

Cedar Falls Racial Equity Task Force Meeting

Wednesday, August 25, 2021 – 4:00-5:30 PM

Cedar Falls Public Safety in person and via Video Conference

To protect against the spread of COVID-19, this meeting was also offered via video conference.

Task Force Members Present: Frank Darrah (Task Force Chair); Kelly Dunn (Task Force Vice Chair); Melissa Heston; Andy Pattee; Felicia Smith-Nalls; Lisa Sesterhenn; Will Frost; LaTanya Graves; Wilfred “Mickye” Johnson; Paul Lee

Facilitators: Aimee Vinaird-Weideman

City Staff/Elected Officials Present: Jennifer Rodenbeck; Katie Terhune; Ron Gaines

Members of the public were also present via video conference.

Absent: Eashaan Vajpeyi; Omar Padilla (Facilitator)

1. Call to Order:

Chair Darrah called the meeting to order at 4:03 PM.

2. Roll Call/Attendance:

Director of Finance and Business Operations Rodenbeck took roll call.

3. Agenda Review/Changes:

Facilitator Viniard-Weideman reviewed the agenda with the Task Force. There were no agenda changes.

4. Approval of 08-11-21 Minutes:

Task Force Member Smith-Nalls moved the minutes be approved; seconded by Task Force Member Lee; approved unanimously.

5. Subcommittee Presentation - Education

Task Force Member Pattee shared a slideshow including: Cedar Falls School District demographic data including race overall and by building, and spoken language; data review of 4 year graduation dates, participation in advanced coursework, discipline, and attendance statistics; work done by the district’s Equity Committee (27 members including students, staff, parents, and community members; they also utilize outside supports) such as listening rooms, Black student unions (BSU) and other student groups, licensed mental health providers through Black Hawk Grundy Mental Health Center on site, and learning opportunities; current and future staff and leader trainings and actively recruiting more diverse staff; student surveys (current and former) about experiences and perceptions; advanced study opportunities; and future goals and plans. Task Force Member Graves stated discipline statistics were concerning; Black students have a high number (23%) of discipline referrals, and most are for disruption. She stated the number of Black students taking advanced courses is low, also a concern. She questioned how to work to flip those: increase the advanced course participation and lower discipline referrals.

Task Force Member Pattee shared the Education Subcommittee's worksheet for: what we (the Subcommittee/Task Force) know; what we don't know; what we (the Cedar Falls School District and City) are doing; and what we are not doing. What we know: district demographic data; advanced course participation data, specific to race/ethnicity and free/reduced lunch (FRL) program participation; attendance data by race/ethnicity; discipline/infraction data by race/ethnicity (Black students received 23% of these but comprise 4.7% of student body); the district has an active Equity Committee. What we don't know: why more minority students and FRL students don't take advanced classes; what tools prepare minority students to succeed; deeper tracking for post-secondary students broken down by race/ethnicity; impact of BSU with integration to junior high; why Black attendance specifically is the lowest, consider working with small groups and parents; and does specific discipline target Black students – is it being tracked/addressed and is training occurring. What we are doing: taking steps to change racial inequity perceived and real in educating minority students; implementing a 3-5 year plan to hire minorities; the district has an active Equity Committee; the district promotes student leadership, specifically through BSU; the district and Equity Committee create and implement action plans and action steps. What we are not doing: no items listed here, but opened floor for discussion. Task Force Member Johnson recommended requiring the teaching staff to take (more) classes about culture, and what other cultures consider acceptable (for example, regarding attendance) and digging deeper into why students aren't coming to school; he also spoke to creating a welcoming culture for students of color. Task Force Member Heston asked if the student surveys asked not only what problems they see but what strengths; Task Force Member Pattee responded yes, most questions are rephrased to elicit responses about problems and strengths. Task Force Member Johnson stated that current students, who have been in the culture for most/all their lives, may not view certain things as issues or problems until they venture out into the wider world; he questioned how to address this while students are still in the school system; change the culture. Task Force Member Pattee responded that they address "micro-aggressions" and the district is currently working to identify and change; he stated this subject is raised by survey results of past graduates.

