



**INITIAL REPORT**  
**Systemic Equity Assessment:**  
**A Picture of Equity**  
**Challenges and Opportunities in**  
**Waterford Public School District**

**PRESENTED TO:**  
**Scott Lindberg**  
**Superintendent of Schools**  
**Waterford Public Schools**

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## INTRODUCTION: A FOCUS ON DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION

The conversation about equity in public schools has been around as long as the institution of school itself. Since the *Brown v. Board* decision about the desegregation of schools in 1954, public school systems across the nation have been grappling with the issue around the diverse array of students attending public schools (diversity), how to ensure their success and remove the structural barriers that often impede that success (equity), and how to promote a sense of belonging for every student that crosses schools' thresholds (inclusion). After the public murder of George Floyd in the spring of 2020, the nation saw a reckoning around the conversation around race. Private companies, municipalities, and school districts took stances to root out racist and inequitable practices in their organizations. In fact, many school districts either began or enhanced their efforts in promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion in their districts. Add to all of this, the politicization of race, equity, and concepts like critical race theory, and as a public school institution, we suddenly have a recipe for confusion, misinformation, and fear.

In the middle of all of this, the Waterford Public School district has stood strong and committed to moving toward ensuring that each child in the school district has an environment free of bias and inequities. The Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee decided to continue implementing the goals of the strategic plan, namely, "Complete the initial training for our DEI journey" (Waterford Strategic Plan Summary Document, p. 12). The important part of this strategic plan and movement toward ensuring equity for Waterford students and staff is that the process had broad support. Board members, parents, school and district leadership, instructional support staff, and community members were all involved in the strategic planning process and setting the strategic planning goals and articulating the district's core values.

Thus, the Waterford Public Schools is committed to providing a world-class education to every student and mobilizing resources in the face of any barrier that challenges this commitment. The mission of Waterford Public schools is: ***We provide exemplary educational experiences for each student to thrive.*** Similarly, the vision of Waterford Public Schools is: ***Inspired, Educated, and Empowered to Thrive.*** The Waterford Public Schools is similar to many school districts across the nation in that it recognizes that an important component of providing an exemplary education where every student can thrive involves addressing issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion, one of the district's core values listed in the strategic plan.

Although it is evident that Waterford Public Schools has a long history of providing educators with high quality professional development and support on instructional matters, educators in Waterford have not had the type of ongoing and sustainable training or support on appropriately weaving socially and culturally responsive pedagogy and discipline practices into the fabric of schools and classrooms. Hence, when the topics of poverty, race, gender identity, and sexual orientation arise, they are not only difficult to traverse or poorly traversed, but they are often left untouched or ignored. The result is that students are left feeling that their identities and experiences are devalued at school. Unfortunately, attempts by school officials, students, parents, or staff to discuss and engage in meaningful work in these areas have evoked feelings of anxiety, apprehension, and disdain.

The struggle to address issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion is a struggle that not only school districts are grappling with, but whole communities, private organizations, and local and national governmental agencies are also reckoning with what diversity, equity, and inclusion actually means. Many educators tend to ignore the differences in the students and families they serve and resolve to treat all people “the same” or “not see color or difference.” These types of sentiments, while noble, are antithetical to valuing people as individuals and the pride that comes along with identity, race, and cultural and religious beliefs. The main problem as it stands is that many times students' identities, their race, and other social and cultural factors, can be predictors of how successful students will be in school.

Schools' attempts at fairness and equality within school walls are rarely noticed among student, family and community groups that perceive they have been historically and traditionally marginalized because that is not their experience on a day-to-day basis. In many ways this dilemma frames the reason that Waterford Public Schools initiated a partnership with The Equity Collaborative: to find and elevate the voices and stories of those whose experiences are not widely known or accepted and make recommendations for a path forward. Furthermore, in the 2021 Waterford School District Strategic Plan, Waterford schools highlight promoting and ensuring diversity, equity, and inclusion as one of its top priorities and core values.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: PRELIMINARY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the fall of 2021, as part of a larger move toward ensuring equity, Waterford Public School's DEI Committee engaged in conversation with The Equity Collaborative to gather data and perspectives from students, parents, and educators around issues of racial equity, to further understanding the student and family experiences based on their social, cultural, and racial factors. Furthermore, the DEI Committee and The Equity Collaborative outlined a series of engagements by which educators, the educational leaders, the board of education, and the superintendent will participate in learning about how the district can improve its equity initiatives.

In October of 2021, The Equity Collaborative staff conducted a series of focus group sessions and interviews at elementary, middle, and high schools across the district (the process for these is detailed later in this report). The focus group participants provided descriptions of their experiences in classrooms, within the school as a whole, and their interactions with school leadership. They expressed their frustrations on how some acts of intimidation (racially motivated, homophobic speech, and slurs denigrating students with special needs) have been handled, provided hopeful recommendations for improvements, and declared their commitment to fostering productive partnership with the district. Parents and community members were also given the opportunity to participate in both in-person meetings and to submit their thoughts on a survey.

When the data was analyzed, the following themes emerged and they were informed by insights shared by focus group participants and staff and community members who completed the survey. Additionally, primary recommendations were identified to further support Waterford leadership in addressing pervasive inequities district-wide.

### Primary Emergent Themes

1. Despite efforts from the district, school staff, specifically principals and teachers, indicate a low level of racial consciousness and racial literacy. People are unclear and fearful on how to participate in conversations about race, and they specifically name lack of confidence with how to respond to racially charged incidents.
2. Students highlight a culture of racial tension within the district, including fractured relationships between students and staff. Staff perceptions of equity and fairness are not reflective of the student experience.
3. English Language Learners, Black/African-American, Hispanic, and students who identify as LGBTQIA+ have experienced the sting of racial insults or slurs and other racially motivated and homophobic actions. More specifically, students of color articulate that racist statements and actions are regularly directed toward them from other students and sometimes staff. They overwhelmingly report that teachers, administrators, or other adults rarely address the racism that they face on a daily basis.

4. Economic diversity across the district complicates the discussions about race, leading many people to steer the conversation away from race to focus on poverty. Poverty, in and of itself, is an equity issue that must be addressed, and equity must be ensured for students who come from low-income as well as students who are marginalized because of their racial background.
5. Discipline policies and practices disproportionately negatively impact students of color, particularly Black/African-American students and students who identify as female.
6. Students, and families report that they want more meaningful and regular communication from central leadership about diversity, equity, and inclusion work.
7. Students highlight that they do not have clear academic expectations from the faculty or the school. Furthermore, students report that they do not readily receive help from staff when asked and that they have to rely on peers for academic support.

