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WISCONSIN'S K-12 EDUCATION CONNECTION

Committing to a More Equitable Environment

By the Sugar Creek Equity Team

As educators, we firmly believe in the principles and hopes of education, working with students and providing rich experiences where students from all backgrounds not only engage in the material discussed within the four walls of the classroom, but also engage within society and the world around them. There are still vast areas of concern within public educational systems, specifically the inequities across multiple groups of students.

The Sugar Creek Equity Team is a new enterprise this year made up of individuals representing multiple areas of our school (administrator, student services, teachers, educational support, and parents). We have come together to attempt to further understand the factors that influence the educational experiences of our students and their families, and

begin to look at implementing new and more inclusive educational practices.

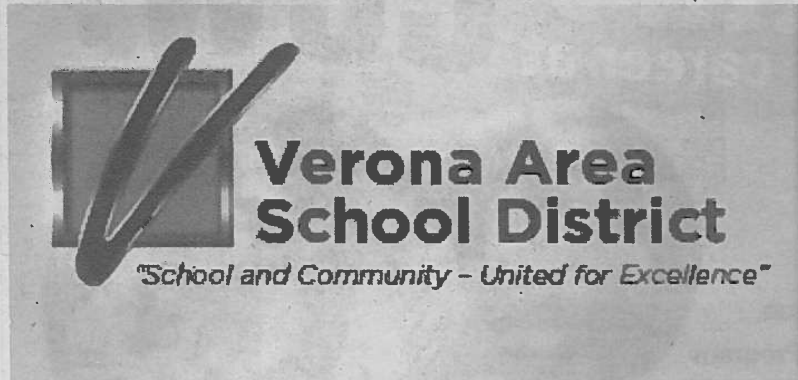
One aspect of this work has been around the professional development of our equity teams, and has consisted of attending Beyond Diversity Trainings based on Glenn Singleton's work on Courageous Conversations. This opportunity has provided a backdrop for a more critical understanding of how race, socioeconomic status and privilege permeate the day-to-day interactions, culture of our schools, and the educational initiatives implemented in our schools.

The Equity Team at Sugar Creek Elementary has focused on applying these same concepts to our local school context; exploring how we can provide a more welcoming environment for students, staff and families. We are a school with 510 students, 40% Free

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and Reduced Lunch, 38% minority; we house an early-exit bilingual program and have 150 native Spanish speakers, and have students from both urban and suburban neighborhoods. Our efforts are in assessing the ways in which we service all of our students and families, critically looking at those disproportionately affected by current policies and practices. Our goal is to build a self-reflective environment where honest, challenging conversations take place around how to make our school environment a more racially conscious and socially just environment.

In recognizing the ways in which some groups are privileged over others, we realize

that in order to commit to a more equitable environment we need to incorporate voices that are traditionally absent. One way in which we have begun to address this is by recognizing the importance of bringing the school into the community. Our monthly meetings have been scheduled for different times during the week. We have alternated between meeting at our school and the local Boys & Girls Club that services our minority student population. In this way, we seek to maximize opportunities for which parents from multiple groups can engage. This builds an awareness of the social and cultural environments of our diverse group of students

and families and the strengths that all bring to our community.

Lastly, we are seeking a more holistic perspective on the climate and culture of our school and how staff, students, and families feel within our school community. We are currently working on researching multiple ways of engaging the voices of English-Language learners, students in special education, students of color, and students from low-income backgrounds and their parents. Factors such as language, culture, access to technology and transportation, often limit meaningful feedback schools receive from these populations about school policies and practices and ultimately limit the level of involvement of these groups in school activities. One example of the participation of all groups in school events, is our yearly Imagination Fair, where students create science projects exploring multiple phenomena and share with all students, staff and families. By looking at data with regard to participation, we have realized that participation in the Imagination Fair does not reflect our racially diverse population, where one out of seventy students was a student of color. We have begun to analyze the ways in which language, access to resources, and the lack of culturally relevant methods of engagement has limited participation of students and fam-

ilies from marginalized groups. In upcoming years we hope to find ways to make this fair accessible to all populations. By integrating this opportunity into the science curriculum, providing opportunities in the classroom where all students can participate, working across grade-levels with buddy classrooms, and displaying finished projects during the school-day where students can view the work of their peers, we will allow for more student participation. We also hope to develop more effective ways of engaging all groups of parents by facilitating events and activities that help make the Imagination Fair successful for all of our children.

We make the road by walking. This phrase indeed reflects the work of the Sugar Creek Equity Team. We are lucky to have a committed staff and community who are invested in the work they do and are willing to focus on evaluating our current practices. This has created a fertile environment where we can begin to address the complexities of educational success. Our goals are to foster the willingness to implement new practices, and ultimately shift to more critical ways of thinking about educational achievement and meaningful participation of all students.