

# 2009

## R&J Consulting Group

Rosalind Cox

## TROY SCHOOL DISTRICT

This initiative is designed to integrate the district's diversity and inclusion actions with insights and perspectives captured from our data gathering. The result is a strategic framework that is aligned. It also builds repeatable processes and easy-to-use tools that support dignity and respect within the school environment that ensure and support:

- Accountability – provides guidance on whether you are “walking the talk”
- Recognition – encourages a culture where thank you's and acknowledgement occur
- Skill building – assists leaders and develops them as coaches
- Involvement – engages district employees and students
- Communication – promotes listening and responding

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary .....page 3

Introduction .....page 5

Background/Methodology .....page 6

General Findings

- Observations and Themes from Focus Groups.....page 7
- Observations and Themes from Interviews .....page 27

Conclusions .....page 30

Findings and Recommendations .....page 31

Next Steps .....page 37

  

Appendix A

  

Appendix B

## Executive Summary

The Troy School District engaged the services of R&J Consulting Group in March, 2009 for the purpose of assessing whether a climate of inclusion is being realized within the district as well as providing recommendations for a strategic framework that ensures alignment with its present diversity and inclusion actions. Interventions developed as a result of this effort will help the district realize its stated goal that *“All Troy School District students will perceive they are accepted at school regardless of cultural, ethnic, gender, academic, or other individual differences as measured by a validated survey.”*

This initiative is divided into two phases with the first phase commencing in April 2009. Phase one involves designing and conducting focus groups and interviews.

A series of fourteen focus group meetings were held in April, June, September and October to gather specific feedback from the community-at-large, teachers and staff in elementary, middle and high school, support staff, building level administrators, district-wide department administrators and students. A total 151 people participated. (See Appendix A)

Each focus group, two hours in duration, was facilitated by Rosalind Cox, along with one note taker.

Participants expressed an interest in receiving feedback on the focus groups. Moreover, they expect “forward movement and progress” in the area of diversity and inclusion as a result of the district’s present initiative.

Each group was asked the same five questions with the exception of the community groups whose fifth question was different. The student questions were changed slightly to focus on their insights and experiences in school. (See Appendix A)

Eight interviews with senior leaders in the district (superintendent, assistant superintendents, directors, and school board members) were held during April and May 2009.

Each interviewee was asked the same basic questions. (See Appendix B)

There is a strong sense of pride to be members of the Troy School District. People believe that Troy is a destination city because of its diversity. It is acknowledged that the district is serious about diversity and makes an effort to foster awareness and understanding of the importance of diversity and inclusion through various cultural fairs, newsletters and clubs. It is believed that diversity is valued in the district and that it is important for all teachers to embrace diversity and ensure that others (students, other staff, and parents) do the same.

There is still work to be done to ensure that diversity and inclusion are “top of mind” for all staff and that all students feel respected and included. Particular areas of concern center around lack of teacher diversity, lack of staff awareness of the importance of diversity and inclusion,

different scholastic and achievement expectations for students, the presence of student sub-groups, the need for better communication between parents and school, especially parents whose primary language is not English and best practices.

The school board and other leaders have a keen desire to do whatever they can to ensure that all students feel respected and included. This support is critical to the success of the district's diversity and inclusion initiative.

Upon review and approval of this report by the Board of Education, it is recommended that **Phase two** of this project commence in January with the formation of a diversity council. If approved, the newly formed diversity council will oversee the diversity and inclusion initiative.

# Troy School District

## Diversity and Inclusion Initiative

### Results of Focus Groups and Interviews

#### Introduction

The Troy School District engaged the services of R&J Consulting Group in March, 2009 for the purpose of assessing whether a climate of inclusion is being realized within the district as well as providing recommendations for a strategic framework that ensures alignment with its present diversity and inclusion actions. Interventions developed as a result of this effort will help the district realize its stated goal that *“All Troy School District students will perceive they are accepted at school regardless of cultural, ethnic, gender, academic, or other individual differences as measured by a validated survey.”*

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## **Background/Methodology**

A series of fourteen focus group meetings were held in April, June, September and October to gather specific feedback from the community-at-large, teachers and staff in elementary, middle and high school, support staff, building level administrators, district-wide department administrators and students. A total 151 people participated. (See Appendix A)

Each focus group, two hours in duration, was facilitated by Rosalind Cox, along with one note taker.

Participants expressed an interest in receiving feedback on the focus groups. Moreover, they expect “forward movement and progress” in the area of diversity and inclusion as a result of the district’s present initiative.

Focus group guidelines were discussed at each session. It was emphasized to all the participants that they had a responsibility to keep the focus group discussions strictly confidential to ensure that all participants had the opportunity to provide honest and candid input.

Each group was asked the same five questions with the exception of the community groups whose fifth question was different. The student questions were changed slightly to focus on their insights and experiences in school. (See Appendix A)

Eight interviews with senior leaders in the district, (superintendent, assistant superintendents, directors, and school board members) were held during April and May 2009. Each interview was approximately one hour.

Each interviewee was asked the same questions plus a few extras depending on the conversation. (See Appendix B)

## General Findings

### Observations and Themes from Focus Groups

Within each session, there was a high level of enthusiasm, shared energy and strong interest from participants as they assembled. They displayed a willingness to cooperate and contribute to meaningful dialogue and shared learning. The dialogue, in each of the adult groups, flowed easily throughout the entire session. At times, we sensed some slight tension or underlying frustration as differing opinions - which seemed to align along racial lines and around the topic of racial/ethnic diversity and/or representation - were expressed. However, we also sensed considerable effort by all to ensure all opinions were stated in a manner that fostered learning from the expressed differences rather than putting anyone in an adversarial position. The student groups, in particular, were extremely animated and the students were incredibly engaged and candid. (Initially, the Asian students started off very reserved, but soon became comfortable and openly participated). Each group had a good mix of young men and young women. The students believed they were a good representative sample of their school and they stated that we would hear similar things across the student groups. They seemed to enjoy the opportunity to convey their ideas and to hear each others' views. At the end of the session timeframe, all groups dispersed with cordial tone and good spirits. All of the focus group participants were very appreciative of the opportunity to share their ideas and concerns and the students expressed the desire to "do it again soon with representatives from the schools and the superintendent."

The following are common themes that emerged. Specific quotes are listed in italics. The information presented represents all participants (adults and students) unless otherwise noted:

#### **Question 1: When someone mentions the term "diversity" what comes to mind? What does it mean to you in your role in the school district?**

In defining diversity, all participants described it as differences among us. They emphasized that diversity is not just a black or white issue, but also encompasses socio-economic, cultural background, different religions, all races and ethnicities, multiplicity of opinions, learning styles, and academic achievement. There were a few comments that diversity is the "politically correct" way to speak about racial issues, but most participants did not agree with this sentiment. Instead, they indicated that while race is definitely a strong focus, diversity also focuses on our similarities which are enriching and need to be embraced. Everyone felt that it is his/her role to embrace diversity and ensure that others did the same.

