

We all want the best for our children.

As members of the Amity Board of Education, we have heard both sides of the diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) debate.

Many families and students have told us that the status quo at Amity is not healthy. Many children feel bullied, taunted, and unwelcome at school. As board members, we want ALL our students to feel happy at school, focus on learning, and grow to their fullest potential.

But other parents fear that in addressing the concerns of children who feel unwelcome, those happy with the status quo will suffer. Some worry that children seen as “advantaged” may be blamed for the problems faced by the “disadvantaged.” Others worry that addressing inclusion may hurt the children’s academic achievements. As board members, we do not want any child to suffer, feel guilt or blame at school. And we strongly support academic excellence at Amity.

One thing is clear across our community: *we all want the best for our children.*

We want to offer the best to ALL our children. So we asked ourselves: Must efforts at inclusion be a zero-sum proposition, where one child’s gain is another’s loss? Does giving one child a sense of belonging and helping them achieve their potential come at the expense of another? We believe kindness and belonging are not zero sum. Creating an inclusive environment can improve academic excellence, as ALL students can then focus on learning and succeed without being bullied, taunted or made to feel inferior.

We also agree that no child should have to feel guilt or blame. That’s part of why we need a trained instructional coach - to help Amity address inclusion and equity in a way that is positive for everyone.

It’s not just Amity that thinks inclusion improves student learning - both US News and Niche.com assess how well schools support Black, Latino, and low-income students’ learning as part of their school rankings. In Niche.com’s 2022 ratings, Amity is 10th of 117 districts in CT, and our worst score is in diversity.

What DEI means to us. As members of the board, we have thought long and hard about this: *We believe diversity and inclusion is about making ALL children feel like they belong at school. Equity is about allowing EVERY child to reach their full potential.* We think these are aspirations and goals that everyone can agree on. **We emphasize that equity does NOT mean that every child is expected to perform or develop the same way.**

We believe that ALL learners must feel supported at school for them to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. We believe Amity should nurture a community of learners who embrace individual and cultural differences, valuing how differences enrich society. We believe that all learners should have access to resources needed to achieve their fullest educational potential. So how do we get there?

It is the ABoE and administration’s job to foster a learning environment where all students can thrive. A public school educates all students in our community, no matter their needs or background. Efforts to ensure that students feel welcome, comfortable, and safe are critical for them to prosper educationally. These efforts enrich our educational environment and strengthen our district.

It is also the Board and administration's job to obey state and federal law. In 2021, CT required boards to increase access to advanced classes for minoritized students; to develop curricula that cover Holocaust and genocide education, African American and Black Studies, Puerto Rican and Latino studies, and integrate Native American studies, Asian American and Pacific Islander studies, LGBTQ studies, Military Service, the experiences of veterans, social-emotional learning, and racism. We are required to create a minority teacher certification, retention, and residency program. We must review implicit bias and anti-bias training for all staff involved in hiring. In 2022, new laws require us to hold suitable educational programs for Juneteenth, if school is open that day. We must celebrate Children's Mental Health Day. We must include disability in our educational anti-discrimination practices.

All of this work - and it's a lot of work - MUST be done by the schools, MUST be overseen by the Board. *Having one of our own teachers act as a DEI instructional coach to help their peers adjust to these requirements is not merely cost-effective. Because it is home-grown and customized to our needs, it will help our teachers teach our children better.*

What might DEI look like in the classroom? A teacher's job is to teach the subject matter to students. But it is ALSO to know our students, inspire, and empower them to imagine themselves doing that work as adults. We aren't doing it right if we drill formulas but don't give kids the sense of how they could use their skills in the adult world.

A science teacher wanting to support girls in class might mention Rosalind Franklin, the x-ray crystallographer overlooked for the Nobel Prize for the structure of DNA. Black students might be inspired by Katherine Johnson calculating flight trajectories for the first human space flight. A teacher with LGBTQ kids might discuss Alan Turing's importance to the development of the computer; one with a student with mental illness might discuss John Nash, the Nobel Laureate in Economics who struggled with schizophrenia and inspired the movie *A Beautiful Mind*. A teacher with a student from a military family can point out the importance of military research to our daily lives - the internet, duct tape, Epipens, microwaves, and GPS. Teachers can choose their own ways to support and empower EVERY kid in their classroom, but together these approaches enrich ALL students because they now see the world they will inhabit as adults in its full richness and diversity.

The DEI coach won't just help teachers comply with new laws - they'll help teachers identify resources, plan, and deliver lessons in a responsive way. The coach will support the faculty to become the best possible teachers they can be for the students they have, this year, and every year.

What DEI at Amity is NOT. Let us be clear: The goal at Amity is not to teach students that people are oppressors or oppressed. It is not to create a permanent class of victims who will be trained to hate their oppressors. Our curriculum and teachers can encourage each student and teach diverse experiences without casting blame on anyone.

As Board members, we hear the fears and concerns about DEI and do not dismiss them. Our teachers and administrators have also heard these fears and concerns and do not dismiss them. But we also see much potential for gain and believe we can avoid the harms that we fear.

Let us keep an open mind. We in Bethany, Orange and Woodbridge pride ourselves on being an open and welcoming community. Families on both sides of the DEI debate agree on this.

We ask our community to have an open mind on Amity's DEI instructional coach. Let us give our teachers and administrators - experienced professionals who know our kids well - the chance to succeed with efforts tailored to our community's needs, with the goal of helping ALL our children thrive. As in other aspects of life, we cannot let our fear of the worst prevent us from trying and growing. We should not forego the opportunity for ALL our children to navigate the world with a broader understanding of the people around them. Let us give our schools and teachers the support they need, for the sake of our children, our parents, and our beloved community.

The undersigned members of the Amity Board of Education

Dr. K. Sudhir, Woodbridge

Dr. Jennifer Turner, Bethany

Mr. John Belfonti, Chair, Orange

Mr. Chris Browe, Orange

Ms. Shannon Carlson, Orange

Mr. Paul Davis, Orange

Ms. Carla Eichler, Orange

Ms. Andrea Hubbard, Bethany

Dr. Carol Oladele, Woodbridge

Mr. Patrick Reed, Woodbridge

Ms. Donna Schuster, Woodbridge