

**Lincoln School District
Anti-Racist-Inclusion-Diversity-Equity (AIDE)
Engaging School Community
Focus Group Summary Report
Fall 2020**



I. Introduction

Evolution LLC, in collaboration with the Building Caring Schools Program of the National Coalition Building Institute (NCBI) was hired in the fall of 2020 to conduct a series of focus groups of students, parents and staff of the Lincoln School Community. Twelve focus groups were conducted involving seventy-two participants. (See [Appendix I](#) for a list of the groups conducted.) This report will detail key strengths identified from the focus groups that the district can build upon as it develops an AIDE plan. It will summarize areas for further exploration and attention and make suggestions on how to address the issues raised. This report is not meant to be a definitive assessment of the Lincoln SD Anti-Racist-Inclusion-Diversity-Equity experience. It is a reflection of a cross section of the school community we listened to. The issues named were consistently expressed.

II. Purpose of the Focus Groups

- To listen to and record first hand experiences of both white and non-white students, parents, and staff from the Lincoln School District through the anti-Racist-inclusion-diversity-equity lens.
- To engage and involve a cross section of the school community in the discussion and direction of the Lincoln SD's AIDE initiative.
- To identify common AIDE issues that participants believe need to be addressed in order to reach the AIDE goals of the district.

III. Questions

In the focus groups, seven themes were explored and participants were asked to respond from their own perspective. Themes explored:

- Being listened to by school staff
- Being respected by school staff
- Staff effectiveness with bullying and harassment
- Impact of race on how school staff treated and disciplined students
- Importance of having non-white teachers
- Positive relationships with staff for support
- Future hopes for the school district

Participants were given a question related to each theme and then presented with the options to vote: yes, no, sometimes or don't know. (The [Appendix II](#) chart summarizes their voting responses.) Facilitators then asked participants to give examples and to elaborate on their answers. The common issues in this report were identified through the telling of participant's own experiences and also their perception and/or witnessing the experiences of others. The issues described below came from these answers. Participant responses will be noted in the report in italics.

IV. Key Strengths

There were key strengths identified across all focus groups that could be building blocks for the District as it develops its DEI comprehensive plan.

1. Engagement and caring

Students, parents and staff volunteered on their own time to participate in the focus group. They were engaged in the questions and wanted to help improve the school environment to be inclusive and more equitable.

"I want diligence on district's part to stay in and work on this. Be realistic and serious about real change."

2. Supportive relationships with staff

The majority of participants responded that they had a relationship with a staff person and/or a teacher.

"Online schooling teacher set up program to talk about our feelings. She set up live meets for students who wanted to talk."

"Had the best teacher conference in years this year because we talked beyond the academics, we discussed issues of adjustment."

"At a faculty meeting the principal looked at everyone, acknowledged their exhaustion and expressed her concern and suggested they leave early and go out for a walk."

3. Support for DEI improvements

Groups expressed a desire for more support, tools, activities and opportunities to foster a more equitable school environment. Students, parents and staff shared examples they would like to see more of.

"I want time to build depth and breadth of this work to create safety in doing this work district wide. I want the time and resources to learn and explore and do this well and be productive. All of this will take time and energy."

"We don't want anyone left behind and anyone pushed ahead. This is forever work. Not just a short-term initiative."

"I feel like we should have clubs about racial issues similar to the SAGA group to help us learn and be aware of other people and their experiences and have activities related to this as well. To have different ways of learning for people."

4. Building Upon Successful Outcomes

Students, parents, and staff gave examples of activities, interventions and approaches that had helped to interrupt and correct bullying and bias as well as to help non-white students have more of a sense of belonging in their school.

"As a parent I worked with a teacher when my child was the recipient of bias hazing by another student. Together we talked with the students and the other parents. It resulted in the students taking leadership against bullying and building a stronger relationship with each other."

"My child's classroom teachers over several years invited me into their classroom to share information about our culture's history, traditions and celebrations."

"I like it when the teacher takes time for us to talk about what is happening."

"When I had a Black teacher in elementary school I felt it easier to relate to them and tell them how I feel."



