcement it is important to us that the children know that a great many police officers go out everyday and leave their own families to help others.*

We recognize that each of us - teachers included - are at different points along a complex journey of developing an understanding of identity, race, and racism. We all have different comfort levels in talking about difficult topics, and the administration recognizes that we must support each teacher in this journey to further develop their knowledge, understanding and comfort level. We encourage all teachers to develop classroom communities in which each child's identity is recognized, embraced and affirmed. We do this through instructional practices like Morning Meeting, structured class discussions and individual writing conferences. We also do this through community-building activities and through our daily interactions with students. We will continue to provide training for teachers to deepen our collective understanding of the ways we can better recognize and affirm each child's individual identity including how their race, ethnicity, national origin or other identity markers shape the way they see themselves. We will also continue to work to ensure materials such as crayons that "match" a wide range of skin colors are available to students as they engage in activities like drawing self-portraits.

In addressing how students interact with one another, we recognize that we need to be more explicit with younger children about how our biases and stereotypes can contribute to prejudice and racism. Building on young children's innate sense of fairness and justice with explicit lessons about racism and prejudice will help all of us become more aware of our actions and behaviors and empower us to act when we experience or witness something that is unjust. Role-playing and perspective-taking are important strategies in the classroom and are used whenever developmentally and age- appropriate.

Having the understanding of the importance of teaching a topic of race will allow all of our teachers to engage in these courageous conversations regardless of the presence or number of diverse students in the classroom. What is most important is that the teacher is able to recognize the feelings and needs of each student in the classroom and that those feelings and needs are given the proper consideration during each lesson.

We believe it is important to stress to our children the importance of law enforcement. Having an officer in our buildings each day shows our commitment to that. Many of our discussions at the elementary level use our SRO as an example of an officer who helps us. We also ask

teachers to share with students the many positive examples of law enforcement and the dangerous job they do to help protect us.

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## **Students' Experiences/Microaggressions and Racism in School/Protecting Children**

*A few participants asked about school climate and culture, such as:*

- *I attended the sit down at the police station yesterday and there were a bunch of spf students and former students who talked about being recipients of microaggressions throughout the school years. How are microaggressions being addressed through the education process and how will they be handled when they happen in school?*
- *How do you make sure new immigrants will be treated well no matter which country they are coming from?*
- *I have a biracial child, so the conversation around identity is nuanced. Are educators being thoughtful around their journeys of discovery?*

As a district, we strive to be welcoming to all of our students. We believe that our anti-bullying lessons address many of these challenges and focus a great deal of being accepting of everyone, regardless of where they are from. We believe a need to continue to be more explicit with these conversations will be a goal of ours moving forward. We want children to be able to express themselves in ways that make them comfortable and we seek to create environments where this is happening. Through continued professional development and trainings, we will provide teachers with the necessary understandings to do so. Our primary classroom materials include crayons, paints and picture books which include various shades of skin tones.

In terms of microaggressions, we believe these are addressed when they are witnessed by adults, but we have recognized that we need to do a better job of this. We feel that being more explicit with instruction, especially at the younger levels is extremely important. For example routinely using the term “racism” with students to help build a true understanding of what it means is not something we have explicitly done at the elementary level and we have reflected that this is something we need to do more of. Being explicit with what racial bias is and how we can address this is something that we hope to begin to do more of at the elementary levels.

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## **Diversity Statistics – Student population, Staff, Hiring Practices**

Participants expressed an interest in learning about the diversity within the school district in terms of students and staff and requested relevant statistics about this.

- *How are you committed to diverse hiring? Please share statistics of diversity in your workforce?*

In an effort to increase minority staff representation, we have started focusing recruitment efforts at institutions of higher education with more diverse students such as Kean University (est. 53.4% undergrad minorities), William Paterson University (est. 54% undergrad minorities), Montclair State University (est. 51% undergrad minorities), and Rutgers (est. 44% undergrad minorities)

Prior to a COVID-related cancellation the district planned to attend a career fair at Cheyney University in Pennsylvania (one of the HBCU's - Historically Black Colleges and Universities). We plan to continue this once it is held again.

- *Do you have data/statistics regarding the diversity of the educators in the district?*

The table below provides the data related to current certificated staff members:

Category	Asian	Black	Hawaiian/ Other Pacific Islander	Other/ Hispanic	White	Total
Certified Staff (All Non-Administrator Certified Staff)	20	13	3	21	463	520
Administrators (Certified-Principals, Assistant Principals, Supervisors, Central Office)	1	2	0	1	24	28
Totals	21	15	3	22	487	548
Percent of Certified Staff	3.83%	2.74%	0.55%	4.01%	88.87%	N/A

- *What are the current demographic stats for SPF students?*

Student demographics are reported in a slightly different manner than staff. Below is the current data on the total student population as well as that within each school:

