



“People start from different places”

*“We are a mosaic of a community with many many identities and beliefs.
People start from different places.”*

- DEI Director

The 2020-2021 school year has been exceptional for myriad reasons. One can only imagine what students will recall about this year when they reflect upon it as adults. What will they say about the experiences they had? What will they recall as joyful or challenging? What will they remember about the way the adults - families, teachers, and administrators - carried themselves in utterly unique circumstances.

The movement for racial justice and equity that flowered in the wake of George Floyd’s senseless murder is now a year old. Though many schools have achieved measurable goals towards achieving ambitious diversity, equity, and inclusion goals over the course of this year, they are also encountering new and powerful forms of pushback that challenge the overall worth and legitimacy of DEI work in our communities. (In some cases, the argument is that DEI work actually does harm to school communities.)

In the midst of this often vocal and public pushback, we conducted two surveys of School Heads and DEI Directors to share insights with us regarding the following questions:

- **What have been the main sources of challenge and pushback to DEI work in your school?**
- **Who have been your most important allies and accomplices in your work this year?**
- **What strategies have you employed to manage and navigate pushback in your DEI leadership?**

The responses to these questions revealed leaders searching for ways to manage layered and complicated community dynamics, all while remaining centered on taking actions that would make their schools more inclusive and equitable places for each student. The main sources of pushback, and the grounds upon which they state their objections, share some common threads but are ultimately unique to the culture and population of each school community. As a new summer dawns and schools reflect on their DEI experiences this year, the voices in our survey make very clear that re-rooting themselves in their school’s mission statements, balancing openness with clarity of conviction, and staying centered on the needs of students will ultimately push their communities forward.

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Naming the Challenges

When asked to name the main sources of pushback to DEI work within their communities, Heads and DEI Directors shared some of the obstacles they have encountered with Board and faculty members:

- “Two challenges that I have found are educating the board and having them do more than provide lip service to DEI work, and the limited knowledge of teachers around DEI. Both stakeholders are caught up in being nice and being afraid of being considered racist.”
- “My main challenge has been a few very conservative Board members as well as a handful of faculty who have gone to the Board over my head. Apparently, they see DEI as a leftist political agenda, and they see LGBTQ+ informative work as appalling and uncomfortable.”
- “What’s been particularly challenging this year is the push/pull; our BIPOC faculty and staff (disproportionately low for our BIPOC student population) is pushing for more, now, and to make “mandates” for everyone to make this work their priority in teaching practice. There is urgency and anger. At the same time, it has been extremely difficult to do high-quality, meaningful, sustaining, collaborative learning and professional work as we’ve not been on campus together in over a year now. And there is also an emphasis on high-quality instruction in the virtual space and attentiveness to the SEL aspect of community care of students. It’s a hard year.”
- “Misalignment - meaning there are some families who do not understand DEI work as integral to academic excellence. This lack of understanding leads to judgment/concern about DEI as ‘add on work’ that blurs focus on providing an outstanding education...”

- “People unwilling to examine or acknowledge their unearned privilege, namely white male faculty members and Board members who have been most vocally resistant, but least willing to engage. I think there’s an underlying sense of threat to power and status in real antiracism work. And there are aspects of naming and recognizing white (supremacist) cultural norms as such that create tension when those cultural norms are employed in order to stifle DEI efforts.”

However, the constituent named most frequently in our survey as being resistant to DEI work by Heads and DEI Directors were parents and families:

- The main source of challenge and pushback has been in situations with parents questioning whether the work we are doing is appropriate for a particular age group that we are teaching (mostly surrounding the BLM Principle of queer affirming).
- Parents, because we have work to do in developing effective forms of engagement and communication that do not infringe on the school’s ability to make decisions that are in the best interest of students, teachers and staff.
- The parents have been most challenging with their notions of “color blindness” and worry that their white children will be labeled racist.
- Parents believing Antiracism is something it is not (Marxism, a form of racism, focused only on Black people) and pushing back against our progress.