### **Primary Recommendations**

1. The superintendent and board of education should work together to craft a consistent approach to messaging support for the work of diversity, equity, and inclusion. The district should take immediate action denouncing and condemning hate speech, racial slurs, and other racially motivated acts. Individual schools should also include this message in their ongoing communications with the school community and not only in response to individual incidents.
2. Establish a clear policy with built-in accountability for addressing racially motivated acts of harm, and create proactive leadership responses to address incidents where racial harm is perpetrated.
3. Design additional opportunities for Waterford Public School educators to engage in professional learning about how to increase the performance of students of color and other marginalized students by building more inclusive and responsive learning environments. Further, establish a culturally-responsive framework to inform curricular and instructional efforts across the district.
4. Establish a short and long-range equity action plan that is aligned to the district's strategic plan, and focuses on opportunities and challenges related to diversity, equity, and inclusion that impact the district's goals for student performance and experience.
5. Individual schools and the district should assemble student groups in order to encourage, value, and amplify student voices. Students should be allowed to share their experiences and have those experiences taken into account in professional development planning for teachers, curriculum and instruction planning, and influencing discipline practices and policies.

## INTERVIEW AND FOCUS GROUP STRUCTURES

During October 2021, The Equity Collaborative staff conducted a series of focus group sessions and interviews at 7 schools across the district and accessed data from one community/parent survey and one staff survey. Questions solicited feedback about student achievement and experience as well as district culture related to diversity, equity, inclusion, race, and school. A list of roles and groups that participated in interviews or focus groups sessions is below. All participants were told that their comments would only be shared anonymously and if part of a larger theme.

- Principal & Assistant Principal/Administrative Team Interviews
- Teacher/Staff (credentialed and certified) Focus Groups
- African-American and Hispanic Parents and Parents with students with special needs Focus Groups
- African-American and Hispanic Teacher/Staff Focus Group
- Student Focus Groups (Students of color, English Language Learners, Special Education, LGBTQ)

The Equity Collaborative gathered all of the qualitative data, sorted the comments by themes, and identified data that best illustrates each theme to create this report. Where we share a theme and examples, it is important to recognize that the theme had many more instances in the data than just the examples shared in this report.

The report highlights peoples' experiences across the system. It is meant to serve as a means of listening to multiple constituencies and validating those experiences. Using these qualitative assessment processes is helpful to understand the Waterford community issues and needs. The data gathered expresses motives, opinions, feelings, and relationships, in addition to the small actions, or pieces of community history or context that affect the current situation. We acknowledge the fact that experience is subjective – that it is filtered through the perceptions and world views of the people going through it. It is important to understand those perceptions and world views because they come from the people who are ultimately served by school districts.

## STUDENT PERFORMANCE: QUANTITATIVE ASSESSMENT

The purpose of an equity assessment is to gather the experiences of the people most marginalized by the American educational system. We lift up the voices of students in this process because the students are the ones who ultimately benefit from, or are negatively impacted by pedagogy, discipline policies, and efforts to promote equity.

District data and anecdotal reports show that there are academic performance and opportunity gaps between student groups as well as groups of students who feel disconnected from the school environment. This report provides a quantitative snapshot of student performance as well as a comparison to the analysis of the qualitative data. All of the quantitative data used in the charts below are Waterford Public Schools' data.

For the quantitative analysis for this report, we accessed district data from Mischooldata, Michigan's data hub for school districts. The quantitative data, which is disaggregated by race, gender, ELL, students with special needs, and economically disadvantaged, tells a story that supports the qualitative data that was collected from the focus groups. To fully illustrate the point that academic and performance gaps exist, we used high school data as academic performance culminates at the end of one's school experience.

When using this quantitative data, there are a few disclaimers that we must point out:

- This data shows proficiency and not growth. As student might academically grow at an expected rate in one year's time but still not be proficient in a subject area
- At its core, the SAT is a college entrance exam. Although college readiness is one of the determining factors of school academic performance in the state of Michigan, it may not give the full spectrum of a student's ability
- Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the most accurate data to use would be from the spring of 2019 when students would have experienced a full year of academic instruction

### Economically Disadvantaged

Waterford Public Schools' staff frequently spoke about the number of students living in poverty and the broad economic spectrum of families in the district. Many times, it was either directly said or intimated that the district did not have a problem with race or racism, rather the gaps were seen between students with different economic backgrounds. Indeed, the district does have achievement gaps between students who are economically disadvantaged and those who are not; however, as other data in this report will show, there are other discrepancies in achievement based on a number of individual and intersecting factors (i.e. students who are economically disadvantaged and Black, students who are English Language Learners and economically disadvantaged, etc.). Thus, proficiency and advanced proficiency status is determined by how students perform on the SAT Math and SAT EBRW (Evidence-Based Reading and Writing) exam that all high school students are required to take.

|                            | Non Economically Disadvantaged | Economically Disadvantaged |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Economically Disadvantaged |                                | 56%                        |
| HS Graduation              | 86%                            | 79%                        |
| SAT EBRW Proficient        | 34%                            | 46%                        |
| SAT Math Proficient        | 27%                            | 11%                        |

Staff address the economic differences with sincere care for the impact of students living in poverty and with questions about the cultural gaps between families across the economic divide. Although this data highlights the performance of high school students, staff at all levels are acutely aware of the living conditions of students from the areas of the district where families struggle with poverty. There is a general awareness that living in poverty can have an impact on student learning, but not many academic interventions existed to mitigate the impact of trauma, hunger, and other poverty-associated conditions have on the brain. What is important to note is that although this data shows a difference in academic performance between economically disadvantaged students and non-economically disadvantaged students, students across the district do not have high levels of proficiency in reading, writing, and math whether economically disadvantaged or not.

Staff, students and parents also talk quite openly about the cultural gaps between affluent and poor families. Sometimes this dialogue also acknowledges the differences in race openly, and sometimes racial undertones are used. We often heard disparaging remarks made about students within the district, and students who have come from neighboring districts like nearby Pontiac. When probed about these differences and why they were seen as detrimental rather than celebratory, most respondents had no sense of how to articulate their responses without using deficit language and how to possibly bridge these cultural differences better than what the schools are already doing.

### Students with Special Needs

When Waterford Public Schools' staff are asked about equity issues, they most frequently spoke about the number of students with disabilities and current inclusion practices. It seemed that staff and parents were more comfortable talking about students who needed special education support. This conversation was welcomed since the voices of students with special needs are not often lifted up or added to the conversation about equity.

Thus, to add context to this overall conversation about equity, we accessed achievement data for students with special needs and compared it to general education students. The data on student achievement shows that significant achievement disparities in Waterford Schools are between general education students and students with disabilities.



|                            | Students without Disabilities | Students with Disabilities |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Students with Disabilities |                               | 9%                         |
| HS Graduation              | 86%                           | 65%                        |
| SAT EBRW Proficient        | 45%                           | ≤5%                        |
| SAT Math Proficient        | 21%                           | ≤5%                        |

Even though there are certain state and federal requirements with regard to the supports offered to students with special needs, it is unclear how those supports have translated to increases in student achievement. There are gaps in achievement between students with and without disabilities and students with disabilities tend to be graduating from Waterford not proficient in reading, writing, and mathematics. And while it is not a major focus of this report, there are elements of equity work that could have additional impact on this specific achievement disparity.

An emphasis on understanding how the brain works can help improve academic conditions for all students with learning differences, whether those be cultural or biological. Additionally, equity work helps to shift school culture to increase expectations for all students, and students with disabilities can gain from a belief system that expects all students to perform at high levels.