Task Force Member Pattee referenced the worksheet for recommendations, broken into District and City categories. District recommendations include: access gap versus achievement gap, ensuring equal access and not just relying on early achievement levels – creating pathways for students utilizing the District Equity Committee and SMARTIE goals; assess, evaluate, create action steps and then provide training for staff regarding Black discipline levels; assess, evaluate, creation action steps and then provide training regarding Black attendance rates, with a future goal to increase attendance by X% in the next X year(s) with additional data; continue to focus and build opportunities to increase minority hiring for all positions within the district, representation of different backgrounds. City recommendations include: collaboration between Cedar Falls Community School District and the City to highlight and celebrate different cultures and how they add value to our City, i.e. celebration versus assimilation, sometimes the focus has been more on assimilation as opposed to celebration; create pathways and collaborative equity discussions between business and the University of Northern Iowa (UNI), Waterloo schools and Equity Committee, community-wide equity committee with representatives from each entity to share, learn, and network.

Task Force Member Graves stated that Black graduation rates for Cedar Falls are higher than state rates; they are graduating, but it is unknown what tools they have to succeed, as they aren't in accelerated classes and discipline rates are higher. Task Force Member Smith-Nalls stated that attendance can skew discipline data, for example in the Waterloo schools, 3 attendance referrals create a discipline referral; she stated that one student with multiple discipline referrals can also skew discipline and attendance and data. Task Force Member Johnson stated that students with multiple discipline referrals exist in all races, and would skew all data. He expressed concern that students of color aren't being pushed into accelerated classes, not assessed for potential/talent starting as early as Kindergarten; he referenced his childhood and a teacher who made a difference for him and saw potential; he stated it just takes one person to see a student's potential regardless of race/ethnicity, etc. He stated changing the dynamic and the culture could lead to students wanting to come to school; when you look at students and see every student has a gift, and speak to them each day and show they're valued; he stated it needs to start at the top and be required. Task Force Member Lee agreed and stated he sees it implemented through his children's experiences, and it's because of people like Task Force Member Johnson

who've been saying it for years; it is not yet consistent, but it is there. Task Force Member Johnson stated those individuals should be held up by the district as examples. Task Force Member Heston stated this needs to be considered prior to Kindergarten; the impact of early childhood (birth through age 5) experiences is well documented; [students are] losing the most critical years by [a system] leaving families to make shift with childcare. There is access to early head start, to some extent, but all kids need to have access to high quality early childhood [education] from birth; she stated it should be a community, not government, responsibility. She stated the rate of return is huge to invest in very young children; the earlier, the more intensive, the better; this approach spends less money, has less discipline issues, and has higher graduation rates; she stated working parents need help. Task Force Member Lee stated the schools offer the state-wide, voluntary preschool option, but it only works with families that can support the school's schedule. Task Force Member Heston responded that school schedules aren't friendly to families with parents/caregivers who work full-time; she encouraged the subcommittee to consider a recommendation about the importance of early childhood education; she stated the current system is losing time and potential that has to be made up later with what could be preventable interventions and discipline. Task Force Member Sesterhenn questioned the judgment that success equals advanced placement classes; are there other paths; is there supporting data. Task Force Member Smith-Nalls encouraged options like dual-enrollment and CAPS enrollment; Task Force Member Lee stated a trend towards more students not choosing a four-year degree but options such as technical or skilled trade programs and degrees; this path should be celebrated as a tool of success. Task Force Member Johnson stated that students going into a four-year degree path or a skilled trade path need the same tools for success and the same access to opportunities so they can make the best decision. Task Force Member Pattee stated a challenge is that everyone had an educational experience and sees through their own lens; there are fixed and rigid components, but things are more flexible now than 30 years ago. Task Force Member Heston stated that schools are expected to "fix" things as opposed to community working to accommodate the realities of families today. Task Force Member Smith-Nalls recommended family support workers in Cedar Falls schools; they know the families and assess needs and can check in with the family and outside agencies as necessary. She stated her support of dual enrollment; it offers a different option to advanced placement classes and also can save students money in the future. She stated sometimes the issues are so big, it seems it must be systemically addressed when sometimes it only takes two people to get in and really make a difference. Task Force Member Frost stated support of family support workers in the school; he stated attendance and performance of African American students is directly tied to bigger things going on in the home/with families and it trickles down. Task Force Member Graves stated we need to give young people credit – when they know you care about them, regardless of race, they embrace that; instilling in them that they can achieve, and be great, then color isn't a factor but teachers need to show that. Task Force Member Pattee provided a quote: "Kids don't care what you know until they know you care." Chair Darrah asked Task Force Member Pattee about The Leader in Me Program and if it had benefit on data; Task Force Member Pattee answered there's no direct correlation; one of the main statistics for success is someone in the building that cares about the student, and involvement. Task Force Member Smith-Nalls stated having, teaching, and modeling clear expectations for classrooms and students is very important and will limit discipline referrals later; expectations in different homes are different; culturally, even time is relative. Task Force Member Lee stated that as students age, the expectations can include more explanation why they exist, and students can help create expectations so they're more invested. He commented on the wording of the second bullet point under "What we know"; Task Force Member Pattee stated they will look deeper into where it was sourced and consider as a subcommittee. Task Force Member Johnson stated the subcommittee only evaluated the data presented; it is looking at getting additional data about post-secondary and technical schooling. Task Force Member Sesterhenn asked if the subcommittee's district recommendations were already part of the district Equity Committee's plan or the school's plan; she stated the City recommendations are broader than just education, and may speak more to community education. Task Force member Pattee responded most of the district recommendations are being worked on; one that is a newer recommendation/focus is attendance, especially with regard to effect on discipline. Facilitator Viniard-Weideman stated her understanding of something Task Force Member Pattee stated during a subcommittee work session: where and how will this Task Force's and Education Subcommittee's work feed into the district's Equity Committee not as a directive but as information presentation; Task Force Member Pattee stated he doesn't want the district's Equity Committee to feel this Task Force is usurping it, but rather be a support and potential source. Vice Chair Dunn stated the community schools should want to work together

