



To: Emily Parks, Superintendent
From: Allison Borchers, Assistant Superintendent
Date: April 1, 2021
Re: DEI update - curriculum changes

One of our district-wide strategic priorities for the past several years has been to *implement programs and instructional practices that recognize and support the needs of students and families in an increasingly diverse community.*

A critical component of that work has centered on curriculum. Our ultimate goals are twofold: first, to make sure that our curriculum offers all of our students, including students of color, both “mirrors and windows”, i.e., opportunities to reflect on their own lives as well as to explore the wider world. In addition, as the district grapples with the full sense of what it means to commit to being an anti-racist institution, we are also starting to examine how our curriculum and instructional practices either perpetuate or begin to dismantle injustice and inequality. To date, while we are starting to make changes in curriculum and instructional practices across all content areas, the greatest progress has been in English (our most recently completed curriculum review) and social studies (review currently in progress), particularly at the high school. A summary of the work to date in these areas appears below:

Westwood High School

The high school has made systemic changes in English and social studies classes that are being implemented consistently across grade levels. In English, a survey of literature selections in all grades in the wake of the English language arts review indicated a need to balance classical texts with missing perspectives and voices. Since the review, the department has added new texts in all grade levels, shifted the sophomore course from a class focused primarily on European authors to a world literature perspective (changes that will be implemented starting next fall), and the junior American Literature course, in addition to diversifying texts, is encouraging students to critically examine the connection between identity and opportunity in America. For example, an essential question for the junior curriculum is: “Considering racial and social inequities, how does American education either empower or stifle personal growth?” Finally, two new senior elective offerings (“Hidden Voices: Race and Culture in Literature” and “Hidden Voices: Gender and Orientation in Literature”) give students further opportunities to explore the experiences and perspectives of historically underrepresented groups.

The social studies department has also revised course content as well as guiding questions in grades 9, 10 and 11. Since 2019, the grade 9 world history course has been framed around a new guiding question (“How do diverse societies respond to common problems?”) and has integrated new content designed to help students think about the impact of race and racism. In studying the medieval kingdoms, students now learn about the great kingdoms and trade empires of Africa. In a unit on exploration, conquest and colonization, they examine the Columbian

Exchange and subsequent transatlantic economy and consider the impact of and reactions to these developments from multiple perspectives. And, a brand new unit considers the persistent challenge of systemic racism in America.

In 10th grade modern history, starting this past fall, a revised course question and content are also introducing diverse perspectives. Students consider the Haitian Revolution, National Identity in Latin America, and the Rwandan Genocide, for example, as the question “Has modernization created a more just world?”

The 11th grade U.S. History course is also being updated to align with updated State Frameworks. While this work is still in progress, educators are developing unit plans that consider multiple perspectives and that help students grapple with the question of to what degree the US has lived up to its founding ideals.

Thurston Middle School

At the middle school level, students are developing their skills as readers and writers, and instead of focusing on a particular era or grouping within literature, teachers pull from a wide range of sources to help students wrestle with the very broad question “Why do writers write?” In the wake of the English review, core texts being used in all grades are being examined and updated in order to provide a broader range of perspectives and to help them consider more diverse answers to the question of what motivates authors to write. In addition to longer works (e.g., *American Born Chinese*, a graphic novel by Gene Luen Yang or *The Crossover*, a novel in verse form by Kwame Alexander), students read a very diverse selection of short stories and poems (e.g., “Raymond’s Run” by Toni Cade Bambara and “Out of the Silence” by Kekla Magoon).

In middle school social studies, teachers in all grades are starting to make changes to implement updated curriculum frameworks, and have modified course questions and content in order to do so. The two-year sequence in 6th and 7th grade explores world civilizations and geography, and during both years, students consider how the past has shaped the present by discussing current events as well as history of the ancient, medieval and modern world. Students move from continent to continent and through different time periods as they explore our world’s geography and rich history.

6th graders study ancient Africa, the rise of the great African kingdoms, and the impact of colonization; the ancient civilizations of Western Asia (The Middle East), the rise of monotheistic religions, colonization and its impact on the formation of nations in the region; and ancient Greece and Rome, including the impact of these civilizations on the modern world. In 7th grade, students learn about the impact of religion, social structure and disease in medieval Europe and consider the changes brought on by the Renaissance; study the cultures and religious traditions that grew out of ancient East Asia; and learn about the challenges related to trade and climate change in Oceania. In both grades, teachers incorporate opportunities for students to understand current events and controversies.