### English Learners

In continuing the conversations about equity issues, Waterford staff and parents also frequently speak about those who are English Language Learners. While equity in this area is important, the total number of students who took the state test who are ELL was relatively low. The data on student achievement shows that the most significant achievement disparities are in SAT EBRS and SAT Math. The graduation rate for ELL students was not available.

|                      | Non EL | English Learners |
|----------------------|--------|------------------|
| English Learners     |        | N/A              |
| HS Graduation        | 86%    | 73%              |
| SAT EBRW Proficiency | 42%    | ≤10%             |
| SAT Math Proficiency | 19%    | ≤10%             |

## Race

Like many school divisions in the country, Waterford Public Schools has significant racial opportunity gaps and thus achievement disparities. While graduation rates are close, Black/African-American and Hispanic students perform at a significantly lower rate than White students on the SAT Math and SAT EBRW. The row labeled “enrollment” identifies the total number of students enrolled in the 11th grade, disaggregated by race, in Waterford schools and not the number of students who took the test.

|                      | White | Hispanic | Black |
|----------------------|-------|----------|-------|
| Enrollment           | 537   | 111      | 87    |
| HS Graduation        | 86%   | 82%      | 80%   |
| SAT EBRW Proficiency | 47%   | 19%      | 29%   |
| SAT Math Proficiency | 25%   | 6%       | 7%    |

In focus group interviews, Black/African-American students, parents and community members shared that although their students graduated at high rates, that data did not define or explain their experiences in school. As will be explored later in this report, Black/African-American and Hispanic students feel marginalized within the school district and do not feel that they are supported in developing a sense of cultural or academic identity.

There are some discrepancies between the graduation rates and the achievement on standardized assessments. While there is a gap in the graduation rates when disaggregated for race, there are also gaps between graduation rates and performance even within a subgroup. One might expect that graduation rates are congruent with students' mastery of the content. However, the data suggests that high school graduation does not translate fully into mastery of the content. This phenomenon should be a cause for further analysis of the issue.

There are, of course, other marginalized groups of students whose data is not represented on any state or standardized test. As the qualitative data will show, students who identify as LGBTQIA+ and Asian students also experienced cultural and academic marginalization in schools.

## Summary: Student Focus Groups

### **Emergent Themes: Student Focus Groups**

1. Discipline policies and practices have a disproportionately negative impact on students of color, particularly African-American students and students who identified as female.
2. Most English Learners, Black/African-American, and Hispanic students have experienced the sting of racial insults/slurs.
3. Students are not clear about the academic expectations and what it takes to be successful.
4. Students rarely speak with their parents about routine racial incidents experienced at school. When incidents of racism are reported to staff, staff does not intervene.
5. Students indicate a desire for more engaging academic work and different approaches to learning.

The Equity Collaborative staff engaged groups of students at the elementary, middle and high schools that we visited. The groups were mostly, but not exclusively, composed of students of color and students from marginalized groups (Special Ed., LGBTQIA+, etc.). Each group participated in structured dialogue to express their perceptions and experiences of how equity is treated in Waterford.

Students of color shared openly about their experiences with race in Waterford Public Schools. In fact, many students were relieved that others were talking to them and that we cared about what they had to say. The atmosphere in the groups could be described as having an aura of validation and affirmation - the recognition that their experiences, both positive and negative, were indeed real and authentic. Summarized below are vignettes that capture the essence of what students encounter in the racial landscape of Waterford Public Schools.

### **Racial Slurs, Insults, and Hostile Learning Environment**

Although many times people are afraid to talk about race, or they may even deny or ignore racially motivated issues, we live in a world where race matters. Race is a social construct that shapes our identities – how we think of ourselves and how others perceive us. To some degree, we may be able to control how we view ourselves as individuals. It is exponentially more difficult to influence what others project on us because of our race. Focus group students explored the frustrations in their everyday experiences being targets of racist comments and acts of violence from both their peers and teachers. Most disturbing was a growing sense of despair among those interviewed that such racist events, large and small, are ignored and school leaders do not believe their reports of mistreatment. *“Nothing happens”* or *“Teachers ignore it”* were common comments across the district.

Focus group participants highlighted the pervasive use of racial slurs and insults directed at students of color. Many of the focus group members had been on the receiving end of racial insults personally or

have witnessed incidents in school or through social media platforms. Students also shared that those who hurl the insults frequently hide under the cover of humor or mockery, discounting how harshly they affect the targeted student. Students continued to share that White students will deny having said the insult to avoid repercussions. Also, White students say “well if Black students can say the N-word, then why can’t I?” While insults have taken on many forms, it is shocking the extent to which students report the use of the N-word as the prevailing concern and consistently discussed among students in the school environment. Focus group participants were also very specific to say that the vast majority of the racial insults come from White students, both subtly and overtly and teachers and administrators neglect to address it.

*“I didn’t feel safe here at all. In my classes, I would be the only person of color. I was so alone in those classes. So when someone next to me would say the n-word, people think I’m annoying or opinionated but there is nothing done. I don’t want to be here. I don’t want to be walking through these halls.”*

*“I have a specific teacher that keeps saying things that are borderline racist - they keep saying it - and made a comment about Pontiac kids being ‘gangster.’ That person was stereotyping Pontiac and kids from there.”*

*“I’m Hispanic and people call me a border hopper for some reason. They call me illegal but I’m legal. It’s the same friend group that targets me. Some teachers defend me but others can be right next to them and won’t say anything.”*

One group of students engaged in a conversation about teachers and how they address racism in their classes. On many occasions, students refer to the teachers as “awkward” when issues of race arise.

**Student #1** - *“I have one teacher who is always talking about racism but she doesn’t care - they don’t address it.”*

**Student #2** - *“No teacher speaks about it. I think that we should speak about it. We have so many people that get called racial slurs. The teachers who are standing around, they don’t say anything.”*

**Student #3** - *“We can be in class and start talking about race - and they all turn around and look at me” (this student is a Black student and the student motions that the whole class turns around and looks at him).*

**Student #4** - *“I have never heard a teacher talk about race or racism - i feel like it’s a touchy subject.”*

**Student #5** - *“The only person who has said anything is my math teacher. He defended me when someone said I’m only smart because I’m Asian.”*

**Student #6** - *“Teachers don’t address racism. Someone can say something right in front of them and they won’t say anything but if I am one minute late to class they will start yelling at me.”*

The student focus group students seemed to understand the complexities surrounding the N-word that is either said by other students, sometimes by teachers (most often when they read the word in a book or text), and the feeling of discomfort that teachers and other staff have in addressing it. In some spaces, the word is used as a term of endearment among students of similar social and cultural backgrounds, and in other spaces, when used by White students and teachers, the word is used to demean and humiliate. Students of color indicated that White students felt that they had the right to use the N-word. Focus group students also acknowledged the historical significance of the term and its problematic nature in whatever space it is used.

