

# MEMORANDUM

**To:** BOE and Mr. Thomas Scarice

**From:** 31 concerned Westport parents (and counting)

**RE:** Disciplinary and restorative policy to address protected class harassment and bullying within the Westport School District

**Date:** March 5, 2024

Based on the call for participatory policymaking during the town hall meeting on 2/27/2024 of the Westport BOE Policy meeting, we have short, medium, and long-term policy proposals to address the increasing prevalence of racism, antisemitism, and overall protected class harassment.

## **Short-term policies to be approved by the BOE and implemented immediately:**

- Block students who violate the protective class harassment governance from sports and leadership positions during their suspension period. Remove VI. Procedures Governing Suspension 13 "unless the responsible administrator or the administrator's designee specifically authorizes a student to enter school property for a specified purpose or to participate in a particular school-sponsored activity" and specify that students will not be able to participate in sports, orchestra, staples players, or leadership-related activities during suspension.
- Modify VI. Procedures Governing Suspension 9 and 10. Notice of suspension specific for protective class harassment shall be recorded in the student's cumulative educational record and not be shortened for students with first-time suspension. In both cases, the suspension notice should remain in the educational record until the student completes a bias training specific to the offense (i.e., ADL training, NFHS bias training) and submits a professor-reviewed 250-word reflective essay for middle school and 1,000 words for high school.)

## **Medium-term policies to be implemented before the next academic year:**

- Review the middle school and high school social studies curriculum to make sure it equips students with an understanding of biases and how they can avoid harming others with their behavior.
- Make community service/volunteering, preferably outside of Westport, and bias training mandatory for ALL students.
- Review the mission and vision of the school district to ensure that kindness, good character, and civic-mindedness are part of our school's culture.
- Support and empower school diversity initiatives that increase cross-cultural and identity understanding.
- Report protected class harassment indicators such as relapsing rates, number of suspensions, number of reported cases, etc., on a quarterly basis.

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**Long-term policies to be implemented in the next five years<sup>1</sup> within the context of the restorative justice procedures that will become law in CT next year in lieu of expulsions for “non-safety related offenses” that prevent the district from adopting a zero-tolerance policy:**

- Assign up to 180 hours of specifically outlined community service and a reflective 1,000-word essay as a restorative sanction within the context of a restorative circle to middle and high school students who violate the code of conduct's policies on protected class harassment. The student should have a note in their file about their violation and be blocked from student leadership positions and sports until the completion of this requirement. Completing community hours should be a requirement to shorten the suspension period of first-time-suspended students and remove a notice of suspension from the cumulative educational record (180 assigned hours.)

The current code of conduct has two salient loopholes that enable the concerning behavior (VI. Procedures Governing Suspension 9. And 10.) We find it's of utmost urgency to address the gaps in these rules to deter protected class harassment and keep children who are being victimized safe. Notices of suspension should not be expunged from the cumulative record by just graduating high school. This policy overlooks an opportunity to educate children about the consequences of their actions and how they can make amends for the harm caused by their behavior. We are also advocating for the suspension of individuals from leadership positions, including athletics, until they complete their required bias training/service hours. One of the Westport parents backing this proposal emphasizes the importance of this policy: “As a former member of my Universities judicial board where I held a judicial role for 4 years, we found that over 80% of primary perpetrators of civil rights infractions and sexual assaults on campus were members of a sports team or fraternity. These peer-led and often pressured organizations have been seen to insulate young adults enabling behaviors such as these infractions and often protect them from being held accountable. Suspension from these activities would have a tremendous impact on behavior.”<sup>2</sup>

In order to help students avoid disciplinary action in the first place and promote a culture of belonging and respect, the Westport School District should require community service/volunteer hours and bias training for ALL students. Recent research suggests that schools offering a variety of diversity education activities, such as diversity clubs, lessons, or special events, are associated with lower rates of bias-based bullying among students. Specifically, attending schools with more diversity education opportunities was linked to reduced odds of bullying related to race, ethnicity, or national origin among boys of color, bullying related to sexual orientation among gay, bisexual, and questioning boys, and bullying related to disability among boys with physical health problems. These results indicate that diversity education may help

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<sup>1</sup> Successfully implementing restorative justice in school is a process that can take up to five years: Maura Shramko, Kara J. Beckman, Abigail Gadea, Emily Goodhue, Miles Davison, Becky McCammon & Barbara J. McMorris. (2023) School Leaders' Perspectives Implementing Whole School Restorative Practices Across Grade Levels: A Case Study of a School-Based Pilot Project. School Psychology Review 0:0, pages 1-15.

<sup>2</sup> See the list of Westport parents backing this proposal and their feedback/comments in the attached excel sheet

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protect vulnerable students from specific types of bias-based bullying. Therefore, implementing diversity education as a fundamental part of anti-bullying efforts and policy is recommended.<sup>3</sup>

Anne Van Goethem's research indicates that community service/voluntarism positively influences adolescents' behavior and attitudes towards school, self, others, and society. She found that intensive service experiences enhance learning outcomes, especially when accompanied by frequent reflection. The impact of community service on adolescents is influenced by the amount of service performed; adolescents derive greater benefits from community service when they engage in it more frequently. There is no apparent threshold where the benefits plateau or become negative, and the positive effects of community service can extend up to 180 hours of participation. Whether the service was mandatory or voluntary doesn't impact the overall positive effects.<sup>4</sup> Community service hours would be a restorative sanction within the context of a harm repair circle, where students "are guided to understand the harm their actions caused, take steps to repair the harm, and make a plan to avoid making the same mistakes in the future."<sup>5</sup> The community service hours should ideally be in communities outside of Westport. Some hours could be integrated with the activities of the school. For instance, a California school district offers community service hours to students who participate in Black History Month events.

We believe in the potential of these policies to address the increasing cases of racism, antisemitism, and overall protected class harassment within the district. It expands on the restorative practices efforts while giving victims a sense of justice, keeping victims safe, and educating students so they graduate from the Westport School System, being kind members of society. Please let us know if you have any questions about the impact measurement of our proposed policy.

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<sup>3</sup> Eisenberg, M. E., Gower, A. L., Brown, C., Nam, Y.-S., & Ramirez, M. R. (2022). School-Based Diversity Education Activities and Bias-Based Bullying Among Secondary School Students. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 37(17-18), NP15992-NP16012. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08862605211025016>

<sup>4</sup> Van Goethem, Anne, et al. "The Role of Reflection in the Effects of Community Service on Adolescent Development: A Meta-Analysis." *Child Development*, vol. 85, no. 6, 2014, pp. 2114–30. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24696717>. Accessed 28 Feb. 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Darling-Hammond, Sean, et al. "Effectiveness of restorative justice in US K-12 schools: A review of quantitative research." *Contemporary School Psychology* 24 (2020): 295-308.