The 8th grade curriculum has undergone the most change in recent years. The updated social studies framework, while still rooted in American history, places a much heavier emphasis on civics. Overarching course questions have been revised: “How do our values shape our views

on democracy, current issues, and the creation of just communities?” and “How do injustices occur and what are our responsibilities as citizens when they exist?” In terms of content, the course explicitly addresses historical and current injustices and the attempts to address those injustices.

Elementary Schools

At the elementary level, there has historically been significantly less consistency from classroom to classroom when it comes to text selections in literacy and content focus in literacy in social studies. An initial step in working toward a curriculum that represents diverse perspectives and is explicitly anti-racist has been the introduction of a core curriculum resource and common expectations in literacy. In the wake of the recent English language arts/literacy review, Westwood has formally adopted the [Units of Study in Reading and Writing](#) program out of the [Teachers College Reading and Writing Project \(TCRWP\)](#) at Columbia University.

While the Units of Study are well-regarded within the field in terms of pedagogical approach, the materials have also been controversial because the anchor texts (whole class read aloud texts) and text sets that were curated for use with each unit were not especially diverse in terms of authors or representation of major characters. This controversy was magnified by the fact that the TCRWP curriculum is used in many New York’s city schools. In 2019, TCRWP conducted an examination of their curriculum materials using a tool designed by the Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools (NYU). As a result, they have started the process of [updating resources to ensure that texts and recommended strategies are culturally responsive](#) and promote equitable outcomes for all students. Meanwhile, our literacy team had already started making changes to texts in order to address the need for more diverse books (e.g., the addition of *Indian Shoes* by Cynthia Leitich Smith to the grade 3 text set).

Elementary social studies lacks a core curriculum resource--a fact that makes consistency from classroom to classroom more of a challenge. This year, we have encouraged teachers to pilot resources, like the “[History’s Mysteries](#)” units, that use primary sources, support the development of critical thinking skills, and encourage the examination of events from multiple perspectives. The social studies review is restarting this spring with a series of meetings in May. One goal of these sessions will be to generate a set of preliminary recommendations so we can begin to see improvements as early as next school year.

While we have started this work in earnest, there is more work ahead. It is also important to note that an anti-racist approach that encourages critical thinking, supports classroom discussion of difficult issues and introduces diverse voices and perspectives is not an uncontroversial stance. Some parents have expressed a concern about the introduction of difficult, politically charged or controversial topics (e.g., discussion of the Black Lives Matter movement in social studies classes). A primary worry that these parents cite is related to teachers’ capacity to create a forum that is unbiased and allows students of differing views to share ideas and opinions. Professional development this past fall introduced the dignity framework for classroom conversation and was geared toward helping teachers develop their skills as facilitators of discussion. Ongoing anti-bias training will be a necessary and important component of this work.

The Westwood Public Schools policy on Teaching About Controversial Issues (IMB) cites the importance of preparing students “for intelligent and conscientious participation as citizens in our democratic society” and notes that “one step toward meeting this goal is to introduce students to reasoned and dispassionate approaches to the analysis of historical and contemporary social, and political issues.” The policy also lays out helpful guidelines for teacher-led discussions that will be incorporated as part of our ongoing anti-bias training efforts.

Some families expressed a worry about introducing difficult or painful topics to students in younger grades. The American Psychological Association (APA) and the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) both support the practice of proactively bringing up sensitive or tough topics with kids. According to the APA:

As much as adults may try to avoid difficult topics, children often learn or know when something sad or scary happens. If adults don't talk to them about it, a child may overestimate what is wrong or misunderstand adults' silence. So, be the first to bring up the difficult topic. When parents tackle difficult conversations, they let their children know that they are available and supportive.
([*“How to Talk to Children About Difficult News,”*](#) updated January 14, 2021)

The AAP offers [helpful guidance](#) for parents, teachers and others on how to broach topics in a way that meets children where they are developmentally. Continued professional development for teachers about how to manage difficult conversations with younger children will be critical. In addition, it will be important to work with our community partners at Westwood Youth and Family Services in providing parents and guardians with supports for navigating these conversations at home.