English Language Learners, Hispanic students, and students who identify as LGBTQIA+ also experience insults and slurs because of their race, religion, language and culture, or gender identity. Sometimes, students indicated that teachers did not know how to interact with students that identified as LGBTQIA+. And similar to the experience of Black/African-American students, they too cited the use of jokes and humor as cover for the slurs.

What’s clear across groups is that no adults are helping them navigate this difficult terrain.

**Student #1** - *“Haven’t heard people say N-word towards me but they have used other slurs like Asian f\*\*\*\*\* and Asian Thanos.” (This student was unclear what Asian Thanos meant).*

**Student #2** - *“There is a kid who draws Nazi symbols around the school. I know who he is. I told the teacher but I never heard anything else.”*

**Student #3** - *“He drew it in the sand and outside.”*

**Student #4** - *“I feel like the teachers think it’s awkward to intervene.”*

Other students engaged in a similar conversation,

**Student #1** - *“At homecoming, the whole crowd would say the N-word in a song even though it was bleeped out. You can’t vape but you can say the N-word.”*

**Student #2** - *“Teachers don’t know how to address it. The teacher opened the [book] page, circled the N-word in the book, and said ‘oh I’m trying so hard not to laugh.’ I feel like some people got educated during quarantine about slurs and stuff. Some people completely ignored the fact. With all the BLM protests, some ignore.”*

Another student who identified as African American, remarked that they wanted their teachers to affirm their identities at Black/African American students. She documented this exchange with a teacher,

*“One of the kids was asking the teacher if Black Lives Matter, the teacher got really red, she got nervous, she said, ‘Yes I do - I think all lives matter.’ Then she kept staring at me.”*

Based on the accounts of multiple groups of students, there is a low level of racial literacy among teachers. Not only do teachers and other school officials often refuse to talk openly about race, they refuse to address racially charged and racist incidents within the school. The students (at all levels) expressed the desire to continue these types of conversations. They also overwhelmingly expressed the desire to understand how adults will address racial slurs in the future. This lack of action among the adult population left many students dejected and hopeless that anything will be done about it. These feelings undoubtedly have an impact on student achievement.

When talking about hostile learning environments, students at the elementary school level talked more so about how they are treated as students overall rather than specifically about race. The students in these next few quotes were students of color, White students, girls, and boys. Although their comments about how they were treated were not racially motivated, their comments did speak to the feeling of being in an unwelcoming learning environment. This student conversation documented how the teachers yell at them constantly,

**Student #1** - *“The teachers sometimes yell at us even if we just ask them a question.”*

**Student #2** - *“The teachers should respect other kids. one day when I was at parent pick up, one of the teachers yelled at me. It's not just one teacher, it's multiple teachers.”*

**Student #3** - *“Without us, they wouldn't have a job.”*

**Student #4** - *“They can be nicer.”*

**Student #5** - *“I feel like teachers can be a little bit nicer because sometimes kids can have some things going on in their lives. They could have abusive parents and they [teachers] can be just a little bit nicer.”*

Similarly, some middle school students remarked about how teachers constantly yell at them. Again, the quotes from these students and the treatment they endured was not specific to race. The interviewer needed to clarify what the students meant by the word “yell.” The interviewer asked, “When you say ‘yell,’ are people just showing their displeasure or actually raising their voice?”

**Student #1** - *“They are actually yelling and screaming at us.”*

**Student #2** - *“The one thing that I hate most about school is [how they yell at us]. They always have something to say to me. I'll be going to class and Ms. X will be yelling down the hall to go to class.”*

**Students #3** - *“She targets this one group of kids and she’s taking shots after shots. She is on a power trip.”*

**Student #4** - *[Ms. X] will constantly come up to us and target us. She will come up to us and say ‘I hope you’re not doing anything in the bathroom.’ We are just sitting here using the bathroom.”*

One of the core values in the Waterford Strategic Plan is that “We believe in a collaborative school community that values relationships that foster trust and respect.” With students hearing racial slurs and insults everyday in hallways, at recess, at lunch and in the classroom, coupled with their experience and perception of little to no repercussions for those who use such hurtful language, students are forced into a hostile learning environment that is not conducive to academic success. Furthermore, students across the district expressed a desire to have good relationships with their teachers and even if students had at least one adult with whom they had a great relationship, they could document others that made their school environment unpleasant.

### Academic Expectations

Students were just as descriptive about how teachers respond to them in academic settings when they self-advocate for support. Students frequently connect their identities to their academic success. Many students indicated that they had at least one teacher recently who was supportive; however, there were quite a few who indicated that they did not have one caring adult and that they did not feel safe (psychologically) in the school environment.

One of the things that served as a recurring statement is that, although the COVID-19 Pandemic was hard on them in other areas of their lives, their academic lives were even more stressful. A student documented his experience,

*“I just got out of quarantine. I had two mental breakdowns because teachers were doing so poorly at working with Google Meets and Google classroom. Very vague messages. Not starting on time (marking me absent - affects my grades). During quarantine, four of my grades went down to Cs. Teachers failed to put my assignments in the [Google] classroom. I had to contact my counselor and principal. Teachers put no effort in supporting students who are quarantined. [I’d be] logged in, staring at the wall, teachers not responding in the chat, etc.”*

When instruction and educational experiences were positive, however, some students indicated that they had favorite teachers who either affirmed their identities or instructed in ways that met their needs. At one particular school, students were eager to share about the teachers who connected with them,

*I like how the teachers are open about the things they go through too. They’ll share about their life and not sugar coat it. It’s not like “I have everything together.” They try to connect with you but they don’t try too hard. It is more relatable. It feels like you can talk to them about anything.*

Another student said,

*I like how the teachers and everyone here will genuinely notice if you're not okay and will ask if anything is going on. You don't have to tell them everything but they just want you to know that they are here for you - but that alone is enough.*

Another student spoke about how open and accepting all of the teachers and staff were,

*Before I came I didn't hear too many good things but I didn't really listen because I like finding things out for myself. My first impression was my teacher who is so happy-go-lucky and energetic. As I went through the day I realized these people really care about each other, about their students, about everyone.*

Overall, students remarked that they have to “do your homework” or understand how to work independently to be successful. Some students said things like “listen to the teacher” or “get help if you don't understand.” From the student perspective the only two measures of academic success seemed to be completing your work on time and getting good grades. Even for individual assignments, there was no mention of rubrics or scales that helped students understand the standards for being successful.

### **Discipline Practices**

Almost all student participants acknowledged that their school has a discipline policy, but that is often experienced as discriminatory and particularly “unfair” for Black/African-American and Hispanic students. Furthermore, at each of the middle schools and high schools the students felt that the dress code policy was applied unfairly to girls, and even more unfairly applied to Black girls. Students are very tuned in to the tone and phrasing that teachers and administrators use in the disciplinary process. They see and hear about who received which “type” of punishment, who gets suspended and who does not, and for how long.

