How Franklin County & North Quabbin Schools are Advancing Racial Justice:

A Regional Snapshot

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Communities that Care COALITION

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INTRODUCTION

Racism and the structural and institutional barriers imposed by it on people of color are significant drivers of inequitable health outcomes. The Center for Disease Control states: "A growing body of research shows that centuries of racism in this country has had a profound and negative impact on communities of color"[1]. Sandra L. Shullman, PhD, president of the American Psychological Association states: "Racism is taking a heavy psychological toll on our African American citizens. Racism is associated with psychological consequences, including depression, anxiety and other serious, sometimes debilitating conditions, including post-traumatic stress disorder and substance use disorders"[2]. Since 2019, law and policy makers from over 50 American municipalities and three states have officially highlighted racism as a public health crisis[3].

Professionals from other fields join health experts in naming the detrimental effects of racial inequities connected to one of the important social determinants of health, Social Environment & Education. The Department of Secondary and Elementary Education (DESE) in Massachusetts has explicitly recognized that in order to improve the educational and social environment for all students, equity-based practices and culturally responsive teaching is integral to a high quality learning environment[4].
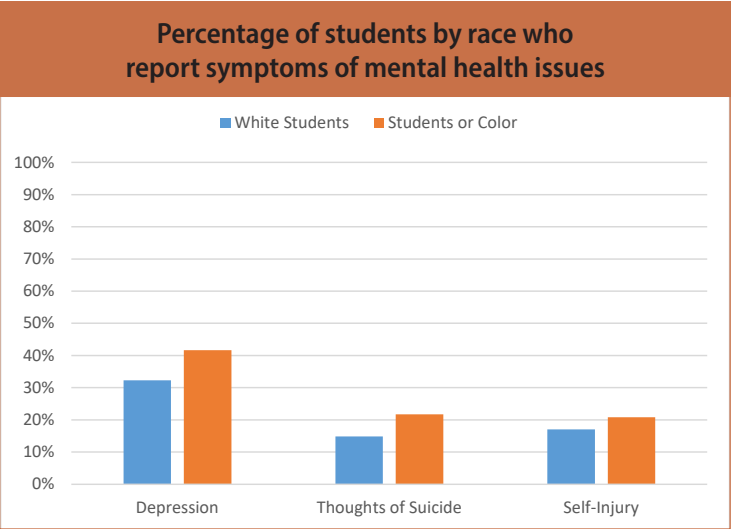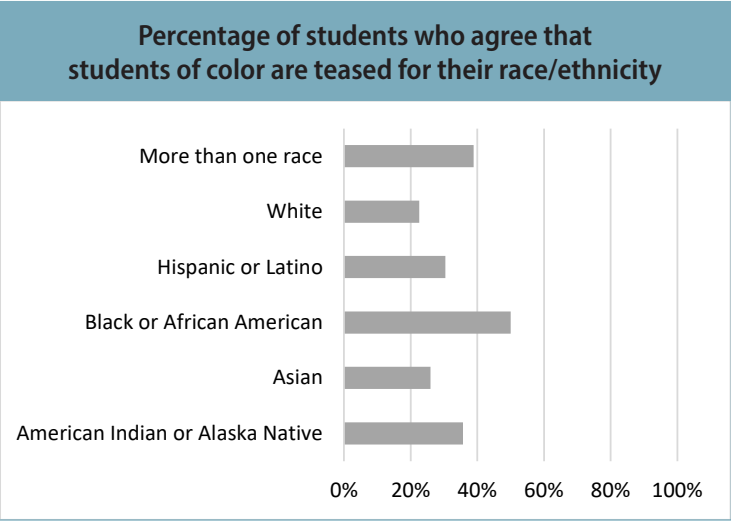
School is how our youth receive their formal education, and generally consists of their primary social environment as well. Young people spend approximately half of their waking hours in school and school-related activities. Racism and structural and institutional barriers can directly affect young people's experience at school, subsequently the onus is on schools and their community supports to ensure access to a learning experience free from racially-based inequities.

In Franklin County and the North Quabbin region, public schools have been becoming increasingly diverse – 15% of students identified as people of color in 2010 and in 2019 22% identified as POC[5]. Yet the region is still predominantly white (93% of the total population identified as white in the 2018 American Community Survey), and the overall lack of diversity in the region presents unique challenges for the growing number of people of color.

The Communities That Care Teen Health Survey data from 2019 shows that nearly half of local Black/African American students agree with the statement "Students at this school are teased or picked on about their race or ethnicity", while less than a fifth of white students agree with that statement. Because of these and other disparities in their experiences, students of color in our region are more likely to report symptoms of depression, self-injury, and thoughts of suicide, and are more likely to report early initiation of drugs and alcohol.

Out of these understandings, this collaborative project: ADVANCING RACIAL JUSTICE IN SCHOOLS (ARJIS) was born.

Percentage of students who agree that students of color are teased for their race/ethnicity