*"Learning styles are a big piece of diversity, especially within socio-economic background. There are differences that go across ethnic groups."*

*“I think of race and ethnic differences because we’ve been trained to think that but the most impactful are academic differences.”*

*“We’re very diverse and we need to start celebrating it. We’re living in a world of diversity. Our students need to know that diversity is a given. I think it’s inherent in their education that diversity is inherent to the world and it’s very different to when I grew up.”*

*“With diversity also comes a possible risk of misunderstanding. We need to be able to talk about it and discuss it. I think students are often afraid to talk about it. A lot of adults too.”*

*“I see it as a respect for differences, but if there’s ignorance involved diversity can sometimes mean a negative thing because it’s not understood.”*

*“Progress, in the sense that the more diverse the group, the more progressive it is.”*

*“Different types of people coming together. When there is a group there are different perspectives which can be really helpful.”*

**Question 2: What are signs that the district values the diversity, (race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, thinking style, culture) of our students?**

In every group, the participants identified programs and actions that indicate the valuing of diversity within the district. They referenced the Martin Luther King Jr. event, Ethnic Issues Advisory Committee, cultural fashion shows, ethnic festivals, various languages spoken by students, ability to wear cultural clothes at school, country flags displayed, greetings posted in many languages in the halls, variety of clubs available, Cultural Connections Newsletter, hiring a diversity consultant and thoughtfulness in the planning of events using an inclusive calendar. They also commented on how the district addresses diversity by allowing administrators to be creative and sanctioning the inclusion of the community, especially the parents of different ethnic groups, in planning events. Moreover, the district supports the administrative staff conducting meetings that include hearing perspectives of the different ethnic groups. Finally, some groups stated that support is further evidenced by the fact that the district immediately addresses issues of cultural insensitivity (although this was not a view shared by the students, nor the community groups, especially parents of African American and special needs students).

*“Troy is a destination choice for parents. There must be something right going on here in the Troy district. Perhaps, there are things that need to be replicated because there are good things going on here.”*

*“Offering the International Baccalaureate (IB) program...another option for students...is a good thing.”*

*“I’ve been to many diversity training and then I thought oh, here we go again and the brakes were on and things stopped. I’m glad we’re really getting to some issues.”*

*“Well they have focus groups like this...shows they’re willing to put the time into it.”*

*“Hiring more people that speak other languages. That helps a lot...that’s a very supportive thing.”*

*“More minority teachers have been hired this year. I don’t know the number but there are more.”*

*“The district also has a disability workshop for 4<sup>th</sup> graders.”*

*“They do a coffee hour for ESL parents...once a month or I’m not sure how often.”*

*“I saw, that ESL is at every school, so I felt that Troy is more focused in helping the school, because Troy has ESL in every building.”*

*“One out of every 50 kids will be autistic. We’re seeing more and more. I’m happy that the district is looking at how to manage this.”*

*“My child is in her first year of middle school. I was excited to hear that there was a bible study offered before school. This was a sign of appreciating diversity.”*

*“There is a Troy African American group meeting where the superintendent shows up and starts the meeting by asking “are there any questions for me?” Also, she talks about how she values and supports this group.”*

*“Year book features the different ethnic groups.”*

### **Question 3: What diversity and/or inclusion issues/concerns do you see in the Troy School District as it relates to our students?**

The **adult** participants stated various issues that impact diversity and inclusion. We have grouped the common comments under six categories based on the frequency of comments: (1) lack of teacher diversity; (2) lack of staff awareness of the importance of diversity and inclusion; (3) different scholastic and achievement expectations for students; (4) sub-groups of students; (5) providing multiple opportunities and a variety of modes for parents to communicate with the school and for the school to communicate with the parents; and (6) other concerns.

#### **1) Lack of teacher diversity**

This was by far, the most prevalent theme across all of the adult focus groups. There was much discussion about the need for teachers to look more like Troy's students. In every group, we heard that Troy has a diverse student body, but its teaching staff is not, which is a major concern. In addition, there was a shared feeling that a stronger hiring effort to employ more diverse teachers is needed. There was concern expressed about the pressure placed on the few minority teachers because minority students tend to gravitate to this group whenever they have issues and concerns. It was also noted that the minority teachers often feel a responsibility to be the "teachers" for the staff on diversity issues.

The elementary, middle school and high school teaching staff felt that overall hiring practices should be reviewed. They observed that a strong emphasis on hiring based on academic background, which while important, does not necessarily make the candidates selected on this basis the right people to work with Troy students. The teaching staff also commented that the administration talks about change, but nothing changes. They believe that the practices used to select candidates are creating "cookie-cutter" teachers and that is felt to fly in the face of diversity.

*"Two issues – retirement/layoffs are causing a natural turnover of the teacher population. In elementary schools, our teachers are female and white while in secondary the teacher population was more mixed. In elementary, the male population is sparse. We need the diversity for children. The (teacher) pool is so small and everyone (school or district) of substance wants to be diverse; it is not that easy to recruit to this area."*

*"Could it be that people just don't bother to apply to Troy? How do we convince people that Troy is welcoming? Do potential candidates feel that they may not fit in?"*

*“The Perceiver Model is used and it tends to end up hiring the same people, we need more people of different diversity teaching our students. Now we have Insight...don’t know if that’s any better.”*

*“And I don’t think we shouldn’t hire if you’re not from the same race but, you know, I think it would be hard if you were a kid to not see anyone who looks like you.”*

*“We don’t have to lower the bar or anything like that. There are plenty of qualified people to hire. In terms of recruiting, it’s subtle but it’s important.”*

*“I think that’s where we need more teachers who look like them (students). I can say things to students that come from my culture that others probably can’t. I can relate to them in ways that others can’t.”*

## **2) Lack of staff awareness of the importance of diversity and inclusion**

It is believed that staff awareness needs to be heightened; everyone needs to understand the role they play in valuing diversity and inclusion and how important that role is. There seemed to be a consensus that there is not a culture of acceptance among the teaching staff. The groups did point out that this concern does not apply to everyone, but the “culture of non acceptance” is pervasive and it applies to staff accepting each other’s differences as well as accepting the students’ differences. All staff need to be more open-minded, aware of their own biases and gain more understanding of the different cultures, religions, etc., that the students bring to their respective schools. The community groups, in particular, expressed concern regarding the teachers’ and administrators’ (perceived) inability to address issues of cultural insensitivity.

*“We have a school culture. When students come in the first week, they are told about the school’s culture which is what students should adhere to. We have to figure out how to bridge the school culture with the student’s culture as there may be direct conflicts. That takes sensitivity to and understanding of the different cultures.”*

*“It’s important for all our staff to be educated on different ways of looking at education. Yes, in some cultures there is a language barrier. I would like a greater awareness among the staff.”*

*“I think this leads to a bigger issue: the walking the walk or talking the talk. I think the latest buzz is to accept diversity but I observe too many adults not walking the walk. We allow things to happen that we would never allow students to say.”*

*“I hear things that the staff has said about kids that bothers me. Because if your mindset is that way how are you teaching to the kids?”*

*“I’ve heard some stereotypical things at a meeting I was at. I don’t feel like we have a culture of acceptance among the staff. How we are and how we act is going to influence the kids.”*

*“I had a teacher say something negative to me about another parent and her child and it made me wonder what she says about me and my child to other people.”*

*“My son was called the “N” word in a note. When my husband went to the school he was asked ‘aren’t you used to calling one another this word?’”*

### **3) Different scholastic and achievement expectations for students**

This was a strongly held view among all teaching staff, building level administrators, and the African American and ESL community groups. It was also brought up in the other groups, but not as strongly. The sentiment was that the curriculum is not applied the same with all students. High-achieving students are a focal point and special education students have programs, but there are a large number of “regular” students who tend to fall through the cracks. The participants acknowledged that Troy does have a lot of stellar students but there are also good students who get overlooked and don’t get the attention or encouragement they need. It was felt that scholastic expectations should be the same for all students, but they are not. The perception is that minority students, particularly African Americans, make up the bulk of special education students and that AP classes are filled with Asian students. The community groups expressed great concern over the “unwritten rules” regarding the curriculum and participation in AP classes. It is believed that minorities, other than Asians, are not encouraged to pursue AP courses. Additionally, the African American and ESL community groups expressed concern regarding the teachers’ inability to spend (after school) time to help their children.