**Student #1** - *Some people can wear short shorts and they don't say anything. It depends on your body type. [Some people have] larger body type with curves. (Black female student)*

**Student #2** - *It's the body type and skin tone. They tend to approach more people of color.*

**Students #3** - *Girls get more dress-coded than guys.*

**Student #4** - *My cousin wore a bandana (black) and another kid wore it too (student of a different color) and didn't get [dress coded]. Students of color who wear a bandana - it's assumed you're in a gang.*

When we asked questions about whether discipline was fair, much of the conversation was centered around dress code; although, as documented in the section about the racial environment, many students of color felt like discipline was unfairly applied to them when the adults were allowing a culture of racist acts and language to fester. Their thoughts about discipline included this idea of unfair discipline



practices with regard to race and gender.

*They need to stop with the dress code. You can't show your shoulders. Why are they making us change? [They are] wasting our learning time. [They] put tape over your clothes. I never see the boys get dress coded.*

Another student said this,

*All the black kids get dress coded but the white kids can wear whatever they want.*

Some students at other schools remarked that discipline was fair and that they didn't see any discrepancies.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations were informed by the students' experiences that we gathered from the student focus groups. The recommendations were also shaped by conversations with parents, members, and school site personnel. These recommendations should not be viewed as the only solutions needed to address the challenges identified by students. It will also be important to leverage and possibly rethink existing structures, resources, and practices in Waterford Public Schools to move this work forward.

### **Recommendations from Student Focus Groups**

1. School administrators should establish proactive measures that intervene and mitigate the impact of racial incidents experienced by students of color in order to build an inclusive culture that does not tolerate harassment.
2. Provide ongoing and sustained professional learning for the adults so that they recognize their own bias and set goals to challenge racism and bias in all areas of the school environment.
3. Design curriculum and lessons that are culturally responsive and culturally sustaining, particularly for students who are not represented in the curriculum or in texts.
4. Create a clear discipline policy that works to address necessary changes in discipline practices across the district with input from school-based student groups to include student voice.
5. Educate the entire school community through mini-lessons about using identity affirming language for marginalized populations of students (African American, Hispanic, students with special needs, students who identify as LGBTQIA+).

## Summary: Parent & Community Stakeholder Groups

### **Emergent Themes: Parent & Community Stakeholder Focus Groups and Survey Data**

1. Parents want to eliminate racism and racist practices; however, they use different language about how to achieve these things. Some parents ask for the district to enhance their diversity, equity, and inclusion practices while others believe that DEI initiatives are dividing the district and believe that everyone should just be treated “equally.”
2. Conversations about race have been politicized and have taken the focus off of ensuring that the district is safe and welcoming for all students.
3. Racial and economic diversity across the district, county, and nation complicate the discussions about race by steering the conversation away from race to focus on other issues. There is a lack of understanding about how issues surrounding race, poverty, homophobia, and civil rights can be addressed simultaneously.
4. Parents worry about their students and what the conversations about race, or the lack thereof, means for their academic progress.
5. People feel like the district needs to do a better job with communicating openly and transparently.
6. Parents desire partnerships with other parents, students, and schools to improve relationships for the sake of their students.

The Equity Collaborative staff attempted to interview parents from all levels and areas of Waterford. Parents were invited to participate in focus groups to help us better understand what it is like being a parent of a student in the Waterford school district. Due to low attendance at parent evening sessions, we partnered with the school district to develop a survey that was sent out broadly to the parent community.

The data highlights a general feeling of distrust of the district from parents who want intensified equity action and from those who do not want to see this work start or continue. After talking with parents and pouring through the more than 600 survey responses, it was evident that the respondents understood that the conversation around diversity, equity, and inclusion has been highly politicized. In fact, some respondents referred to DEI work as “critical race theory” or an attempt at embedding Marxism in school curriculum and instructional practices. While sentiments like these might seem far-fetched for some, some residents believe that the motive of DEI work to be the work of the previously mentioned theoretical philosophies.

It may be easy to dismiss sentiments, but as a learning organization, it might be beneficial to address parents' concerns and allow them to understand, interact with, and process through the real purpose of ensuring equity in schools for children. The people that reside within the Waterford School District are proud and many talked about their family histories growing up in the Waterford community, their pride

in the school district as former students, and their belief in the importance of diversity in the school district and their communities.

The excerpts below are from our discussions with parents and other stakeholders as well as the survey data that we collected in October 2021. Although every parent did not have the same personal experiences, they largely and widely agreed about a theme of significant distrust between families and the school district. This report shares several anecdotes from parents to help readers understand the parents' perspective. The focus of this report is to elevate the voices of marginalized individuals throughout Waterford Public Schools.

We started each interview with students, teachers, and parents by asking them to tell us what is important to know about the school district and the community. Parents described the type of pride that they had in their community and in their schools.

*"Overall the district does a fabulous job. I have a student who was in the SXI program. My student feels included and the principal has done a really good job to make sure that all of the children were included. They have done a good job."*

*"Waterford is a perfect example of all different levels of income, abilities, everyone is a family. No one is thinking about anyone's home life."*

*"Both of my kids have reading disorders. All the staff there are great. My son got bullied because my son has a friend who was gay. I went to the administration and they handled it. I told him he would get bullied and he said he didn't care - he would still be friends with him. The kids are really mean to the student who was gay and the administration addressed the issue. The counselor got involved. I love that school."*

The following comment emerged from a mother who identified as White,

*"I think we have a pretty good mix of children but the staff is mostly white females. The children are not properly educated about all people. I don't think there is enough education about people's heritage. The casual conversation can always be there. I think the diversity in staff needs to be there as well. We have two male teachers, one Hispanic teacher, and the rest are all White females. There's nothing wrong with White females but there needs to be more diversity in the staff."*

An African American father launched right into his experiences in the school district. The context behind this parent's quote was that the school was attempting to test his son for special education services, which he believed was due to the fact that he was an active African American boy. The parent also felt as though the school was attempting to test his son for special education services without his consent. The parent stated,

*"I can't speak toward other schools in Waterford - every school sounds phenomenal. But in the spirit of speaking truth to power, there are some inequities that we have at [my child's school]. I don't know if it's just bias. I brought it up at some point or another. My middle son is active - he's a kid's kid. I can understand how that can be a challenge in the classroom. I did take notice of a couple of things that gave rise to me speaking up. My wife was encouraged by a staff member at the school to meet with the social worker. I didn't want to deal with it. I encouraged my wife to have the staff member speak with me. The staff member was against that. Coincidentally, the social worker was African American. I wasn't comfortable with them suggesting my child receive some form of counseling. They told me that if this was any other school in the district, we wouldn't be having this conversation. When she said that I was perturbed but not surprised. I wasn't pleased by hearing it. I made sure that the principal was made aware. She made me feel heard in my concerns and did her part in addressing these biases. I'm not sure if the same is true for the 10/11 children." (The 10/11 children that the parent was referring to were students who were 10 or 11 years old).*

The mother in that family added this,

*"I asked what were the experiences of other schools in the district reaching out to your company for services. I understand the social norms that are constructed for a demographic are not always painted in the best light. I don't want this world to view that African American boys that are hyper are in need of services. The social worker observed my child for several weeks and she told me that my children were perfectly fine for their age."*

When we asked the specific question about what came to mind about DEI in the district, the overwhelming majority of the responses indicated that parents believe that diversity, equity, and inclusion was important and that the district should increase its engagement in such initiatives. The following conversation ensued as an answer to that question,

**Parent #1** - *"We don't see it. I think they do pretty good from a curriculum perspective - STEM, Robotics, etc. But as far as DEI, they aren't focused on that. This district is an interesting demographic of students who go here. All of our children [parents in the room] are minorities or mixed minorities. You wouldn't be here if there wasn't an issue to address."*

**Parent #2** - *"They need to have some programs, activities. They should have funding allocated for it. I'm sure they have money but aren't using it for it."*

**Parent #3** - *"I don't think it exists. I have never seen anything sent home about diversity & inclusion."*

Another parent who identified as Latina shared the following experience.

