

Diversity Equity Inclusion & Justice (DEIJ)
Independent Schools Administrator Challenges and Solutions
Matthew Hayutin with Anndretta Lyle Wilson

MH:

I want to go back to some of the challenges where we left off in our initial chat here around diversity. And what those challenges are now for school administrators. We've talked a little bit about the community at large. We've talked about what students face. I wanted to just turn for a moment to administrators and how are they dealing with struggles for and with diversity now and historically. What are they facing?

AW:

Sometimes administrators are frustrated because they have been implementing social solutions for what they perceive as social difficulties and those do not always work. They did what they thought they were supposed to do. Well, often what happens and what manifests in our social spaces are not necessarily caused by social interaction alone.

In the case of our schools, high schools in particular, we often ignore the single most important reflection of diversity, equity and inclusion, and that is: curriculum.

Nothing speaks more to the priority of that educational institution than the courses required for graduation. If required courses do not include significant attention to racial disparities, to ethnic-based oppression in this country when talking about US history, or the global economic significance of racial enslavement in terms of world history, then that is a clear message to students of all backgrounds that such topics are not really important. The histories don't need to be valued. The contexts are negligible.

I've read over and over so many stories of students who are very hurt when a person uses the N word. Well, how can we possibly expect an adolescent to understand the depth of harm done when they really had no knowledge, teaching, instruction around racialized chattel slavery in this country or around the world? That is a huge deficit in most curriculums that I've seen. But then with that deficit, can we really be surprised if our social programming around diversity doesn't stop all the tension that we're seeing across campuses?

MH:

Another pitfall that can happen with a really well-intentioned educator or a peer, or just a conversation that happens, maybe in a yard with friends: Someone might turn to someone who they might misperceive automatically as an expert, simply because of their sexual orientation or their gender or something about their parents that one might misconstrue to mean that that person wants to be the expert or spokesperson for everyone else. The resident voice. Which might come from a good place. I think a lot of people have been sometimes put in that position even tacitly without an educator or administrator even understanding that's happening. Now I

wonder if you can talk about that for a moment, if you can think about how that might happen in a classroom or in a school culture, or that maybe something happened to you, an event or anything like that. That would be helpful for people to hear about.

AW:

That is related to the fatigue that some students are feeling--students of color, students who identify as LGBT, students with different abilities--because they are forced to be, in a lot of instances, educators. When that's really not their job. It is not their job to educate their peers around diversity and identity. A lot of them have been doing it. A lot of them have been doing a really good job. But that labor takes energy and it takes a type of resilience that really should be saved for academic work and applying to colleges and studying for exams. A lot of high schools are tacitly asking students of color and students with various sexual and gender identities to do that leg work. And it's not fair. We need to hire professionals: instructors, experts, community partners. But let's not put that labor on our students.

Of course, administrators might not explicitly ask students to do this work, but when DEI is not built into the fabric of the curriculum, that's exactly what we're asking our students to do. We're asking them to fill in the deficit for us. And that is a part of why there's so much frustration among students right now; because they've been doing the work of instructing, and they should really just be learning.

MH:

Excellent. Wow. Yeah, I think there is so much good work that has to happen. And you're right, it would be very alluring, or tempting rather maybe, for a school to create a DEI department. And that's such a critical step, to start to look at their canon of literature and their larger curriculum, and to see how many ways they can attack it from an interdisciplinary perspective and look at how to make it a more inviting and inclusive space. But it's another matter to really evolve something like this and to not rest on one's laurels, and know that it's constantly evolving and your work's never really done, right? That's why it's important. That's why it's deep and good work.

If we think about success and what that would even look like within the DEIJ space, you know, what would that mean and how can we sort of celebrate victories about where we are? As well as, I think, how do we get more of these victories in the future? That's a really loaded question. I know there's no simple answer. But I'm curious what your take is on that because success can mean so many things. Just as a word like diversity can. Where are we looking for victories?

AW:

Some of the successes that I'm seeing begin with the fact that so many schools have already done a great job of hiring staff that focus on diversity, equity, inclusion and justice. That's a huge, huge commitment and a lot of schools have made that. And that is a big success. It's a big win. I would say to continue in that direction. You want to make sure that there's continuing

education. A lot of diversity training out there is not specific to school environments, not specific to student environments. A lot of it has more to do with businesses, corporations, adults to adults, and communities of adults. We want to make sure that the training and continuing education considers student communities.

MH:

I think that's really important to think about, when we think about other educators now or administrators who have been brought in to do such vital work in the DEI space at their schools. I imagine too that there may be another pitfall. I don't even mean so much in the hiring space. But the idea that because someone's in DEI or DEIJ, then we are done. Or because that person has that title, they're ready and equipped pedagogically to unpack everything that needs to happen. And I think that that's worth stating for a minute. Because I'm not suggesting that any of the folks in the space aren't doing vital and beautiful work at all. What I'm saying though is that it deserves respect, like any other aspect of academia, like any other profession does. I, for example, feel really comfortable teaching writing and literature. That's one of my favorite things to do. But that doesn't mean I think I would be the best professor, say, for Calculus. So I think it's interesting to think about your work like any other aspect of academia; you need to come prepared with the right experience and credentials to really be effective.

AW:

Successes moving forward mean incorporating parents, alumni, and neighbors to the school into community learning activities. This is not something that we want to compartmentalize. We want it to be a continuum of learning so that we all demonstrate we have a stake in it, and it's important to all of us.

It would be great to see more schools--the facilitators who have great reputations are often leaders in their communities and connected to Alumni leaders who graduated and are proud to be affiliated with that school--tap into those resources to make this an ongoing conversation. Particularly reaching out to alumni in affinity groups or identity groups that might be interested in supporting current students. Community learning is also one way that schools can alleviate a little of the burden of the educational center for all of this work. We should share the responsibility as neighbors, as civic leaders, as parents, as extended members of the family and other members of the community. We should share this work and we should all learn together, and high schools that assert themselves as leaders in the space have huge opportunities to bring communities and families together. To expand the base of what we're doing so that it's not just a DEI priority in high school curriculum, but something that can spread you out families and communities as a whole.

MH:

When we think also--you alluded to the idea of community when it comes to DEI, not just on campus or in the ether, but the larger community of parents, Grandparents, special friends, neighborhood. Let's go a little wider for a minute, and then I'm sure we'll get specific again. You

know, what could the role be for parents, for example, and that part of the community, that thread.

What could their role be in accomplishing some goals for inclusion? How can we get folks like that more involved, rather than think of it as, "Hey you're at school, and you teachers and masters, you go handle that and deal with that for us." It's easy to sort of think that you can separate yourself from that. But if this is really a systemic challenge, it's global also. What can parents do--or other parts of the Community?

AW:

Parents are the primary advocates for their children and for their students. I would say that a few of the things that parents can do are: 1) hold schools accountable for a curriculum that prepares your students to be the best possible leader they can be in the future. We're already seeing corporations shift in how they approach hiring; corporations are now looking for new hires to have some level of cultural competence. They're now understanding that when individuals don't have some level of cultural competence that those employees might end up being liabilities for their company.

And so in order to make sure that your student, your high schooler is prepared to be not only an employee of one of those companies, but a leader of a company or nonprofit or some other institution, make sure that they have all the tools they need and ask their school about the ways that it's prioritizing diversity in its curriculum. I would say to parents to be ready to learn more about diversity and inclusion alongside your students so that they don't feel isolated in this learning process, and when they're developing cultural competency allow them to teach you what they've learned. And also join in with them and practice becoming better advocates for people, particularly people who are in our society, the most vulnerable.