	Asian	Black	Hawaiian/ Other Pacific Islander	Other/ Hispanic	White	Multiracial	Native/ Other	Not Reported
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District	10.84%	7.15%	0.33%	13.08%	62.76%	4.99%	0.16%	.83%
High School	7.86%	8.44%	0.13%	12.37%	66.04%	5.03%	0.13%	0.00%
Park Middle	10.13%	8.71%	0.33%	15.14%	60.89%	4.68%	0.11%	0.00%
Terrill Middle	11.47%	5.14%	0.24%	12.43%	65.23%	5.26%	0.00%	0.24%
Brunner	12.87%	8.04%	0.27%	12.06%	58.18%	6.97%	0.27%	1.34%
Coles	16.09%	6.92%	0.00%	12.22%	58.66%	4.07%	0.20%	1.83%
Evergreen	12.76%	6.51%	0.26%	14.58%	57.81%	4.69%	0.78%	2.60%
McGinn	11.47%	2.16%	0.00%	9.96%	68.61%	6.06%	0.43%	1.30%
School One	10.69%	6.94%	0.00%	18.50%	58.09%	5.20%	0.00%	0.58%

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### **Resources to Use at Home/Responses to Children’s Questions**

*Many participants asked about resources or responses to children’s inquiries that could be used at home. Several professional organizations have created resources and several of these are shared below. Many of the questions were specific to individuals, but the responses here provide what we believe to model developmentally appropriate responses.*

- *How do I handle it when my child says something mean about another race? How do you handle it in the classroom?*

Be honest with your child. Talk to them about how it makes you feel to hear that, but focus on how it will make someone else feel when they hear it. Depending on the age of your child will also determine how deep into this conversation you want to go, but above all be honest with them that this is something that is wrong and not nice to do.

- *My child has trouble sleeping recently due to these recent events. What child meditation or mindfulness websites/apps are recommended?*

The district is continuously reviewing apps that are child friendly. Although we do not have specific Apps to recommend, there are numerous child-friendly mindfulness and calming Apps

available. Also, there is a wealth of resources on the district's Social and Emotional Learning website, *The Inner Well*, [found here](#).

- *I have a 2nd grader and pre K - they have seen the protests as we watch the news and have questions. We have tried our best to explain, age appropriately, what is happening. I would love some guidance from you all on how you, as educators, would respond to those questions.*

In general the guidance that would be given would be to be honest with your children. Let them know why these protests are happening because people are upset and working together to make things better, let them know your thoughts and feelings on them. Share with them that people are trying to make a difference by encouraging others to treat each other fairly.

- *Also, on days when teachers have major classroom discussions on race, could they notify parents/caregivers so that we know to discuss at dinner? Sometimes my son doesn't tell me what he did at school during the day, so I want to make sure I don't miss an opportunity to reiterate these important topics.*

Of course, we would encourage our teachers to always communicate with parents/caregivers so that you are aware of what is happening in the classroom. Whether this is through an email or a weekly newsletter, communication between home and school is important.

- *How do you explain why people are protesting to your 6 year old?*

Share with your child that people are trying to make a difference by encouraging others to treat each other fairly. Depending on the maturity level of your child you may want to begin to extend that conversation by having some discussions as to why there is a need to do this. You can certainly talk to them about how there are people who are not treated the same because of the color of their skin. You can discuss with your child how this may make someone feel. Furthermore, protests are a means of demonstrating your disagreement with something in a safe and peaceful way.

### **Diverse Books**

- [We Need Diverse Books](#) - This organization provides a wealth of resources to help you find books on many topics of diversity including race, ethnicity, and gender identity; they also have an [app called OurStory](#) which can help you find more books!
- [PBS - Books about Race and Diversity](#) - This is a list of 13 picture books appropriate for elementary children

- [American Library Association - Inclusive Booklists](#) - The ALA has curated a list of websites that provide titles on a range of

### **Mindfulness strategies**

- The Child Mind Institute has [several resources about Mindfulness for children](#) and parents/caregivers
- Mindful Schools has offered a [variety of free classes for kids](#)
- [Headspace provides a variety of mindfulness activities](#) for children and adults (This is a paid subscription app that offers a two-week free trial)
- [The Calm App](#) is another paid app with a variety of meditation and mindfulness exercises

### **Talking to children about race and civil unrest**

- The Child Mind Institute provides a range of resources including articles for parents/caregivers ([“Racism and Violence: How to Help Kids Handle the News”](#) ) as well as access to mental health services.
- PBS - [How to Talk Honestly with Children about Racism](#)
- Zero to Three - [Racism and Violence: Using Your Power as a Parent to Support Children Aged Two to Five](#)

## **Parent/Caregiver and Community/School Partnerships**

*We are fortunate to have an engaged and supportive community willing to assist in these matters. Some questions focused on community mobilization such as:*

- *How is the District partnering with Diverse groups of parents/caregivers or students to gain perspective and influence change where it is needed?*
- *How can you leverage black parents/caregivers and students helping non-black parents/caregivers in understanding the complexities of our experiences as a race?*
- *Will there be ongoing community opportunities for these conversations going forward? We are hopeful that this will be an ongoing conversation in our SPF district for students, families and community members. Thank you for your consideration.*

Recognizing the importance of this work, the Board of Education recently formed a Wellness and Equity Committee. This committee has subsequently formed a Racial Equity Task Force to bring together representatives from various student, parent/caregiver and community-based organizations to assist in guiding this work. Progress will be reported upon during public Board of Education meetings.