*"I don't think they talk about it. I did get a letter in Spanish that said that he was going to be in the ESL program. It was all in Spanish. My son speaks more English than he does Spanish. Why*

*are you sending this home? Are you judging just because his name comes up as [a Spanish last name]?”*

Another parent shared the following,

*“Waterford is very diverse and so are the schools. When I hear terms like diversity, equity and inclusion, I believe that to mean that the district does everything it can to make sure that all students are catered to as much as possible, regardless of their background.”*

Another parent said,

*“We have a growing number of students that are people of color but our staff and administration do not seem as diverse. Our school has one teacher that is a person of color, all others are white or white passing. I have heard from colleagues of color that have presented to high school staff say that they were the only ‘one like them’ in attendance. There needs to be more diversity in staffing our school building. Students will feel more supported when they see staff that look like them.”*

A Latina parent stated this about their child’s experience,

*“When Latino students do something there are consequences very quickly, but not applied equally to White students.”*

In some cases, parents talked about the inaction of teachers and school leaders in addressing racial and homophobic slurs against their students. One parent talked about his experience in being from a household with two dads,

*“Our family is different from most. We are an LGBTQ family with two dads and three adopted children. [We have] one African American [child] and two Caucasian [children]. We expect looks and mumbles. Some students have made fun of my son for having 2 dads. Claiming he will probably be gay too.”*

A parent of a transgender student had this to say about her child’s experience,

*“There is still a huge problem with gender norms. If a child wants to change their name a child should be able to be called their name without having to change it legally. I watched my child’s trans friends not be called their name by their peers, teachers, or admin at my daughter’s [school]. I have a child who is trans who has known since the day that he was born.”*

Another parent said,

*“Racism is very present. Students at the school will tell the teachers and they are just not*

*equipped to deal with racial slurs from their classmates. Many times they just don't say anything knowing it will not be taken care of properly."*

We asked two questions to understand the experience of equity and social relations in the community and incidents that help us understand how students and families are treated in the school district. A parent of a special education student responded as such,

*"Oakland County has failed marginalized students. Waterford is not much better. Teachers are very indifferent to any student that doesn't fit the mold. Teachers are very punitive."*

Another parent responded,

*"Waterford and Oakland County certainly have a checkered past when it comes to treating Black people with equal respect and opportunities that white families have enjoyed. I think we have an obligation to make sure that doesn't continue the best we can."*

Another parent said,

*"I think that Waterford, while it is growing in diversity, has not always been welcoming. I think that has shifted but there are still those that do not want this growth and change. I think the school district will be important to helping shift within the next generation as each does appear to get better than the previous."*

This parent responded that the history of equity and social relations in the community was,

*"Not great. [The district needs to be] more accessible to children with special needs, sexual orientation, [different] races, etc. [They] need to create a more diverse and inclusive community and that starts with schools and parents."*

While calls for more attention to diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts abounded from parents, there were some who thought of these efforts as fruitless and meaningless. Responding to the state of diversity, equity, and inclusion in the district, one parent stated,

*"It's fine. I was a white minority in an all Black school. Over thinking ways to address minorities is over-thinking. I just learned in school there was no need to explain to any race any differences they just taught us."*

Another parent stated,

*"Lately I'm not happy, equity is a term I see being used as a politically correct version of segregation. This is a culturally/racially diverse community and I feel the schools reflect that. I don't see the need for equity training."*

Lastly, a parent expressed their frustration with equity for students who identify as LGBTQIA+,

*“All of the LGBTQ things that are put in schools that influence our children in negative ways - an anything goes approach.”*

Some parents even used the survey as a forum to talk about political issues, mask mandates, and other things that frustrated them about Waterford specifically and society at large.

**Recommendations: Parent & Community Stakeholder Groups**

1. As a district, define diversity, equity and inclusion and the accompanying DEI initiatives and include an addendum to the strategic plan outlining what this means for the schools and the broader community.
2. Communicate openly and regularly with parents and stakeholder groups. The district should hold regular and sustaining community forums and programming centered around equity.
3. Establish parent groups that allow parents to connect with others who have similar experiences. This should happen at all school levels in support of stronger partnerships and open communication between parents, students, and school administrators.
4. The DEI Committee should communicate to the entire school community about learning opportunities that provide equity leadership and guidance and feedback concerning the district plans for advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion in its programming (curriculum content, instruction, discipline practices, and district culture).
5. There were many calls for increased mental health support. The district should set up ongoing and sustained mental health support for students and families dealing with the traumatic impact of racism, discrimination, ableism, and homophobia.

## Summary: Educator Focus Groups Interviews & Survey

### **Emergent Themes: Educator Focus Groups Interviews & Survey**

1. School staff, specifically principals and teachers, indicate a low level of racial consciousness and literacy. People are unclear and fearful on how to participate in conversations about race, let alone respond to racially charged incidents.
2. There is a reluctance to talk openly about race and student gender identity; thus, educators resort to talking about equity in terms of special education and poverty.
3. Teachers have some experiences with data, but do not fully understand how and why to analyze data to inform instruction, particularly for marginalized students.
4. Teachers need and want ongoing and sustained professional learning to support DEI initiatives.

The Equity Collaborative staff interviewed educators from across Waterford Public Schools elementary, middle and high schools, including school site administrators, teachers, certified staff, and classified staff. The mission of Waterford Public Schools states “We provide exemplary educational experiences for each student to thrive.” This promise suggests that the school environments are staffed with personnel that make each student feel valued, welcomed, and supported. While staff overwhelmingly believe that they do this for students, student accounts suggest the contrary as described above.

Critical to realizing the district’s mission is to ensure that the district’s staff is responsive to and affirming of all students and their families. Furthermore, in order to live into the mission of the district, staff should be eager to learn, grow, and adjust their practices to meet the varied needs of the student body. Fueled by this mismatch in perception can be highlighted through student accounts when students assert that “no one listens to them.” In fact, in many of the student conversations, they did not want to leave because they felt that they had very few opportunities to have their voices heard. Thus, staff perceptions of the student experiences are colored by their own biases about how students *should* experience school rather than how it is actually experienced.

