Report on Bias Incidents: Action Steps

Around the world there are daily occurrences of bias – on a spectrum that includes outright violence to systematic discrimination, to acts of unkindness meant to humiliate or hurt a person or group.

The shooting of Latinx families shopping at a Walmart in El Paso, the murder of Black congregants in church, the killing of Jews in their temple, violent incidents around the world ... but this is not the time for a list of the capacity of humans to do harm to others.

But in order for us to listen, as Lincoln said, to our better angels, we do need to recognize that side of humanity. And to know we can do better.

Across Connecticut there have been a series of incidents in schools that can be characterized as rooted in bias – the painting of swastikas in schools, the use of blackface – there are others. It’s not just in Shelton. Guilford, Wilton, and Amity – even UConn, among others – have experienced situations like this. But here we are, gathered in this public setting where it is appropriate to explain what we can do.

These are small steps, but they are steps in the right direction. This is the moment we inhabit. Let’s make something positive out of the negativity. We can do that.

This changing of hearts and minds is a process. The move into new realities will take some time if it is to be real. We cannot punish our way to a more just society. While certain acts do require school discipline, and family discipline, and at times the involvement of law enforcement, the work of a school district is to educate.

Listening to each other. True listening is foundational to this work. And to relationships.

Steven Covey wrote: (I paraphrase) Relationships move at the speed of trust. An activist I heard interviewed added – social change moves at the speed of relationships.

There is a time to raise our voices. There is a time to listen, and to build the trust that can lead to meaningful change. It will not be easy, or simple. But it is essential.
Today we met with Cultural Diversity Trainer Michele Stewart-Copes about planning for training of student leaders and staff.

Some of Action Plans include:

**For students:** The creation of a group of Multicultural Ambassadors at SHS. This diverse group will be trained by a Diversity Expert on how to work with younger students (in an age-appropriate way) on cultural diversity and social justice; the Intermediate school will have a similar group. This will result in older children having conversations with younger kids in a way that will open minds, and not make anyone defensive.

I want to address a misconception that a Drill Team initiative at SHS is a part of Diversity Training. It is not! Instead, it is in response to a specific request from students.

There are several other things underway for students, which will be reported on in future updates.

**For staff:** there will be follow-up training for teachers and staff on the complexity of serving a diverse group of students; part of that includes learning how to talk about these difficult situations if they occur, and learning how to guide students in the right direction when issues arise in the classroom, on the playground, or on the bus. SEA President Deb Keller has been helpful in working with the CEA to provide resources — the state union realizes that teachers will benefit from adding tools to their tool box.

In addition, HR Director Carole Pannozzo is working with the SDE on state initiatives to increase efforts to hire certified people of color to open positions.

Last year we started the Anti-bias Committee of teachers and administrators in the wake of a blackface incident that was hurtful and a swastika incident here in Shelton. Part of that work will lead to improved school climate and policy recommendations. (I am working with a group of state superintendents on policy recommendations relating to bias incidents.)

**For families:** We are organizing a Town Hall style/workshop for families – hopefully sometime in November co-facilitated by the ADL and a representative of the NAACP.
In addition, we have formed a vibrant Intergenerational Diversity Group of parents and students. They have good ideas! And we talk, and we listen to each other.

This year we plan to have another uplifting Shelton Showcase with a theme of diversity where our students will share the music, art, food, and more, of our multicultural school district and community.

My job as the Superintendent of Shelton Public Schools, our job as educators, is to prepare our students to have the necessary tools to survive and thrive in their future lives as adults. That includes technical skills; it also means cultivating the social emotional disposition to interact with and collaborate with others. It means treating people with respect.

Let’s be our better selves.