

Chalk Talk: For Norwalk schools, resolving equity gaps starts with 'mindset shift'

By Roz McCarthy

Thomas McBryde Jr., Deputy Superintendent for Excellence, Equity and Inclusion, is new to Norwalk and will begin by learning about his new community. What is each school like? How well are the kids doing? How do parents get involved? How are teachers feeling? How do his new colleagues get along? And where the devil are those schools that are hidden on tiny residential streets?



Having been on the job for two weeks, he is still learning the names of the schools, but he is clear about his mission. His job, he said, is to ensure that there is an expectation of excellence for all students. Even his word choice reflects that expectation: students are scholars.

“We have to make sure that all our scholars are being supported to have success,” he said.

“Excellence” is the first and most important word in his job title, he said, and equity and inclusion is how we get there. When all students – special ed, multi-language learners, boys and girls, rich and poor, straight and gay – receive high quality instruction, the result is excellence for the whole district.

Although McBryde is new to Norwalk, he is not new to this type of work. Previously, he was the superintendent of District 19 in the East New York section of Brooklyn. District 19 is almost twice as big as Norwalk, with 38 schools and close to 20,000 students.

“District 19 is a hidden gem,” he said, “but one portion of kids achieved at a high rate, a middle group was doing OK, and another section of the district was not doing well.” His leadership team looked closely at student needs, the culture of the schools, the materials being used, and they did a quality review so that each principal could see the ranking of his school.

“We saw that curriculum varied within the district,” he said. After choosing one curriculum for the whole district, he looked at new leadership structures, professional development, teaching practices, and equitable resources. “We did quality reviews to diagnose the problems and offered support for solutions,” he said. Student achievement increased.

Superintendent of School Alexandra Estrella said Norwalk has begun to examine gaps in achievement, equity and inclusion. “We are working in the service of all of our children,” she said. “It’s a mindset shift.” In the past, responsibility for regular education, gifted education, special ed, and bilingual

education lay within different departments. She said McBryde's job is to see that everyone is working collectively for all children, that the goal of excellence is set for all children.

It's a tall order, but McBryde said he is ready. He quoted author Zora Neale Hurston to reflect his attitude: "If you jump at the sun, you may not land on the sun, but at least you'll be off the ground."

McBryde said he will build on the work that has already begun.

For the past year, principals have been working with Dr. Edward Fergus from Temple University. They examined data closely to see what disparities in achievement exist. They looked at how fairly kids have been given access to opportunities for learning. And they discussed beliefs within the community that affect teaching and learning. As a result, each school created an equity team.

"I am optimistic about Norwalk," said Dr. Fergus. "The leadership - the principals and assistant principals - are so hungry to do this work."

Curriculum work has been done this summer even in the midst of COVID. "After the pandemic, we have enormous learning gaps to fill," Dr. Estrella said. Some curriculum has been adjusted to align more closely with state standards, and extensive new reading materials have been purchased.

Even the school libraries have received scrutiny. "Our texts should fit the community we serve," she said. "Diversity looks different in different schools. We want to make sure that teachers have resources that students can relate to. Our children should engage in multicultural learning experiences."

An ambitious plan for school improvement is planned as well. Each year, half of the schools will engage in a two or three-day quality review. A team from Central Office will have in-depth talks with administrators, students, teachers and parents, and pore over the data. The team will visit at least six classes, more for the larger schools, and a report will be generated that diagnoses problem areas. "It will be a transparent process," said Estrella.

Most importantly, she said, central office administrators will work closely with the principals in 6-12 week segments to work on specific areas. "We will create cycles of support for the schools," she said. "Our Central Office staff is here to service the schools, and we have the right people on the team."

Support is a word that Estrella and McBryde use often – support for principals, for teachers, for children. McBryde said, "We want to be sure that kids feel, 'Someone is seeing me. I have a need. I belong.'"