*“It is very difficult for a student to be average in the Troy school system. And so the student gets frustrated and shuts down. Not everyone is going to be a college student. We need something for those who are going to go to a vocational school. It’s not popular, but it’s a fact, we have those students.”*

*“But part of the other thing is that they’ve got to change the curriculum because there are some kids, they don’t fit in. They are doing things but they don’t really know what they are doing.”*

*“There are a lot of benchmarks. It’s like the government. They (meaning administration) live and die by MEAPs.”*

*“We tend to be very heavy on emphasizing the data side and not so much the human side.”*

*“Bottom line is you’ve got to cut back on some of the nonsense. What’s education for? The pressure to excel has the unintended consequence of disenfranchising a large population of students, that is, the average student.”*

*“It’s difficult to accommodate all the needs in our classroom. We’ve not been able to meet all those needs in our classroom.”*

*“The goal is not to make everybody here be like everyone else but to realize that we are a melting pot and we have different needs and kids. We have to redefine Troy.”*

*“These are good students and we have to take the time with them.”*

*“You always feel like you are fighting for your child. Why didn’t my child get into AP even though his score was higher than others (e.g., Asian)? Our children are told that they are doing well at the average level—like that’s a good thing; why try harder classes?”*

*“Teachers are quick to label African American boys as needing special education—like there is some type of quota or something. It’s hard to get our kids into PACE.”*

*“Some of the teachers have a difficult time understanding that we, as African American parents, value education.”*

*“A teacher told me that my daughter can meet with her if she needs help. When my daughter avails herself to this teacher she does not have time despite her offer.”*

#### **4) Sub-groups of students**

The concerns around different expectations led to the discussion of sub-groups. There appears to be a concern with students from low socio-economic status and school of choice students. Often these groups are described as interchangeable. Participants voiced that there is the perception that lower expectations are set for the school of choice children and that some are seen as transient or not wanted or valued. Each focus group talked about the Villas and the trailer park and the assumption/stereotype that these students are low academic performers because of their economic status. Many teachers/staff expressed concern with negative comments they have heard from colleagues regarding these students. Also there doesn’t appear to be a specific orientation program (specifically at the high schools) geared to new

students in the district to ease their transition into the system. It was felt that with student sub-groups, there is an opportunity for us to be more welcoming and “better and warmer people.”

There was also discussion around how ethnic sub-groups self-segregate. While this is often seen as a problem, there were many who commented that it is a natural thing to do and we need to embrace similarities as well as differences. At the same time, participants felt strongly about the need to address the issue of meeting the needs of these students and encouraging them to broaden their circle of friends. Some parents felt that students are pressured to stay within their ethnic group and this is creating extra stress on the students.

*“I also think there is a low expectation of our school of choice children. And I know some people are wondering what impact these kids have on our MEAP scores. Some are not as wanted or valued.”*

*“In my area I know that school of choice kids are not as valued, but my issue is that they are not getting the services they need. Some qualify for special ed but don’t get it because they are from a different area. One parent moved to Novi so they could continue to get special ed.”*

*“There is an educational issue, in that, students coming in don’t always understand the importance of education or they may lack the academic skills.”*

*“And it’s not always across racial lines. Sometimes it’s just that you didn’t come from Troy schools and therefore you are not welcomed.”*

*“Something is needed so we all begin to see them as “our kids” and not “those kids.”*

*“I have the feeling that for some staff it’s a burden...oh no another one. I think we look at our transfer students as a burden. That’s unfortunate.”*

*“We need to be looking inside ourselves first. I hear comments like “you gave me one of the kids from the trailer park.”*

*“The diversity around socio-economic status may be an issue. We have a great range in economic status...and it’s going to get worse.”*

*“Students can be grouped as the haves and have nots. There are material problems which create conflict. Things can explode if they are not dealt with.”*

*“Teachers use subtle ways of discouraging a minority student.”*

*“In the cafeteria, I saw 12 to 14 tables where minority kids were seated and at the other tables were white (kids). I’m disappointed in the self-segregation.”*

A sub-group that generated quite a discussion was **students with disabilities**. This area was brought up by several community groups, teachers as well as the community group of parents of special needs students. It was a general feeling that Troy needs to work on improving resources for special needs students. It was commented that the district needs to have better outreach to the parents of these students as well as better access to Braille and translation services. It was commented that the district needs to be careful not to forget that learning disabilities are less visible and may go unrecognized as diversity issues. At the same time, however, the district needs to be careful not to categorize students as “those special ed kids” as is sometimes the case; because when that happens, teachers may tend to treat this population in a way that does not foster nor enhance their learning. There was much concern from parents of special needs students, that parental input is not seen as useful and valuable when decisions are being made regarding their children and that identified services are not being provided as mandated under the law. Several of the parents of special needs students spoke openly about how they had to retain the services of an attorney to get the school to listen to them. It appeared to be a mutual feeling that something drastic (like a lawsuit) needs to happen to get the district to take notice of their issues. Other parents commented that it’s important to try to maintain a balance so that “regular” students aren’t disadvantaged because the special needs student is getting all the attention. And, the teachers commented that they sometimes feel overwhelmed with the responsibilities associated with a special needs student in their classroom. Many favorable comments were made regarding the present director of Special Education and how she really does try to make a difference.

*“I heard someone say “oh you have all the special ed kids” and I didn’t know that. That was not my first impression. So it’s not good to have them categorized and to judge them that way.”*

*“We need to ensure we have inclusive resources particularly for students with special needs.”*

*“In my opinion the district has almost universally, consistently failed to educate itself and all administration and support about the specific nature of my kid’s disability which affects 1 in 10 and no one is educated about it.”*

*“The bus drivers are horrid (to special needs students). The lunch people are horrid.”*

*“We have the same kinds of issues every year. We have to provide training to the aid and every year no one knows what to do and they try to “cure” the disability. We lose a lot of time the first month of school.”*

*“What I found is years have gone by and all things I was fighting for, things have become more acceptable and still less regard for parent input. You’re always behind the scenes to try to shore up the support and if they can ramp it up quickly he gets support but if not then he gets what’s left over.”*

*“I believe that special needs kids are probably more segregated and more isolated than I can imagine any other diversity group in this school. I also see sexism in the school district, and I can tell you there’s a difference with regard to treatment of a mother of a child with special needs than a father.”*

*“The bottom line is that the school district intimidates the parents.”*

### **5) Providing multiple opportunities and a variety of modes for parents to communicate with the school and for the school to communicate with the parents**

This was passionately discussed in all of the groups. There was much concern that even with the efforts the district is making with outreach to parents, it is still not enough. Sometimes language is a barrier to effective communication between the schools/staff and parents who do not speak English as their first language. There is a desire to get parents of all ethnicities and cultures to be a part of the school and programs. There is an assumption, that some teachers believe that some minority parents are not interested in their children’s academics. However, it may just be that they (the parents) don’t know how to navigate the system. The participants stated that there needs to be more understanding among the staff and a personal desire to reach out to parents. Also, not having information in languages other than English presents another communication problem.

