Katonah-Lewisboro School District
40 North Salem Road, Cross River, NY 10536
KLschools.org

Lenore Person, Communications Specialist
lperson@klschools.org

(web version with photos: https://www.klschools.org/groups/57961/district_news/dei)

Beyond Black History Month
DEI – a year-round focus

Small nods rippled through Geneve Patterson and Susan Hirsch's classroom. The Katonah Elementary School fifth graders were watching a video of Youth Poet Laureate Amanda Gorman reciting her poem, "The Hill We Climb" at President Joe Biden's inauguration. Their eyes lit up as they connected her ideas about diversity, unity and personal power to what they'd been studying throughout the year.

"To have hope, we need to speak out for what we believe," said one of the students afterwards, nailing one of the big ideas of the poem.

Lessons like this, which integrate social justice and personal responsibility into literature, history and other classes, take place throughout the year at Katonah-Lewisboro Schools. "A continued emphasis on issues of diversity, justice, equity, and inclusion is a key focus area for our district this year, as it will be for years to come," said Superintendent Andrew Selesnick. "Change in any of these areas is typically not swift. That's why the commitment must be for the long-term."

It starts with identity

At the elementary level, the work begins by helping students understand who they are. "Everything starts with identity," said Jocelyn Lividini, a fourth-grade teacher at Increase Miller Elementary School. She serves as the elementary-level curriculum integration leader of social-emotional learning (SEL) and DEI—which she calls two parts of the same whole. "If we understand ourselves and our emotions, we are able to understand and empathize with others—the first step towards equity."

Understanding ourselves, understanding others

Many teachers start the discussion of "who am I" with young students by creating identity webs. Each child collages or draws a constellation of images that represent family and friends, hobbies and favorite foods—what's special about them.

This year, kindergarteners at Meadow Pond Elementary School created identity webs along with reading the book “All the Colors We Are” by Katie Kissinger, a child-friendly, scientific explanation of skin color. They used an array of crayons reflective of skin tones from across the globe to add that information to their identity webs.

“Our curriculum still focuses on the self and others,” said kindergarten teacher Jackie Kovatch. “But I now look at how I can teach it through the lens of diversity and inclusion.” She notices a shift as a result of the read alouds and authors she chooses to use in her classroom. “My students and I have become more comfortable having conversations about identity and the conversations are more in-depth and thoughtful.”

KLSD is working to ground its teaching in equity and justice

Teachers share ideas and lessons that fold in racial equity at grade level meetings, professional development days and staff meetings. Some also participate in the district’s Equity and Racial Justice Committee, looking at issues of equity and racial justice in the classroom with the goal of closing gaps and supporting all students. Others are empowered by the All In Action Group, a racial equity think tank led by Staff Developers Candy Wilmot and Catherine Graybosch, at which teachers help one another in thinking about how best to revise curriculum and respond to current events.

“What’s been missing?” asked Wilmot. She was referring to the work of reconciling what has been traditionally taught in schools across the country with the narratives—particularly of Black and brown Americans—that that have been omitted. “We want to teach the whole story by filling in those gaps.”

She cites an audit being done by the high school’s English department, through which teachers will incorporate more historically marginalized voices, as well as the relatively new class Facing History and Ourselves, which requires engagement in civic action, as solid progress.

Integrating an equity lens

Graybosch works alongside middle school educators in integrating an equity lens on all units of study. She mentions sixth grade classes using identity webs to better understand themselves, each other and characters in literature, seventh graders who will be studying the history of oppression through the lens of resistance and resilience, and eighth graders writing opinion pieces about current events which incorporate the dynamics of power and opportunity in a variety of social groups.

She started the Social Justice club at the middle school to engage students in everyday equity work, helping them see it as the norm, not the exception. “They are very interested in action,” she said.

Themes of equity and diversity spiral through students' K-12 experience

Patterson and Hirsch's students were well prepared for the ambitious assignment of analyzing "The Hill We Climb." Earlier in the year, many fourth and fifth graders across the district read portions of the young adult edition of "Dear America: Notes of an Undocumented Citizen" by Jose Vargas, and considered the memoir's themes of citizenship, belonging and identity, ideas that also appeared in "The Hill We Climb."

All John Jay High School students were required to read "Dear America," too. The community read organized by English language arts teacher Vicky Weiss included a live discussion with the author in fall 2021. Class discussions about the book and immigration issues inspired the school's Amnesty International club to do a fundraiser for Proyecto Faro, a non-profit organization that supports immigrants.

The goal: equipping students with the tools to be changemakers

In this way, themes of diversity, equity and inclusion spiral through the year—and through students' K-12 experience, supporting the district's goal of equipping its students with a meaningful education about inequity and racism and the tools to be change-makers in their world.