There were, however, staff members who were equity-minded who understood, supported, and advanced the causes of racial and instructional equity in their classrooms, schools, and across the district. There were a few teachers who were, without being prompted, aware of the discrepancy of opinions about equity in their school. One teacher said,

*“I sometimes feel like we have a different perspective from the kids. We feel like there is some equity and inclusion but our kids don’t necessarily feel that way. It’s not like we don’t have racism and homophobia. We [teachers] are like ‘it’s not like that much,’ but there is some though.”*

To that end, when we asked students questions about which teachers supported equity-based solutions to instructional, discipline, and cultural problems, they frequently named the same teachers.



## Race, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Diversity, equity, and inclusion are concepts that shape current education discourse. These ideas drive education programming throughout the country in areas such as school funding, research, teacher practice, and policymaking. Unpacking the meaning of diversity, equity, and inclusion in Waterford Public Schools revealed a range of viewpoints (similar to that of the parents and community) that were influenced by a number of factors including job responsibility, grade span, and prior professional and personal experiences, and the politicization of race and recent conversations around topics such as critical race theory.

Teachers frequently grounded these equity concepts in the context of special education and poverty. It was common that staff members were uncomfortable speaking openly about race, gender identity, or the discrimination of ELL students.

For instance, when teachers were asked, “what comes to mind when they hear the terms diversity, equity, and inclusion?,” common answers focused on concepts other than those specific to DEI. When people did speak out about inclusion, they framed it from the perspective of special education services. Others used this question as an opportunity to express their concerns about education in general or how the district is run.

*“Academic wise in terms of equity we are trying to do our best but things are playing against us. In my algebra class I have 10 - 9th graders, 2 seniors, 10 - 10th graders, and 2 students who don't speak English at all. The response from central office is 'just differentiate.' I've asked multiple administrators at different levels and the answer is always 'differentiate.' The honors [classes] was gotten rid of. People at central office didn't ask the people who taught the class.”*

*“We are culturally and socio-economically diverse. I think we all do a good job providing academic opportunities for inclusion. Opportunities that we offer are somewhat equitable, although some extra-curriculars rely on parent support that isn't available. I don't see enough support for our strongest students - those in middle school and elementary [who] need more opportunities for gifted students.”*

*“Inclusion for me is when my ASD students are part of the general education classroom. They feel welcomed and part of that classroom community. [My school] does this very well.”*

*“We include and treat all people regardless of background, race, sexual orientation, etc fairly.”*

*“Our special education students perform below the general education students. Many of our special education students are from families of lower socioeconomic status. Low SES has a greater effect on school performance than anything else.”*

*“Politics.”*

People were comfortable using the term “diversity” in place of race. It was most often used in describing the general demographics of the students at school sites. Educators often referred to the rapid pace at which the non-White populations were growing and the anxiety that produces as educators are finding it challenging to adjust pedagogically, programmatically, and linguistically to both student need and parent engagement. In fact, a lot of coded language was used, particularly when referring to students who were from or who lived in nearby Pontiac.

Some staff vocalized that they are not ready or do not feel the need to engage in conversations about race:

*“[I] question if this is politically motivated. To consider all that is going on in daily teaching and decide if this is the right time (new math, new language arts, project based learning, Covid educational loss, turn over of teachers, etc.).”*

*“I don't know what you mean by it [equity]. It seems vague and again I smell politics.”*

*“Equity work is not needed in our district. We need to teach some students and their parents that to get ahead you have to work hard, make sacrifices and choose wisely where you spend your time and money.”*

*“I do not feel that this is the right time to be starting equity work in our district. I do not believe it will have as big of an impact on our district right now as it could if we waited until we were more comfortable with all of our other new responsibilities and commitments. I feel very strongly that our schools are committed to equity and to delivering the very best to all of our students. With all the needs our kids face right now socially and educationally, this seems to be an unnecessary, possibly politically-driven move. Waterford has adopted a new language arts curriculum, we are focusing on social emotional learning, and dealing with covid-related learning loss. I feel like this is not the right time to be bringing this up. Our teachers need professional development on how to better teach what we have been given, we need time for discussion and sharing of ideas and time for digging into data. This seems like another new thing to pile on to an already overwhelmed plate. We are becoming a profession that has no depth of knowledge because we are not focused on one goal, but instead are floundering through multiple, ill-defined targets.”*

Some people in leadership positions seemed to have a working level of racial literacy and literacy about equitable practices when asked questions about these topics.

*“We are not an incredibly welcoming place. We are too inactive. Kids don't get help unless they ask for it. We are not looking to solve the challenges we highlight. I don't have much confidence that people care about the things that I care about. Nobody listens to kids and I feel similarly and I have been in a position of incredible privilege.”*

*“[We should be] committing to listening to what our students are saying about their experience in this district and give them the opportunity to share continually.”*

*“I went into every teacher's classroom and I looked around and asked myself if I were a student, would I feel welcomed? I tried to understand whether or not the teachers liked the kids. I got the sense that some of the teachers were just here - if you fly to Myrtle Beach and stop in Atlanta, you ain't staying there. You are looking to go somewhere else. That is the feeling that I get. I don't know if the teachers are cognizant that the way that their rooms are structured could serve as a barrier. When I walk through this building, you don't see anything that celebrates kids. You see bare halls.”*

*“When we're talking about opportunities for kids in the school, I feel like sometimes our 'one size fits all' – language arts and math classes – can be challenging for some of our students. They have to look at support for kids. Spanish is our predominant area where we offer ESL support. [The] challenge is not just providing services so they can access the curriculum, but also supporting families so they can engage in the curriculum. There is some translation, but as a parent, having the direct conversation with a teacher and only having a limited number of translators [is challenging]. And then you're talking through someone else.”*

Other staff do identify there is a problem with implementation with DEI initiatives within Waterford Public Schools and are ready to embrace the diverse shift in population of students and families with statements such as, *“We are ready for this work. Many teachers are dedicated to equity. Our kids deserve this.”* Even with the positive attitudes toward diversity, equity, and inclusion, many educators interviewed or surveyed expressed trepidation in how to appropriately respond to racism, homophobia, or discrimination against students who are English learners.

What was also resounding, however, was that educators and school leaders did not fully understand what district policies were in place, how they should communicate with each other and with parents, or what specific things they should be doing. To add to that, there seemed to be some fear about retribution from parents or administrators if they stood up and committed themselves to equity work. What also was common, even among the educators who were apprehensive, was a desire to have professional learning regarding equity and wanting the district to sustain diversity, equity, and inclusion practices.

*“We have had a lot of support for different issues. We get one two hour session with the promise of doing something else but nothing ever followed up. Everything has been a one time training and we are told to include it in our instruction.”*

*“There needs to be a commitment of doing the work and not having backlash. There is a lot that we don't do because of the fear of how much the parents get to blast you and the district.”*

*“I would like to see that there's acknowledgement that we have issues. We need to see that from the superintendent on down. It would help me and my colleagues to not be overworked. I learn about the kids and make mistakes in guessing. Something might tell me that we don't want to label kids. I might have a kid on the 4th grade level and there is little to no intervention for those*

*kids. I see kids pretending to understand me and [there's] no engagement at all. We get info about legally binding documents but don't get information about our other kids (ELL, foreign exchange)."*

Similarly, when teachers were asked what the district should do in order to engage in equity work, they gave these responses.