“The HOS and DEI teams have partnered in unprecedented ways this year.” Allies and Accomplices

Before asking respondents to share strategies specifically aimed at navigating pushback, we thought it was important to first ask them to name some of the people in their communities who have been essential to supporting the school’s DEI goals. We also offer this section as a counterbalance to the previous section. While resistance to DEI work can be found in every corner of a school community, so, too, can constituents willing to partner and engage deeply to create meaningful change, such as:

- **“The Board Diversity Committee, the DEIB Coordinator, and our two counselors--emotional support team.”**
- **“Upper school students & DEI Director”**
- **“The HOS and DEI teams have partnered in unprecedented ways this year. Partnerships with Div Heads have also improved.”**
- **“Parents who were trained as Diversity Facilitators and teachers who have taken professional development for years.”**
- **“The four faculty members who worked on last summer’s DEI/Racial Literacy curriculum.”**

- **“Our Board chair, and the leaders of the Board Diversity Committee (all of whom are current parents), our Assistant Head of School, and Head of School. Also, our Middle School head has reached out proactively to our DEI office and established a trusting relationship.”**
- **“Parents - a small but mighty group has continued to press forward”**

Strong leadership and a clear vision from Heads of School and DEI Directors have always been at the core of effective, transformational DEI initiatives in schools.

The role played by allies and accomplices in schools is perhaps less lauded, but equally important. When pushback against DEI goals might result in leadership feeling or appearing isolated within a school community, it is the work’s key supporters who are often most instrumental in keeping the work moving forward. It is essential for leaders to know how to appropriately engage the people working tirelessly within their community to advance DEI goals. No DEI goal has ever been achieved in isolation.

“Tried to explain the ways in which DEI work is not ‘taking away from’ or ‘separate from’ academic focus but integral to the work of the school.” Strategies

The ways in which Heads and DEI Directors have begun to address and engage with pushback offers insight into some of the specific actions leaders have taken in the face of criticism:

- **“Communications - making sure all constituencies are informed sufficiently of the efforts under way or completed (in the doing, we sometimes forget to promote the work and then there can be misunderstandings that it’s not actually happening)”**

- **“I have brought in consultants to do work with both groups (Board and faculty) around DEI. It is never enough and it is never long enough. I have reminded stakeholders that as the HoS I am the chief diversity officer and I support behind the scenes and publicly the work of our DEI Coordinator.”**
- **“The way we have navigated (pushback) is with increased parent education, using our mission and diversity statements as guides, including providing relevant resources.”**

- “We have added a focus to DEI instruction and teaching practice to our review and assessment of teachers, creating time in documentation and in conferences to talk about DEI goals, experiences, and learning what teachers need and hope for. It’s just a constant process of listening, adjusting, and now, planning for a return to face-to-face, deeper work in the summer and coming year.”
- “Tried to explain the ways in which DEI work is not “taking away from” or “separate from” academic focus but integral to the work of the school. It strikes me that all of our schools need to do much more work in this area.”
- “I simply do not let resistance distract me from completing my task once approval has been granted. Whether it is one person that shows up or thirty people I give my presentation, my support or initiative the same level of importance and energy. Additionally, I circle back and make adjustments based on feedback received from the faculty/allies for greater success.”

Still, the strategy referenced most often in the survey was to tie the work of DEI directly to the central mission and values of the school. By making the connection between the school’s mission and DEI goals explicit, the overall value of the work for the entire community, including those who question it, becomes clearer.

- “We work to maintain balance, to identify our concerns clearly, to continue to see the big picture, to reaffirm our overall mission and sense of purpose, and to see this work as part of that broader and longer historical set of commitments that have always been central to who and what we are as a school.
- Grounding the work in our mission and in explicit commitments made last summer.
- Anchoring and centering the mission. Reaffirming and clarifying intention and purpose. One on one conversations to gain understanding
- We link directly to the mission and loop in the DEI team right away. We always loop influential allies in. We pre-think important conversations. The DEI/HOS partnership is EVERYTHING.”

At its heart, DEI work is about ensuring that every child in a community is able to come to school each day as the fullest, most authentic version of themselves without being subject to identity-based harm. Or, if they do encounter this harm, a school’s work in the realm of DEI should help the child and the community find ways to repair the harm. While schools are, by their very nature, places where debate and dialogue among community members should be vigorous and complex, each person within the community needs to be affirmed, seen, and valued in order to fully partake in the conversation. It is because DEI is foundational to creating healthy, identity-safe communities that we must think critically and creatively about how we engage with its detractors.



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Every Voice Matters.