*“We don’t give things to parents in their native tongue.”*

*“I think also, the kind of base model is two parents, mom at home. And there’s a whole huge range of family situations in Troy; non-English speaking, out at work at night, all kinds of different situations. We need to take these things into account before we start making judgments.”*

*“Broken English doesn’t mean poverty or low intelligence.”*

*“I think that sometimes it’s the language barrier too.”*

*“Some teachers have talked about the lack of parental support. They see problems in the middle school which could have been averted but they weren’t because there were other things that were focused on, like sports. It could be just a matter of talking to the parents about expectations.”*

*“Sometimes it’s a lack of knowledge and the parents don’t always know what’s going on.”*

*“We talk about diversity and we have an ESL teacher in every school but we’re not doing what we need to do to support the program. We go to ‘in services’ and we don’t get the resources.”*

*“So I think we need to be better trained as staff. There’s a difference between they (parents) don’t care and they (parents) don’t know.”*

*“Parents may not respond unless they know that they need to be involved. When I was growing up someone was telling my mother that you need to be involved.”*

*“We have to find a way to connect and bring parents in. I know some are working at night, but we have to find a way to bring them in.”*

*“Some parents have come from cultures where they are not involved in schools, so they didn’t know what to do. If I asked, they were delighted to be involved. They just didn’t know how to.”*

*“We got a letter, for us and for all teachers of ESL. There was a meeting. From there, we just got letters. We don’t know what’s going on. I have no idea what he’s learning.”*

*“The way it is today it’s intimidating... the experience...no formal or informal system...so you have to rest on your social skills.”*

## **6) Other concerns**

Several groups brought up gay and lesbian students because they just don’t want to forget those students as a diversity group.

The fact that many of the diversity actions are dependent upon the respective school’s principal was an issue in several of the groups. If the principal is not supportive, then it becomes extremely difficult to move forward on any initiative, particularly diversity initiatives. This generated an animated discussion as participants began to talk about what is allowed and not allowed in their particular buildings. It was stated that although they’ve seen efforts to improve communication, there is still a need for consistency across the buildings and the sharing of best practices.

*“In some buildings you might have services that are not at other buildings. Some buildings have culture committees, some do not.”*

*“Sometimes it just depends on what the principal wants and how supportive they are.”*

All community groups were very vocal in the “failure” of the PTO to reach out and include people of color. They indicated that the PTO is very segregated and that comments have been made that they (PTO) don’t want to work for anyone other than their own kids. Even the few men who have attended the PTO meetings commented that they did not feel welcomed and saw the PTO as a “white moms” club. There was general agreement in the community groups that the PTO needs a lot of work. These groups also agreed that district-wide programming would help provide consistency across buildings which could ultimately help in getting more parents involved in the school and the PTO.

*“The PTO needs to be open to things that are going to be different, which is exciting.”*

*“I agree with you though that there is definitely bigotry.”*

*“It’s true our PTO is very non-diverse so people are not feeling welcome or what...I don’t know.”*

*“The PTO is not inclusive and they need facilitators to help with the meetings.”*

*“I do know that everything we sell for fundraisers, everything is mainstream, pizza, cookie dough and that’s fine, but maybe also we could have some diversity, a bit.”*

For question 3, “**Are there any diversity and/or inclusion issues/concerns you see or have experienced at your High School?**” the **students** mirrored the adult groups along several dimensions—lack of minority teachers, stereotypes, segregation, training, and curriculum. However, it was not unexpected that their responses would be more personal and therefore warrant highlighting separately. Some specific quotes are imbedded in the text. You will see that a few comments are specifically regarding Troy High or Athens. This was done only to highlight some differences that will help for future action planning.

Overwhelmingly, the students believe that Troy schools are better than any others. They base this decision on what they hear from friends, relatives and from students who have transferred into the district. They believe that even with the issues (indicated below), that most students tend to accept each other. They are proud that there are no “real gangs” in Troy. Although the students stated that the school culture at Troy High is different than at Athens (Athens is seen as more “laid back”), there are some common issues that appear to occur at both schools:

**Stereotypes:** The students commented that they deal with stereotypes every day. Asians are perceived as smart and if they have a Caucasian friend, they (the Asian students) are considered a “dumb Asian.” African American and Caucasian students are treated differently if they are in an AP class; “the teacher acts like we aren’t supposed to be there.” Some African Americans who are new to Troy schools have difficulty fitting in. They think they have to act a certain way (the “black way whatever that is”) and that perpetuates stereotypes. White kids try to act “black” and make comments that they think are cool, but are really offensive. Students tend to make racist jokes and Chaldeans and other Middle Eastern students felt they are often the brunt of them.

Although they cited the many clubs as a good thing, the students commented that a lot of clubs are perceived to be for one ethnic group only. They realize that all clubs are open to all students, but a Caucasian won’t join a club that is thought to be for Asians and vice versa. The African American students voiced concern that there are no clubs highlighting African American heritage.

**Segregation:** There appears to be quite a bit of self-segregation at the high schools. Students of different races or genders can hang out with another group if you happen to have something in common such as being in band or on a sports team. Those groups trump race or gender. However, if you aren’t in those groups, you are expected to hang with your ethnic group. Students usually go into their own (ethnic) section of the cafeteria and don’t invite others to sit with them. There are also certain areas of the school building (Troy High) where specific ethnic groups congregate (Africa; Boater’s Bench), but the students see this as okay because it’s just friends hanging out together. However, a person from another ethnic group would not be welcomed unless they were a good friend of someone in the group (and even then it might be awkward). “I see more of the exclusion by race than anything else.”

At both schools, there are still too many students who sit alone in the cafeteria or are always by themselves in the hallway. One student commented that she had no friends her freshman and sophomore years and desperately wished that someone had just reached out to her.

**Teachers:** All students expressed concern that there are very few minority teachers and “something needs to be done about that.” African American students were especially vocal regarding the lack of black teachers. There were also many comments about teachers who play favorites. “You get to be in plays or participate in student government conferences based on if the teacher/sponsor likes you.” This was not seen as a race issue, although some minorities in the groups did perceive that Caucasians have the upper hand “especially white girls.” Also minority students felt that they were not treated equally. For example, if a minority student needs extra help, teachers say they are willing to help after school. However, if the student tries to see them more than a couple of times, the teachers say they don’t have the time to help. It was felt that Caucasian students don’t have this issue. Another comment they made (regarding

unequal treatment) was that teachers over-react to African American students. “White kids can “get away” with so much stuff, but let one of us do something—look out.”

The minority students felt that many teachers don’t understand their culture and don’t take the time to learn about it. They are dismayed that some teachers try to discuss other cultures and give erroneous information. They also cited the fact that there is an absence of literature pertaining to minorities especially African Americans. Additionally, it was felt that the teachers do not do a good job responding to racial slurs or other diversity/inclusion issues that occur in their classrooms.

There are a lot of new teachers at both schools who don’t seem to know how to handle diversity issues and the older teachers are “stuck in their ways.” The Athens students especially focused on what they considered to be the lack of sensitivity of the administration staff and hall monitors. Many of the minority students stated that they were rudely treated when they came to the Athens office with questions and the hall monitors “treat us like criminals.” The Caucasian students at Athens commented and agreed that they also see a difference in how minorities, especially African Americans, are treated by hall monitors and office staff. One (Athens) student who used to be at Troy High remarked that Troy High has the same issues with several of the hall monitors and several of the Asian students from Troy High also commented on the insensitivity of office staff.