V. Address

Issues to

1. Racial Bias

In a school community that is a majority White, Black, Biracial, and non-White people stand out. In Lincoln SD, Whites and non-Whites noticed how non-White students were often treated differently. White and non-White students could be exhibiting similar behaviors or participate in the same incident and the White student behavior would be described in "developmental terms" – (he or she is assertive). While the Black student's behavior would be described in "behavioral terms" – (he or she is aggressive or acting out).

"My child has darker skin and she is described as bossy and bully-like and the white kids are described as assertive."

"This year – I feel more like a target in class – called out for small things and yelled at but not the white kids. For example if I stand up I get yelled at but not the white kids."

"They assume I'm not as smart because I am not from a good educated place."

Anecdotal from son: "certain children are disciplined and others get away with more."

"Don't always feel our resilience and flexibility is understood and respected."

2. Parent Communication

White parents reported higher satisfaction in being listened to and respected by school staff than non-white parents. Non-white parents expressed frustration in how they had to advocate for themselves in order to have their concerns addressed. A key factor was the timeframe it took for a concern to be addressed. Both White and non-White parents also described examples of support from the district.

"Been in lots of districts. Feel questions responded to quickly. Feel my student is more supported here."

"Generally yes and positive in particular around special ed."

"I can go to the classroom teacher for help with my child."

"We are hands on parents but imagine children and parents who don't feel like they can push back. I have felt like a guest and I have been there for eight years. Some parents just endure."

"They are getting a great education. I am still not happy because of how hard I have to fight for my children."

"Now I do feel it is happening but it was a process to get there. I had to get involved with the teachers, PTA, and lots of activities. They are especially careful about not walking over my child but it took seven years to get there."

3. School Discipline

Two main concerns were in regards to school disciplinary practices. First, non-White students expressed, and others perceived that they received stricter and more disciplinary actions by teachers than non-white students. Secondly, all groups noted that there were inconsistencies on how discipline was administered. Participants stated that there seemed to be no clear policy and practice that was being followed by staff.

"Students of color seem to get more disciplined – impression that has been there for a number of years."

"The Metco students are looked at through a racial lens."

"Staff often doesn't have a full cultural context to understand the black child experience. They see certain behavior as aggressive by Blacks but not by Whites."

"Black students are perceived 'guilty' vs. innocent."

"Our consistency can vary."

"Depends on student and adults involved – lack of consistency."

"When it reaches point that parent is involved, then there is an action plan for how to manage a student."

"I can lean on my colleagues and can ask for help, but lack of policy is an issue."

4. Boston – Lincoln Connection

Students, staff and parents expressed a wish for more structure and support for students and families to interact and have shared activities. It was noted several times that there seemed to be more structured events in prior years.

"Feels like in the past, METCO students and school and community did a much better job of making Boston feel more part of the community. Families used to take them into their homes. Staff and community don't seem to make the same effort as used to happen."

"Students used to go to each other's houses. Reverse visiting buses. Events were organized once a month. Now there is definitely less interaction back and forth. Seems increasingly difficult to find people to be host families."

5. Staff Diversity

The one AIDE issue that all groups advocated for was more Black and diverse staff. Non-White students expressed how important it is to have a teacher that *"looked like me"* for a sense of belonging. White students, parents, and staff also agreed to the benefits of a more diverse staff to everyone's education as well as overall.

"Very difficult to be only one or two in the room."

"In Lincoln they need to make more of an effort to recruit teachers of color. This is not the focus of this district. You come into the building and all you see are pictures of white people (students) everywhere."

"I think you would learn more about personal experience if you had black teachers. Better way to learn about how people go through racism and also is better for students of color who have someone who looks like them."

"Students need to see teachers and administrators who look like them. They need role models."

"For us Black students someone to reach out to – can't go to a White teacher all the time – in 5th grade there was a Black teacher and it was very helpful – if I got called out by her – I didn't have to worry if it was racist."

