

Valuing Your Diverse Staff: Implement an Affinity Group in Your School District Now

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Our schools are a microcosm of our communities. As our communities are becoming more diverse, so too are our schools. How do you respect and value the diversity of your staff? In Meriden, like many other districts throughout the State of Connecticut and the nation, our school district has implemented a number of strategies to recruit, hire and retain staff members of color. Approximately 35 percent of Connecticut's students are of Latino or Black descent, compared to the teaching force that is 7 percent Latino or Black. Conversely, 57 percent of the students are classified as White, as are 91 percent of the teachers. Nationally, Edutopia recently reported that 80% of public school teachers are white, and 7% were black. They also referenced a 2018 study that found Black students who had a single black teacher were 13% more likely to enroll in college. While student diversity rises at an accelerated pace, the rates of teacher diversity are rising much more slowly, thus creating larger gaps between students and staff of color. As districts successfully recruit and hire teachers of color, efforts must be made to support these staff members as they enter a workforce where they can feel isolated and face challenges their peers may not be aware of. Implementing an affinity group for staff members to network, assist each other and offer professional learning opportunities to, can be a powerful strategy to support and retain staff members in your district.

Affinity Group Defined

An affinity group is a group formed around a shared interest or common goal, where individuals formally or informally belong. An affinity group is a designated "safe space," where everyone in that group shares a particular identity. This identity can have implemented an affinity group for staff members of color in order to provide support, professional development and a medium to help our recruitment efforts to increase staff member diversity in the district. This is one small way to let your diverse staff members know they are valued and supported.

Tapping Into Our Teacher Leaders

We believe that for educational initiatives to flourish and to achieve our vision, we need teacher leaders who embrace change and recognize the global and diverse interests of our students. By empowering educators to contribute to the collective growth of our district, we believe that we are building capacity and shared ownership in a meaningful and purposeful way. In Meriden, we have taken a multi-tiered approach to diversify our teaching staff, ranging from "grow your own" programs, on the spot hiring, partnering with our local chapter of the NAACP to recruit at historically black universities, and other talent development initiatives. These efforts helped us attain increased percentages of staff of color for our new teacher cohorts hired over the past three years of; sixteen percent, twenty-five percent and twenty percent. However, missing in our recruitment and retention strategy was an intentional structure of support for the staff members of color in our district to network and support one another. We were aware of the concept of affinity groups from our research and professional learning around equity, but did not have a plan in place to implement such a group as recently as the 2018-2019 school year. We had, however, been involved in work around equity for a number of years. We spent more

time on recruiting diverse staff members rather than looking at supporting our current staff members of color. We had recently completed a Teacher Leadership Academy for High School staff focused on the topics of Equity, Student Centered Learning and Teacher Leadership. At the conclusion of that academy, our district secured grant funding to continue equity and leadership training for staff members who shared a strong desire to continue with this work. With the help of a local consultant, we developed an Equity Leaders program intended to train our own teaching staff on how to conduct equity training throughout the district. It was one of these equity leaders, Orlando Valentin, who helped organize and implement the affinity group in our district. He agreed with our central office team that this was an area we could further strengthen our support for staff members of color. With the Equity training in place, Orlando felt confident that he could help lead an affinity group with support from the central office team. "From personal experience, I know that teaching can seem like a solitary mission, especially if you are the single educator of color in your school. In creating this safe space for educators of color, we hope to retain and empower them, so that they feel valued for all that they do for our students. These educational meet-ups will help foster organic interactions and will address topics of equity and inequality which can plague any educational system. Ideally, these sessions will build camaraderie within this small community of teachers of color" Orlando Valentin, 4th grade teacher, Casimir Pulaski Elementary School, Meriden, CT. Orlando's strong leadership encouraged our central office leadership team to think strategically about all of our equity work. It became more apparent that having a platform to share the district efforts with all stakeholders was critical. We now have a page devoted to this work on our website.

Planning For Implementation, Year 1

We began by jointly brainstorming how the district could support the endeavor and what we hoped for in regards to intended outcomes. After outlining a structure that aligned with our district improvement plan, we paired Orlando with our district grant coordinator to draft a proposal for local funding. The proposal was successful and our district received funding to start our own Meriden Public Schools (MPS) Affinity Group. We implemented this initiative in the 2019-2020 school year. Funding was used to purchase educational literature, host experts in the field of equitable education, and purchase a compilation of books to host book studies. Some examples of texts purchased were: *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood...* and *the rest of y'all too*, *Pushout*, *Lost At School*, *Why Are All Of The Black Kids Sitting Together In The Cafeteria*, as well as many other texts. The meetings were designed to allow attendees to build a support system, but also to provide professional learning so that they can become advocates for equity work within the district and assist in the recruitment and retention of educators of color. Topics such as; navigating situations involving micro aggressions, implicit bias, and having conversations around race, were some of the topics provided to our group. A year end culminating activity was planned, allowing our members to attend the Leadership In Diversity Annual Conference at the University of Connecticut. While the Covid-19 Pandemic prevented our group from attending this conference, the concept of our MPS Affinity Group attending and providing professional learning to others remains.

Building On Initial Success, Year 2

With current conditions dictated by the pandemic, and staff health and safety at the forefront of our decision making, we have planned for virtual sessions to start the 2020-2021 school year. We held our first session in early October and experienced increased attendance from the previous year. This session

served as an opportunity for our staff members to express their feelings regarding the racial unrest in the country, the effects of working and living during a global pandemic, and the challenges facing staff in the new normal of social distancing and hybrid teaching and learning. This truly served as a platform for staff to openly share their feelings and experiences, and to support one another during a challenging time. Reflecting afterward, we felt we truly had accomplished one of our goals for this initiative; to reduce the isolation felt by some of our staff members and create an environment for nurturing and support. This initial meeting also helped serve as a platform to report out to our staff on the equity work we had engaged in throughout the past year. Additionally, we were able to share the gains made in recruiting and hiring staff members of color to the district. Members of the MPS Affinity Group have expanded their individual efforts and have initiated their own equity book clubs within their schools, offered professional development to their peers, and even held a virtual panel discussion on diversity for early career educators. Some of our MPS Affinity Group members have volunteered to help the district launch the Educators Rising, a division of Phi Delta Kappa International (PDK). This program supports students who may be interested in pursuing a career in education. Momentum has been built to continue this work and our teacher leaders are helping to expand and reinforce our district vision and goals.

Expanding Our Scope and Distributing the Leadership

One of the main goals for this year is to increase the MPS Affinity Group beyond the approximately thirty staff members that are presently involved. We have expanded participation beyond teachers and classified staff to incorporate administrators in our group. This will allow us to further the scope of the work from the classroom to the school and district level. We hope to have a designated MPS Affinity Group representative from each of our schools to assist in communicating updates and promoting further participation. If we are going to create an environment where “all students” succeed, then our system must value and support diversity. That is how we will retain and recruit a staff that is more reflective of our students.

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