**Fighting:** The issue of fighting provoked a lively discussion in three of the four groups. The students expressed concern with the incidents of fighting, especially within the same ethnic group. Some of the students felt that girls (of all races) get pushed around by boys and “if the girl doesn’t tell them to stop, the boys will continue to bother them.” “Black boys (in particular) get real aggressive with the girls.” At Troy High, some of the African American girls are viewed as “disrespectful” and they create conflict with other students. At both schools, there appears to be a group of students who feel that “sometimes you just have to fight it out.” This was acknowledged as a concern and the students felt that there has to be a more positive way to resolve conflicts. The students at Troy High commented that peer mediation was positive and worked well. The Athens students strongly felt that peer mediation did not work and went on to say that students don’t want to use it because it is seen as tattling on each other.

**Basic needs:** Several of the responses from Athens’ students focused on basic needs. Indeed, one student commented that “the problem is that we are not solving our basic problems.” They referred to the fact that at the end of the year, they have to bring in their own soap and paper towels for the restrooms and that there are broken stalls that haven’t been fixed in months. They also focused on the poor quality of the food and specifically commented that “the present chef needs to wear a sweatband so he doesn’t sweat into the food.” They feel these issues are tied to inclusion because they “show a lack of respect to us as students.”

**Question 4: What type of actions do you think are needed so that all students feel accepted, included and respected regardless of cultural, ethnic, gender, academic or other individual differences? How do you see your personal impact?**

The **adult** participants identified areas that paralleled the concerns they cited earlier. We have listed them in priority order: 1) Training, 2) Recruiting, 3) Curriculum, 4) Parent Outreach

**1) Training**

First and foremost, there was a consensus across all the groups that training for all staff is greatly needed. However, it is important to go beyond the statistics, focus more on the human side and give tools that staff can use. Most participants agreed that there are many staff members who are just ignorant, and it's not that they don't care—they just don't know. They stated that once there is dialogue, support of students and each other will come naturally. Staff needs to learn how to properly intervene in issues of diversity and inclusion especially when ethnic intimidation issues arise. There is a great desire to learn more about the different cultures within the city of Troy. For the maximum return on training in the district, all stakeholders must participate together...mix it up so administrators and others are not segregated by position or role. Everyone felt that if training is voluntary, it will not work and that it should be a department goal. Therefore, the Troy School District must ensure that everyone is required to attend. The participants also strongly felt that "Troy needs some serious training in each of the High Schools" and should consider obtaining student views on what is impacting them, both positively and negatively.

*"The important piece is to have diversity education so that there is an increased awareness of cultural nuances especially when people are not aware."*

*"And we need to focus more on disabilities and sexism."*

*"In terms of action we also need something to increase our understanding as teachers."*

*"I think one of the other things we need to do and we've talked about different cultures etc. but the 1<sup>st</sup> step needs to be for us to look at ourselves and see where we're coming from."*

*"They (teachers) need to be trained to accommodate the behaviors that these (special needs) kids have."*

*"Our issues are teachers, there are pockets of some teachers doing some great stuff, but there needs to be a whole diversity program and needs to be something at every school."*

*"Training of staff...with cafeteria and bus drivers, it's key...they don't know how much*

*damage they can do with a kid until it's happened."*

*"Regarding training...there must be some way to inform parents too...so parents need to know some basic idea about other cultures so we can explain things to our children."*

*"To me there should be a consistency of person(s) who deal with your child. You have good luck at elementary school because we have consistency but at the middle school environment you have all this rotating inconsistency...need a team as an advocate...it's the luck of the draw if you get a great teacher."*

*"Everyone in the school district including the school board needs to be educated (regarding special needs children) and follow the federal law."*

*"How the counselors talk to our children greatly impacts them. They need to be more sensitive."*

## **2) Recruiting**

The groups felt that the district needs to make a concerted effort to bring more diversity into the staff including employing persons who speak more than one language. Some of the participants (mostly teachers) felt that there needs to be a competent person on staff to deal with diversity related issues (specifically around cultural assimilation of immigrants) as they believe the present administration does not have this ability.

*"If we just looked more like our students, we'd be able to help our students and impact inclusion. Everyone is making assumptions about our students; if we were like our students we'd know what they were thinking. The other things are important but not as important as looking like them."*

*"We need changes among current staff as well."*

*"Maybe we need a department of diversity or something to help with all of these kinds of problems...advocacy for all of these problems and issues."*

## **3) Curriculum**

There was discussion around the fact that the curriculum needs to be changed or more balanced to better address the needs of the "good, solid" student. This comment came mostly from the middle school and high school staff but was supported by the other groups especially the ESL and African American community groups. They also commented that in Troy, there are high achievement expectations and there's no middle ground. It was believed that it's the district's goal to tailor everything to the higher achieving students' needs and goals. It was felt

that there needs to be a more effective way to identify and prioritize students' skill development needs and, *where appropriate*, guide the students' academics towards obtaining an associate's degree or vocation. At the same time, teachers need to encourage non-Asian students and other sub-groups towards AP or college prep track (hence, the balance). The participants also commented that balancing the curriculum included incorporating everyone's history/culture and the district should look for materials that do so. The participants recognized that a lot of good ideas and actions related to curriculum require money and that the budget is an issue. However, they stated that if the district is really serious about inclusion, it needs to re-prioritize some things to ensure that it is reaching all of the students.

*"What are we doing for the kids that need to go to O-tech or to get an Associates Degree and have other needs--not just the high profile schools like Harvard or MIT etc? We've gotten away from the fact that we have students who have different needs."*

*"Success for our students should be redefined so that everyone can achieve."*

*"We need to invest in resources for our ESL students."*

*"We should consider classes that teach a diverse view of our country."*

#### **4) Parent Outreach**

Parent outreach was another passionate topic. Specifically, there is a desire to survey parents to get a feel for how we can serve them and their children better and ensure that the information is distributed to each building. Programs and practices such as a welcoming packet for parents in their native language indicating the do's and don'ts; information on how to navigate the system; setting up a buddy system for ESL parents; an ESL segment at curriculum night; and having better access to effective translation services, were all issues discussed. Also it was felt that there needs to be a stronger liaison between the school, the PTO and the parents.

The participants agreed that sharing diversity best practices would help to ensure consistency across the buildings. Practices such as having diversity groups/cultural committees are actions that can occur across all buildings. It was suggested that Troy benchmark other successful school districts to see how they handle outreach and diversity in general.

*"If we had central enrollment with people culturally sensitive and being able to provide links to a parent liaison, cultural liaisons. The 1<sup>st</sup> contact would be here, someone from their culture or who knows about their culture."*

*"When they meet with us, just speak in simple English so we will understand."*

The students were asked the same **question 4: What type of actions do you think are needed so that all students feel accepted, included and respected regardless of cultural, ethnic, gender, academic or other individual differences?** Again, there is some correlation between the student responses and the adult responses.