*"My advice would be to bring in an educated organization to provide training on systemic racism, and to include training about other minorities such as religious minorities and LGBTQ+."*

*"Prioritize needs for students. Seek feedback from students regarding equity on all levels."*

*"We need to start with staff education. The district needs to take a stand on where we stand on issues. Social media needs to show our stance. Cultural celebration days need to be planned district wide. [We need] clubs and SEL related learning so we get to know our differences."*

*"Make hate speech absolutely unacceptable. I hear many, many slurs of all kinds by students throughout the day and I believe they are 'spoken to', but there needs to be additional steps. I don't currently know what those could be, but I think that parents, families, and students have recently become empowered to have whatever beliefs they have, but it should be unacceptable to have racist, homophobic, hateful beliefs and especially, to weaponize them at school."*

*"Actually start it, embrace it, find leaders who want to lead this! Some have asked and have been shot down."*

*"Jump in head first and open up forums/surveys for diverse families to share their responses to these questions."*

*"Do it!"*

It was evident from the teacher's responses, parent data, and student experiences that the seriousness about which school leaders take this issue is not clear. It is fair to say based on the interviews that some school leaders are responsive to this matter, but consequences are unpredictable and inconsistent. Also, there is no space to have these honest conversations without fear of retribution. I think most staff agreed that students were the primary beneficiaries of an equitable education; thus, they should be the ones who are most served and valued. With the prevailing use of the N-word, and other racial and homophobic slurs, students are left feeling that they are navigating the challenging environment of school all on their own.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations were informed by insights shared by school and district leaders, teachers, certified staff, and classified staff who participated in focus group sessions and the survey that was distributed. As previously stated, these recommendations should not be viewed as all-encompassing, but representative of the type action needed to address the challenges identified at all levels of the system. It will be important to lean on the ideas of staff of Waterford Schools to move this work forward.

### **Recommendations: Educator Focus Groups Interviews & Survey**

1. The Waterford Superintendent should communicate regularly with staff about the commitment of the leadership and board of education and how this work should be strategically approached.
2. Establish clear policies with built-in accountability for addressing racially motivated acts and speech.
3. Create, repeat, and further emphasize proactive leadership measures that the N-word and other racial and homophobic slurs are not tolerated. The district should name specifically those racial insults and that they will be addressed by ANY and all staff who are employed by Waterford Public Schools.
4. Develop and socialize a shared understanding of the meaning of diversity, equity, and inclusion among educators.
5. Engage staff members in ongoing and sustained professional learning about equity-centered instruction and discipline practices.
6. Review current efforts and further establish short- and long-range action plans to address challenges related to hiring for diversity, equity, and inclusion.

## THE PATH FORWARD

Famed educator, John Dewey, said that “All that society has accomplished for itself, is put through the agency of school.” To that end, schools, teachers, and school leaders not only have the possibility to change society through schools, they have the responsibility to do so. If our true aim is for an equitable and just society, those words have more than a political connotation. For the marginalized in our population, those ideals are aligned to the ideals set forth in America’s founding documents. If we can agree that all students need and deserve an education that positions them for life success, the question becomes, why aren’t we doing that?

The conversations that students, staff, and parents had with The Equity Collaborative staff illuminated what many already inherently knew, there is work to be done within the Waterford Public Schools around racial equity, ensuring the safety and mental well-being of students who identify as LGBTQIA+, encouraging and supporting English Language learners, and fighting for the educational rights of students with special needs. The process of engaging in this report also uncovered there are some members of the community who do not want this work to persist. The opinions of those who do not want equity work to take root makes it all the more necessary to do it. The students in the Waterford community are worth it.

The Superintendent’s remarks in the video shown to all staff on November, 2, 2021 express the need for addressing inequities to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in Waterford Public Schools.

*“The Waterford School District’s number one priority is cultivating a safe and nurturing environment for all of our students. Such an environment is the bedrock for effective teaching and learning.*

*“Waterford School district will cultivate an environment of mutual trust, respect, inclusion, and substantive relationships so that the students, staff, and our community thrive.*

*“The board of education and I have committed the Waterford School District to the critical work necessary to ensure equity for all students, in all of our schools.”*

While the synopsis of experiences in the above report are reflective of stakeholder concerns and insights, the most important question at the center of this review is, can those on all sides of these critical issues move forward together in a community of collective action? For Waterford educators, this work would require leadership and an openness to hearing and affirming the stories and schooling experiences of marginalized students and their families. This work would also require a willingness to practice from a place of *action* - not only good intentions. For Waterford students, their families, and community members, this work would require a commitment to productive partnerships and a readiness to support educators to bring the entire community together. With the support of The Equity Collaborative staff, and other support providers, there is clearly a path forward in the Waterford Public School district to engage in this work.

## APPENDIX

**\*Note – the questions for the in person interviews with staff were identical to the electronic survey**

### **Equity Assessment Questions: Waterford Staff**

#### **Names and Roles**

- 1. What do you feel is most important to know about this community and the Waterford school district?**
- 2. When you hear the terms diversity, equity, and inclusion, what comes to mind regarding the Waterford School District?**
- 3. What do you know about the data on student performance in the Waterford School District?**
- 4. Who are the people doing the best work to support students of color and other marginalized students in Waterford? In the community?**
- 5. Can you speak to any incidents (small or large) that could give me insight to how race is experienced in the community? In the Waterford School District?**
- 6. What would be your advice about starting equity (racial, gender, religious, etc.) work in Waterford School District?**
- 7. Is there anything else you would like to share that I didn't ask about?**

**Equity Assessment Questions: HS/MS Students**

- 1. What do you feel is most important to know about this community and the Waterford school district?**
- 2. When you hear the terms diversity, equity, and inclusion, what comes to mind regarding the Waterford School District?**
- 3. What do you know about the data on student performance in the Waterford School District?**
- 4. Who are the people doing the best work to support students of color and other marginalized students in Waterford? In the community?**
- 5. Can you speak to any incidents (small or large) that could give me insight to how race is experienced in the community? In the Waterford School District?**
- 6. What would be your advice about starting equity (racial, gender, religious, etc.) work in Waterford School District?**
- 7. Is there anything else you would like to share that I didn't ask about?**



**\*Note – the questions for the in person interviews with parents were identical to the electronic survey**

**Equity Assessment Questions: Parents**

- 1. What is it like to be a parent of a child at your school (in the district)?**
- 2. What do you know about the data on student performance in Waterford School District? Do the schools talk to you about how your children are doing regularly?**
- 3. When you hear the terms diversity, equity, and inclusion, what comes to mind regarding the Waterford School District?**
- 4. How would you describe the history of equity and social relations in the broader community? In Waterford?**
- 5. Who are the people who you feel best supports your child at the school?**
- 6. Who are the people providing the best support to students of color and other marginalized students in Waterford? In the community?**
- 7. Can you speak to any incidents (small or large - positive or negative) that could give us insight to how students and families are treated In Waterford School District? in the community?**
- 8. What would be your advice about starting equity work in Waterford School District?**
- 9. Is there anything else you would like to share that I didn't ask about?**