(Cedar Falls, Waterloo, UNI, etc.). Task Force Member Frost stated offering students further ways to engage with school can affect attendance positively (I.E. sports, music, clubs, etc.) with peer expectation to attend; Task Force Member Johnson questioned where and what students participate in, is there data available. Task Force Member Lee commented that sometimes optional classes can clash with required class scheduling or advanced class scheduling, and the optional class may be an attendance motivator. Task Force Member Heston stated there is a lot of data stating when kids feel connected to extracurricular activities, they come to school; a problem with larger schools, there are so many who wish to participate but there are limited spots; creating enough interesting, compelling extracurricular activities would be a logical next step; it is important to feel connection not just to teachers but also peers. Task Force Member Frost stated the opportunity to participate might exist but may not hold interest, especially culturally; it would be a benefit to build cultural reciprocity between the students/families and the school.

6-7. Consideration of Action Items and Next Steps

Facilitator Viniard-Wiedeman provided a tentative schedule for the next Task Force meetings with potential agenda items including the Public Safety presentation and Task Force work session, preliminary recommendations, a rough draft of the report, and how the Task Force wants to present to Council; she proposed two additional meeting dates and times. Task Force Member Sesterhenn stated if the Task Force wishes to do a Work Session with City Council, that will need to be determined soon so it can be scheduled; Facilitator Viniard-Weideman stated she is meeting with Director Rodenbeck about this possibility and others to present to the Task Force; Chair Darrah questioned the Task Force consider what it wants to get out of a Work Session with Council. Facilitator Viniard-Weideman asked for consensus on adding two additional meetings; she received consensus; meetings on September 29th and October 6th will be added to the Task Force's meeting schedule. She asked for comments about the proposed rough draft provided to members; members responded positively; she asked for consensus to approve the rough draft to the Task Force; she received consensus; a small number of members will work on parts of the report instead of writing it collectively and will bring it to the large group for response; she requested volunteers. Facilitator Viniard-Weideman requested consensus on path forward; she received consensus. Facilitator Viniard-Weideman stated that if members have questions or thoughts to capture between now and the next meeting to direct them to Director Rodenbeck or herself.

8. Next Meeting Date

The Task Force's next meeting is September 8th, 2021 at 4:00 PM.

9. Adjournment:

Chair Darrah accepted a motion to adjourn. Vice Chair Dunn moved; Task Force Member Lee seconded. Motion carried unanimously. Meeting adjourned at 5:28 PM.

Respectfully submitted,
Katie Terhune, Administrative Assistant