The **students** spoke at great length about how they personally need to step forward and show that they can accept each other. Students felt they need to take a personal stance because they provide the best example for their peers. They stated that they should (and would) make an effort to hang out outside of school with others so they can understand them better. All students commented that they needed to “walk in someone else’s shoes” and that “you can’t fully understand a person without walking in his shoes.” “The bottom line is that we need to be more helpful and connected to each other.” They suggested having older students in the school take the lead in talking with younger students about diversity and inclusion to help reduce fighting, stereotypes and self-segregation. The peer mediators at Troy High “roam” the cafeteria looking for students who are sitting alone and reach out to them. This was cited as an excellent way to connect with lonely students and have them feel less isolated. They commented that teachers should make an effort to ensure that students in their classes get to know each other. They also stated that it’s important to train students on how to respond to diversity and inclusion issues.

The students also focused on the transition from middle school to high school and stated that there needs to be a way to make that transition smoother as many of them had a difficult time in ninth grade. They suggested emphasizing the importance of clubs in middle school and that the clubs are not solely based on ethnicity, although (once again) the African American students commented that offering a club for black students would be welcomed. “They don’t say anything about the clubs during middle school anymore. And there used to be a time when all the clubs had a booth so that freshmen can find out about the clubs. People would feel more welcomed and they can sign up. The school should do more of this.”

The students stated that there needs to be more focus on diversity and inclusion, such as hiring more minority teachers and coaches, diversity assemblies (and not just ethnic dances), more teaching about history of other cultures, and encouraging students to participate in clubs and not just sports.

There also needs to be sensitivity/respect training for teachers and staff, not forgetting the office staff, hall monitors and janitors. “Even a simple hello from the hall monitor would be nice.” “Treat us with more respect.” They commented that staff and teachers need to respond more effectively to bullying and racial slurs. “Teachers need to know how to acknowledge and handle emotional abuse before it escalates.”

**Question 5: What type of training or coaching do you think you need to better understand, effectively support and work with students of different backgrounds and abilities?**

There appears to have been little diversity and inclusion training for most of the participants. For those who did attend some training, there were comments that while it was insightful, they did not come out with real tips on how to deal with the students. The majority of the groups felt that it is important that training be meaningful and integrated into the workday. They want experiential training with tools and not a one size fits all approach. The need for systemic change for everyone in the district was expressed. Training cannot be a quick fix. They commented that although ethnic fairs are important, the focus should be on changing what happens between 8am and 3pm—not just academic, but also social achievement. They also expressed a desire to interact with experts in field.

Another idea was to create a list of resources (peer resources, experts in the field, tips, do's and don'ts) that they can use in the classroom.

Instead of question #5 above, the following question was asked to the community groups and to the students:

**Question 5: If you were superintendent for a day, what are the top three changes you would make to improve inclusion in the Troy School District?**

The community group participants gave four changes they would make.

They overwhelmingly stated that they would focus on **education** of our teachers on diversity and inclusion. They would increase the programs that are available, ensure that there are measurable outcomes and also ensure that teachers and staff see the advantage of why they need to understand diversity.

They also stated they would **hire more people of color** in positions of power in the district as well as more teachers of color.

They would **provide more opportunities to better involve the parents** in the school.

They would also ensure that everyone gets the **same opportunity to learn** by having a more balanced standard for curriculum.

For the students, this question created quite a bit of animation. They were able to narrow down their responses to four. Their number one response was to **train the teachers and staff on cultural differences**. They said this training needs to begin at the elementary school level so teachers will realize the impact they have at the beginning of a child's school life.

They said they would **hire more minority teachers and coaches.**

They stated that the **curriculum needs to be changed** to include more information on other cultures. This would include a mandate on diversity/inclusion assemblies and celebrations of cultural events such as black history month and women's history month. Also, they would have classes with fewer restrictions so the students could have freedom to choose classes that truly interest them.

Finally, as superintendent, the students would **improve the communication** between the administration and the students. They would solicit ideas from the students on teachers, curriculum, and homework (recognizing that students learn differently--they suggested giving homework in video games). They stated they would communicate best practices between the high schools. They also specifically stated that as superintendent they would communicate more to the students about school finances—where does all the money go?

## General Findings

### **Observations and Themes from Interviews**

Eight interviews with senior leaders in the district, (superintendent, assistant superintendents, directors, and school board members) were held during April and May 2009. Each interview had a high degree of openness and a genuine interest in the discussion topic. The leaders indicated that they felt the district has tried to do a good job helping teachers and administrators understand that there are different perspectives as well as the need to appreciate the differences that the students bring. They believe that most of the diversity concerns occur in the district because of ignorance and not out of malice. Some felt that there needs to be a stronger focus on the diversity conversation in the middle schools which could help avoid issues in the high schools. The interviewees voiced that diversity is part of the attraction of seeking residence and/or employment in Troy. Diversity is a difficult conversation, but all felt that it is an important subject to discuss.

When asked “***What diversity and/or inclusion issues/concerns do you see in the Troy School District as it relates to our students?***” the senior leaders simply said “changing demographics” as their biggest concern. They are very concerned that Troy has a very diverse student population and the staff does not reflect this diversity. The fairly homogeneous staff is seen as a disadvantage which limits the connection points between the staff and student populations. It is recognized that the staff will never perfectly match the student demographics, but if there were more diversity, it would have a positive impact by providing all of the students more opportunities to connect. They also believed that having the ability to interact with diverse peers would give them a better perspective and help to create cultural competence amongst the staff.

They also stated that the staff (administrators and teachers in particular) need training on how to respond to the changing diversity in the schools. It is important for them to understand their own biases and how they perceive ethnicity. Even though there has been some cultural training with administration, there is still a concern regarding the lack of cultural competence and awareness in the district.

In addition, they voiced concern around the achievement gap; understanding it and how to address it. They commented that there is a need to ensure that all students are learning and achieving at their fullest potential.

***In describing “the biggest obstacle to overcome in improving how the Troy School District manages and supports diversity and inclusion,”*** the leaders stated that diversity of staff was the biggest. This corresponds to their issues cited above. They know that as difficult as it may be, the district must design and execute a plan for developing a workforce that better represents the make-up of the student population.

They also stressed the importance of impressing upon the staff that they may not be as culturally aware as they think they are. It is felt that there are a number of staff members who have been around a long time and feel they know all there is to know about diversity and inclusion.

All of the leaders agreed ***“that there are existing stereotypes or attitudes (from teachers, administrators, etc.) that hinder students from being able to contribute fully and productively.”*** They agreed that some stereotypes are specific to ethnicity and expectations. There appears to be certain expectations for the Asian students, for Middle Eastern students, for African American students and for students who are new residents in Troy. They felt that sometimes students are put into a particular mode—Asians, for example, should be on a certain track and if not, something is wrong. There is a sentiment that staff do not have to focus much on Chaldean students because they will grow up to own a party store; and African American students should be guided towards sports and the general education track. These stereotypes do hinder students from being able to participate fully because the students feel they've been labeled from the beginning and they have to meet specific expectations. There may be something that the student is interested in doing and would excel at, but he/she doesn't pursue it because it is not what is “expected” of them. There is a stereotype around immigrant cultures whereby if a parent does not show up for conference or if homework does not get turned in, it is thought that parents do not care. There is a lack of understanding that there may be circumstances that should be investigated. Finally, there appears to be stereotypes specific to economic status. These leaders have heard comments about students from the Villas and the trailer park and are concerned that some teachers may have different academic expectations based on economic background.

