

## **"The Race for Excellence has no Finish Line . . . The Pursuit of Equity has No End."**

by Ken Bossert Ed.D.

When I began my position as Superintendent of Schools in the Elwood School District in the summer of 2016, I found a great deal of positive initiatives taking place throughout the district. The community had high expectations of the schools and the achievement level of the students reflected the passion for the faculty, staff and parents. There was an outstanding group of educators in place doing fine work in many, many areas.

As this was the case, it stood out to me that despite all of the positive accolades the district had received, the Elwood School District found itself identified by the New York State Education Department as having a disproportionate percentage of African-American males suspended from school and recommended for special education (specifically speech) services. Upon further investigation, it became clear that our faculty/staff did not represent the diversity of the student population. Of equal concern was that those within the faculty representing minority groups did not feel the same level of support, and in some cases respect, that their white counterparts seemed to enjoy. Upon having the opportunity to engage with students, it became clear many of them felt the same way. In short, there were aspects of the culture of Elwood Schools that reflected society (or at least our region) that needed direct and immediate attention. The essential topics of equity, inclusivity and the celebration of diversity would become paramount to all of the work we would do moving forward.

Over the next four years, the district's Equity Team accomplished a great deal. The district is no longer cited by the State for disproportionality. Members of the faculty and staff report feeling supported and "heard" like never before. Students have been provided with multiple forums to celebrate diversity and find avenues to explore not only their own identity but the cultures and traditions of others. The district is an active participant in LICEE, The Long Island Consortium for Excellence and Equity. The district formed its own Cultural Competency Committee (focusing on professional development for teachers and staff). School and classroom libraries have been modified to represent all cultures and diverse groups. The Board of Education adopted a calendar recognizing diverse holidays in an attempt to represent the entire community. Elwood Middle School has been designated as a "No Place for Hate" school by the Anti-defamation League (ADL). The other three schools are well on their way to achieving the same ADL designation. Both John Glenn High School (2018 Blue Ribbon School of Excellence) and Elwood Middle School have clubs to represent the LGBTQ community (GSA). Every school participates in PBIS (Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support) and many forms of restorative justice programs have been established and utilized when students make poor choices.

A common expression we use in Elwood is: *"The Race for Excellence has No Finish Line."* While we feel our students enjoy many exceptional opportunities, and great success – there is always room for improvement. During the summer of 2020, we also learned that *"The Pursuit of Equity has No End"*.

The summer of 2020 will be remembered as "the summer that wasn't". Over one hundred members of the administration, faculty, staff, parents, students and community met frequently through the summer to "reinvent" the Elwood School District in order to safely reopen during a global pandemic. While this was a labor of love, it was all encompassing. Events as important as our High School Commencement

exercises and the like simply needed to take a backburner so that a full focus could be placed on reopening our school buildings.

On July 31<sup>st</sup>, a plan was submitted to the New York State Education Department to do just that. It was presented to the community in a 3 ½ hour virtual forum on August 3<sup>rd</sup>. When I awoke on August 4<sup>th</sup> preparing to hear positive feedback about the reopening plan, I was instead met with a flurry of overnight email expressing outrage over a hate-filled social media post that had circulated quickly overnight. It became apparent that the High School Principal and her two assistants had also received a flood of email as well from students, parents, and outraged members of both our community and surrounding communities. The “power” of social media was on full display as a singular post from a student at John Glenn High School was viewed by individuals from across the Nation.

Following the killing of George Floyd, a national focus on the Black Lives Matter movement took place. The issue of racial equality was at the forefront of public consciousness even amidst the continued threat of COVID-19. Shortly after the Floyd video surfaced, seven students from JGHS participated in what is best described as a hate-filled text message “group chat”. Within these texts, vile language was used to describe members of the black community. Horrific comments were made targeting Jewish people and member of the LGBTQ community. The comments were racist, anti-Semitic, homophobic, and xenophobic. A seventh student, who observed the chat, screen captured the “conversation” and posted it to his social media account denouncing the contents. The post “went viral”.

The next several days were spent responding to the outcry the text created. The high school administration and I answered countless emails, calls and personal visits to our offices. We authored two letters denouncing this hate speech to the community (archived on the Elwood School District website: [http://www.elwood.k12.ny.us/NewsAssets/121224/Social\\_Media\\_post\\_8-4-2020.pdf](http://www.elwood.k12.ny.us/NewsAssets/121224/Social_Media_post_8-4-2020.pdf) and [http://www.elwood.k12.ny.us/NewsAssets/121328/Social\\_Media\\_Incident\\_Official\\_Letter\\_8\\_20201.pdf](http://www.elwood.k12.ny.us/NewsAssets/121328/Social_Media_Incident_Official_Letter_8_20201.pdf)

Concerns from students and parents continued despite the strong stance taken by administration within the letters posted. Many residents demanded information about “consequences” for the boys involved (the posting included their full names). Due to student confidentiality laws, the sanctions imposed, of course could not be shared. The administration was informed, from the parents of those directly involved, of threats of violence against the boys who engaged in the text thread. The boys received targeted threats, anonymous threats, individuals posting their home addresses, etc. The parents of these students shared that they were frightened for their safety.

We did everything we felt was right in response to this horrific act. Some parents felt we did not do enough. Some perceived the district’s actions as “boys will be boys”, when in fact, the consequences they received were swift, severe, and included restorative justice practices to make certain this became an opportunity for learning – the intended focus of all of our decisions. Despite our best efforts, some community members contacted local media; CBS 2, News12 and Newsday. Each ran a story that painted the picture of a “failing school” and racist boys.

What did we learn? Our equity work will never be done. As much as we think we have done, we can do more. This is not an Elwood School District issue. This is a societal issue. It indeed does take a village to

raise a child. The “solution” to systemic racism needs to be education. We must all be part of the solution. The efforts of the Huntington Anti-bias task force are greatly appreciated.