"I've had a Black teacher and I learned so much more because I get to learn more personally about their experience."



including their race, have shaped their own education experiences and inform their interpretations of student behavior. White educators need to engage in their own learning and critical self-reflection to understand how their lives and views have been shaped by their unearned advantage and experiences as white people and actively build their knowledge of how the legacy of race, racism, and systemic oppression are operating in schools and communities today.”
- National Equity Project



VI. Suggestions

“During this painful time, let us work together to be a light to break the darkness that silence can bring. Let us facilitate education, healing, connection, and let us support each other and our communities. Every one of us needs to be part of the solution and we must work together to ensure that there is justice for all.” - Taken from the Lincoln SD AIDE statement

We offer the following suggestions for addressing the issues identified by the focus group participants.

1. Include AIDE as part of the staff development program

To address racial bias and provide staff a full understanding and a skill set to be an AIDE educator. Topics to include but not be limited to are:

- Understanding the impact of systemic racism and implicit bias and corrective measures
- Communication skills to discuss race, privilege and bias with students, peers and families
- Intervention strategies when there are incidents dealing with micro-aggressions and bias.
- Culturally relevant K-8 curriculum to give students a historical and social-emotional learning and appreciation of race and diversity.
- Learning approaches that build trust and rapport across race, class, and culture to ensure enhanced communication.

“Educators need regular opportunities to increase their self-awareness about how their various social identities,

2. Establish a consistent school discipline policy and practice

- That provides guidance for staff, students and parents.
- That is monitored on an ongoing basis to check for any disparity in its application.
- That provides staff training and coaching to support discipline practices that are bias free and developmental versus punitive.

3. Hire and support a diverse staff.

This will take an intentional plan of action to identify a pool of diverse candidates for school district openings. This plan should also include a system for current minority staff and new hires to support their full participation and recognition in district activities.

4. Foster Boston- Lincoln communication and connection

There is a built in structural as well as a racial divide between the two communities. Even with best intentions by district and individuals from both communities it is a challenging bridge to cross. It will take an intentional program approach to build the relationships and trust between Boston parents and school staff. It will be important to continue the conversations with the Boston parents and staff to ensure their concerns are heard and addressed. In additional planned activities and strategies will be needed to build relationships between Boston and Lincoln students and their families.

5. Build internal capacity

Develop an AIDE Advocate Team. This team could provide support and assistance in monitoring and

addressing the issues raised in this report as well as in the following areas to support the District's AIDE goals.

- Act as “bridge builders” to strengthen relationships across the school community.
- Act as advocates to ensure district policies and practices operate outside of bias.
- Provide training and resources to the school community to enhance the awareness of diversity, equity and inclusion.
- Be a response team when incidents occur related to bias and prejudice.
- Provide support for the District AIDE Coordinator.

6. Additional resources

The following organizations have free resources that could assist with the recommendations made in this report and to support AIDE work in the Lincoln School District.

1. Teaching Tolerance – Southern Poverty Law Center: www.tolerance.org
2. National Equity Project: www.nationalequityproject.org
3. Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium: www.maec.org
4. Aspen Institute – Call to Action: www.aspensintitute.org
5. National School Climate Center: www.schoolclimate.org
6. A Guide to Equity and Antiracism for Educators – Edutopia – George Lucas Education Foundation



VII. Conclusion

The results of the Focus Groups pointed out some strengths as well as areas needing to be addressed. The suggestions give some directions for moving forward. This combined with the District Administrative Council Leadership team commitment to address AIDE as a district priority is a good foundation. (See Appendix III to see the equity items they identified for the district.) As stated earlier there is commitment from students, parents and staff to address the racial disparities identified and to go beyond correction to creating a school community that embraces diversity, equity and inclusion.

In one of the focus groups of students, the facilitator asked: “If you could wave a magic wand to make a change you’d like to see for Lincoln School District, what would it be?” One student offered a strong recommendation on how to go forward.

“If we just had more discussions about race and had a more culturally diverse curriculum it would be good for everyone. Not my White friends fault she didn’t know when Black History Month is. It’s a problem – in order to be global citizens, we need to know about who we are going to be sharing the world with. We can’t have ignorant people running the world.”

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