When asked ***“if it were up to you, what is the single most important change you would make with respect to improving inclusion in the school system?”*** the leaders stated that the district needs to have a long range plan with an overall initiative that focuses on a three part systemic change that will reduce the “hit and miss” diversity efforts. This systemic change should begin with ensuring cultural competency of the staff. That includes improving the “look” of the staff (hiring of more diverse teachers) and improving the way people think (through training). This training cannot be voluntary. Secondly, a structured way to reach out to other cultures—a partnership between the parents and the school--was seen as part of the systemic change. This outreach would help to encourage participation of parents who may not be comfortable in the school setting. And third, would be to remove barriers from students and allow them to be involved in various academic programs. Sometimes expectations are unwittingly lower for certain groups and messages are sent about academic achievement of these students that shouldn't be sent. The focus needs to change to what is best for the student and help that student to succeed.

The leaders stated that they ***“have received some training or coaching on how to work with students of different backgrounds and abilities”*** but they need much more. The training was for administrators and some teachers and was offered on a voluntary basis. There needs to be a stronger focus on diversity and inclusion training and a need to look at how expectations are colored by different cultures. And, they must figure out a way to ensure everyone participates. They believe that the district is taking steps in the right direction with the diversity and inclusion initiative.

## Conclusions

This report data was not derived from a quantitative study instead it was qualitative in nature. This allowed us to draw upon the richness of the focus group discussions and interview data as we made our conclusions.

It appears that community members, students and those employed by the district have great pride in being part of a diverse school system. They expressed satisfaction with their every day and work lives in Troy and indicated the many factors that demonstrate a commitment to diversity and inclusion. They feel that the city and the district have much to offer people. There is a genuine desire in the district to ensure that each student and staff member feels valued and respected regardless of racial, ethnic, cultural or religious background, lifestyle, socioeconomic status, or physical or mental difference. There does not appear to be issues of student safety as a diversity concern, rather a desire to create an environment where all students, teachers, staff and parents feel comfortable.

It is recognized that even with the progress made so far, there is still much work to do. There is great concern regarding the lack of diversity of the staff and the lack of overall cultural awareness. It appears that these two factors contribute to a lack of sensitivity to diversity issues and could potentially hinder students from being able to contribute fully and productively. There are also certain groups of students and parents who feel that they are not treated respectfully.

It is recognized that for some actions, the budget could be a hindrance, and time and resources are always issues, but it is strongly felt that a focus on diversity and inclusion should be made a top priority.

Making effective, *sustainable* culture change across the district is the challenge. It is apparent that the Troy School District has a strong desire to implement systemic change to support its diversity efforts. This change must include diversity and inclusion education which is viewed as extremely important and cannot be a “one size fits all” approach. It was noted that although some cultural awareness training has been conducted (and it was valuable), it did not impact enough people. There also must be a method to ensure accountability of implementation of actions. The district must consider implementing a diversity/cultural competency component in the performance appraisal process.

There appears to be strong support of the diversity and inclusion initiative from the school board as well as senior leaders in the district. These leaders must take an active, visible role in stressing the importance of diversity and inclusion. The district must move forward into phase two and demonstrate action as many people are anxiously waiting and watching for movement. Dr. Fowler is viewed as the right person to lead this initiative as she is credited for “moving the district in the right direction” during her tenure as superintendent. This support from Dr. Fowler and all senior leaders is extremely critical to the success of the district’s diversity and inclusion initiative.

## Findings and Recommendations

### **Finding 1**

The Troy School District has made efforts to hire a diverse work force reflecting the district's diverse community, but despite these efforts, the percent of employed minorities is low. There is much agreement that a top issue is the lack of diversity in the staff especially the teaching staff and that this is an issue that must be resolved. Although many teachers expressed that they feel that diversity is overlooked in preference for the right academic background and that the screening process that is used tends to create "cookie cutter" teachers, not all administration leaders shared this view. Nevertheless, everyone felt that the district should be more aggressive and continue to strengthen its efforts to hire a diverse workforce. There is an excellent opportunity to demonstrate commitment since there are so many openings for the 2009/10 school year. The district should consider approaches in addition to college recruiting. There are a number of districts that have terminated their teachers. The "word on the street" is that Troy is not willing to bring in a teacher at other than the lowest level. The district needs to ask itself "are we willing to consider the whole person?" Then decide which actions it is willing to pursue.

In addition, the administration needs to better communicate with its teachers on the efforts that are presently being made to recruit diverse staff. The teachers need to be educated or re-educated on the process of selection in order to overcome the view that the district is producing "cookie cutter" teachers who don't have the students' best interests at heart.

### **Recommendation**

(Since this was a finding that required immediate action, focus group comments and recommendations were already given to the Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources)

Pursue an aggressive plan to hire a more diverse workforce. Communicate plan's progress to the teaching staff and community

- Create a strategic hiring plan and monitor the student/teacher ratio as they relate to gender and ethnicity
- Consider offering conditional, preliminary contracts to qualified potential employees
- Hold a diversity recruitment fair for Troy only
- Re-evaluate the hiring/benefits package to ensure that it is competitive

- Actively recruit teachers of color through personal contacts and professional networking. Provide an incentive to teachers who recommend someone who is ultimately hired
  - Connect with the Detroit Urban League, the NAACP and some of the large churches/mosques in Detroit, Dearborn and Pontiac and the Public Relations person in those school districts
- Utilize advertising and appropriate minority media to recruit
  - Place ads/information in minority newspapers such as the Michigan Chronicle and the Indianapolis Recorder and on diversity recruiting sites such as [www.HBCUconnect.com](http://www.HBCUconnect.com) and [www.blackcollegian.com](http://www.blackcollegian.com).
- Connect with the HBCUs that are closer to Michigan such as Central State, Chicago State, Kentucky State, Lincoln University-Pennsylvania, and Wilberforce, OH.
- Develop an internal communication that highlights the efforts the district has made with respect to hiring a more diverse workforce

## **Finding 2**

There is a definite consensus that an intervention is needed to increase teachers' and administrators' cultural awareness. While there has been some training it was insufficient and did not reach enough people. Most everyone agreed that there is a need for education (general awareness training) that encourages the exploration of personal biases and stereotypes, coupled with practical resources and skill building on how to address diversity issues in the classroom. This would help address not only cultural issues, but issues around perceptions of economic status and student achievement. Another observation is that while most students seem okay with diversity, the critical role models in their lives (teachers) may not be. Therefore, working with teachers is crucial. It is also important not to forget the support staff in any diversity training.

Also, it is felt that whatever action is taken, that it must be required of everyone or it will not be successful. It was pointed out that professional development days or collaboration days could be used for diversity training.

## **Recommendation**

Appoint a diversity council which reflects the ethnic, social and academic make-up of the community. It will focus on matters of inclusivity including overseeing the development of ongoing, diversity training that is required for **all staff**

- Establish cultural/diversity competencies for all staff as a part of the performance appraisal process
- Design a training and development program to focus on personal biases, respect, cultural competencies and development of sensitivity skills to communicate effectively with a culturally diverse student population
- Require that all the district's newly hired staff members are scheduled into diversity training (once developed) during their first 3 months of employment
- Along with parent input, develop an in-service specifically designed for training on special needs issues/concerns
- Design and provide specific tools, programming and resources such as library, video and other media that participants can use to enhance their daily diversity efforts
- Encourage all teachers, especially in the high schools, to develop an icebreaker (small group connectivity exercise) during the first days of class that encourages students to get to know each other. Other times during the year are also encouraged
- Design diversity and inclusion programs that include networking activities for staff
- Design a diversity and inclusion survey for students and staff that can be given annually to assess the inclusive climate within the school district
- Consider ways to expand existing reward systems to include diversity efforts and competencies
- Partner with Oakland Schools, local universities and former students to provide diversity presentations to students, faculty and the diversity council
- Have a diversity day once a quarter where each 3<sup>rd</sup> hour high school teacher (regardless of subject) takes the class time to hold a (prepared) discussion on a diversity and inclusion topic

### **Finding 3**

The focus groups and the interviewees have issues with the curriculum and student sub-groups although it was expressed in different ways. The common thread, however, is that there is a need to remove artificial barriers so students can be encouraged to succeed. The curriculum, as it is presently designed and the pressure to excel may have the unintended consequence of disenfranchising a large population of students, that is, the “good, solid” student.

A way must be found to balance the curriculum/instructional focus and support the individual needs of students so that the “good, solid” student has options and does not fall through the cracks. Additionally, balancing the curriculum means incorporating everyone’s history/culture to present an inclusive view. The district needs to ensure that *all* students are made to feel a part of the learning process and are achieving at their fullest potential. That may not always be the case as there appears to be lower expectations for certain groups of students e.g., African Americans, Chaldeans, ESL students and those new to the district.

### **Recommendation**

Partner with the diversity council and other groups such as Troy African American Parent Support Group and parents of special needs students to review current processes to ensure that TSD has an inclusive curriculum and there are not artificial barriers preventing students from involvement in various academic programs

- Review the statistical data related to the achievement gap; develop specific remedies to address student deficiencies
- Incorporate programs that reach out to minority students; develop a plan to inform minority students and their parents of the benefits of taking higher level courses and encourage them to do so
- Develop or refine the orientation program for new students to help ease their transition. Consider development of a buddy/mentor system for new students and/or those having difficulty fitting in
- Develop a student advisory group in every building. This group would meet with the principal on a monthly basis to give input into school decisions that address concerns around basic needs and issues of race, culture and other diversity/inclusion areas as (age) appropriate
- Ensure that there is adequate minority representation on the committee that reviews textbooks and develops course curriculum

- Continue to review the curriculum to ensure there are options for the “good, solid” student and ensure that this information is appropriately communicated to parents and students
- Recognize and celebrate achievements in diversity and inclusion

#### **Finding 4**

There is widespread agreement that something more needs to be done regarding outreach to parents, particularly minority parents and for those whom English is their second language. It is also agreed that it is important to fully integrate the student, family and community as partners in the educational process. There must be programs that help raise the comfort level of those who are not comfortable in the school setting. It appears that mass communications (e-mail, websites, etc.) are done well, but there is a need to look at some non-traditional ways of reaching out to the parents and encouraging their participation.

In addition, there are good diversity activities happening in the district but oftentimes they are limited to a particular building. There is a great desire for consistency in sharing of best practices and a mandate that principals must be involved in the diversity initiative.

#### **Recommendation**

Review current method and flow of communications and consider additional communication/outreach strategies

- Provide talking points to teachers and administrators that help foster parental involvement
- Partner with the PTO on creative ways to connect with parents such as developing a buddy system for ESL, minority and/or new parents. Ensure the PTO is made aware of parent concern regarding the openness of the organization
- Consider having the superintendent of schools place a regular diversity and inclusion message in *Perspectives* and other Troy media
- Implement an annual parent survey to obtain feedback on their needs and their opinion of inclusion in the school
- Develop a welcome/orientation packet for parents with translated materials that provides information on common procedures, expectations, forms, and contacts. If materials cannot be translated, ensure that they are in simple English terms

- Develop a parent “board” as a sub-group of the diversity council to review parent concerns/recommendations (such as a special segment of curriculum night dedicated to ESL parents, special needs education, etc.)

Benchmark inside the TSD and with other school districts regarding diversity best practices

- Build upon the present meeting structure/requirements to establish a formal method of sharing diversity best practices within the district, especially between the high schools; and use performance feedback as a mechanism to show compliance
- Develop a program where students would visit an inner city school to learn and share views about diversity and inclusion
- Have a day when students/administrators/teachers would swap roles so they can get a better understanding of each other’s responsibilities
- Continue to celebrate diversity and inclusion through aesthetics at schools (murals, dual language signage)
- Continue to sponsor a variety of cultural heritage recognition events, lectures and other special programs/assemblies, e.g., black history month, Hispanic heritage month, etc. Consider including juniors and seniors as diversity and inclusion “ambassadors” to freshmen, sophomores and middle school students

## Next Steps

A communication plan will be developed to provide feedback to focus group participants and the greater community regarding the focus group results and future plans.

Upon review and approval of this report by the Board of Education, it is recommended that **Phase two** of this project commence in January with the formation of a diversity council. If approved, the newly formed diversity council will oversee the diversity and inclusion initiative. One of its initial tasks will be to review this report, determine the feasibility of the recommendations cited, prioritize and determine action steps. The council will also work with the Instruction and Assessment Department to analyze survey data.

It is noted that some of the recommendations are already in progress, but were listed to give a complete view and to ensure that whatever the district does regarding diversity and inclusion falls under the purview of a governing body such as a diversity council. The council's primary role will be to develop a diversity and inclusion strategic plan (with measurable actions) that the district will implement over the next several years.

A special thanks to Dr. Fowler, her entire staff for arranging the focus groups and to all who participated in the focus groups and interviews.

## Appendix A

### **Fourteen focus groups included:**

Parents of African American students; Parents of Special Needs students; Parents of ESL students; A mixed group of parents (Caucasians, Muslims, Jewish and Asian); African American students at Athens; Asian students at Troy High; Middle Eastern students at Troy High; A mixed group of students (Caucasians and other students of color not listed above) at Athens; Building Level Administrators; District Wide Department Administrators; Elementary teachers/staff; Middle School teachers/staff; High School teachers/staff; Support Staff

### **Questions asked of the focus group participants:**

Question 1: When someone mentions the term “diversity” what comes to mind? What does it mean to you in your role in the school district?

Question 2: What are signs that the district values the diversity, (race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, thinking style, culture) of our students?

Question 2: (students) What are signs that your High School values the diversity, (race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, thinking style, culture) of its student body?

Question 3: What diversity and/or inclusion issues/concerns do you see in the Troy School District as it relates to our students?

Question 3: (students) Are there any diversity and/or inclusion issues/concerns you see or have experienced at your High School?

Question 4: What type of actions do you think are needed so that all students feel accepted, included and respected regardless of cultural, ethnic, gender, academic or other individual differences? How do you see your personal impact?

Question 5: What type of training or coaching do you think you need to better understand, effectively support and work with students of different backgrounds and abilities?

Question 5: (community groups and students): If you were superintendent for a day, what are the top three changes you would make to improve inclusion in the Troy School District?

## Appendix B

### **Questions asked of the interviewees:**

Question 1: What diversity and/or inclusion issues/concerns do you see in the Troy School District as it relates to our students?

Question 2: In your opinion what is the biggest obstacle to overcome in improving how the Troy School District manages and supports diversity and inclusion?

Question 3: Are there existing stereotypes or attitudes (from teachers, administrators, etc.) that hinder students from being able to contribute fully and productively? Please elaborate.

Question 4: If it were up to you, what is the single most important change you would make with respect to improving inclusion in the school system?

Question 5: Have you received any training or coaching on how to work with students of different backgrounds and abilities? Please elaborate.

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November, 2009