Percentage of students by race who report symptoms of mental health issues
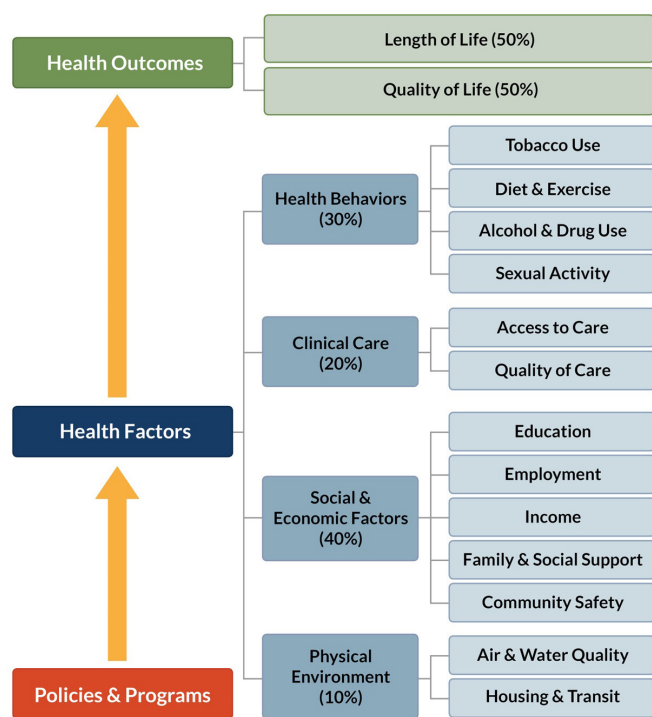
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[1] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021.
[2] American Psychological Association, 2020.
[3] Why declaring racism a public health crisis matters, 2020.
[4] Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (n.d.).
[5] Franklin County/North Quabbin Teen Health Survey.

ADVANCING RACIAL JUSTICE IN SCHOOLS: HISTORY AND GOALS

In 2019, the Franklin Regional Council of Governments' Partnership for Youth (PFY), on behalf of the Racial Justice Workgroup and the Regional School Health Task Force of the Communities That Care Coalition (CTC) sought and received funding from Health Resources in Action (HriA) to support the nine school districts in Franklin County and the North Quabbin in their efforts to advance racial justice in schools. This partnership understood that more needed to be done to address racism and barriers to health equity that specifically focused around the health and well-being of young people in the region. Through this project, the collaborators identified above intended to address racism and structural and institutional barriers by working with the public school districts in Franklin County and the North Quabbin; the team planned to identify and adopt programs, policies, and practices that would effectively address the most pressing racial justice needs in local schools.

This collaborative project was planned to address the social determinants of health by improving school climate, making disciplinary policies and enforcement more equitable, reducing teacher/administrator bias, reducing bullying, making the curriculum more attentive to racial justice, and improving school connectedness, particularly for students of color.

Advancing Racial Justice in Schools: Project Process

A REVIEW OF NATIONAL BEST PRACTICES in school-based racial justice work, to include: hiring practices, professional development, school discipline, school climate, policing in schools, curricula, events & programs, grading & testing, evaluation & supervision, and access to resources & opportunities.

SCHOOL FOCUS GROUPS & INTERVIEWS with students, teachers, counselors, and school administrators to assess and map current practices, strengths, weaknesses, readiness, and opportunities in local schools.

DISTRICT LEVEL REPORTS GENERATED for each school district paired with a regional-level report. The report will highlight local and national best practices, local data on racial equity, and local opportunities for improvement.

PRIORITY ACTION STEPS IDENTIFIED and taken by the Regional School Health Task Force and the Racial Justice Workgroup based on the report findings. These steps were to focus on policy, system, and environment change strategies that are feasible to implement locally and that effectively addressed the most pressing racial justice needs in local schools.

ADOPT AND IMPLEMENT BEST PRACTICES. Finally, the Regional School Health Task Force, Racial Justice Workgroup, and Youth Leadership Initiative planned to work with local school administrators and community partners to have schools/districts adopt and implement these prioritized best practices. Some of this support included facilitating access to trainers and consultants and seeking additional resources as needed.

County Health Rankings model © 2016 UWPHI

The overarching goal of the *Advancing Racial Justice in Schools* (ARJIS) project was to make policy, system and environmental changes that would improve school climate, racial justice, and racial equity for the public school districts in our region over the course of the 5-year timeframe. The ARJIS project set seven outcome goals by which the group planned to measure success.

The original team completed their first action step, a Review of National Best Practices, and shared this information out. Next, the group began laying the groundwork for the second action step of Focus groups & interviews, unaware of what March 2020 would bring to the world.

When the pandemic hit, the work plan stalled but never fully ceased. ARJIS work continued with key project members checking in with school-based student groups and supporting school staff already engaged in racial justice in their school communities.

Vibrant work in highlighting Black Excellence through and beyond Black History Month was shared on the Communities That Care coalition website[6] as an action step supported through the ARJIS project. Several film screenings and discussions of "I'm Not Racist, Am I?"[7] and "Virtually Free"[8] film. Partnership For Youth staff member, Keyedrya Jacobs facilitated a community presentation and panel review of a local multigenerational, youth-focused piece of performance art delving into the School-to-Prison-Pipeline from the Performance Project's[9] First Generation group.

Through the fall and winter of 2021-22, school districts and community partners were invited to a monthly ARJIS-related virtual networking meeting to share information and continue to build regional connections to advance racial justice.

As Covid-19 restrictions began to ease in the fall of 2021 and some of the ARJIS leadership and management came under the purview of new Partnership for Youth/Communities That Care staff, Leigh-Ellen Figueroa, Communities That Care and the Racial Justice Workgroup took stock of the state of the project and decided that it was necessary to reassess the current climate and needs of the regional school partners through the framework of the originally-identified goals and focus points of the ARJIS project. This Regional Snapshot is the culmination of that assessment process.

Advancing Racial Justice in Schools:
Five-Year Outcome Goals

1. **At least 10 significant new policies, programs, or practices to advance racial justice adopted** by at least 5 local schools as a result of this project.

2. **At least 10% reductions in disciplinary incidents for youth of color and at least 10% reductions in the "suspension gap" in our school districts**, as reported on Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education School and District Profiles.

3. **Significant improvements for students of color regarding experiences of school climate,** including at least 10% more favorable responses to questions related to race and equity on the Teen Health Survey.

4. **At least 10% fewer youth of color presenting as at risk of youth substance use and mental health problems because of "low commitment to school"** as measured by the seven-question scale (from the national Prevention Needs Assessment Tool) on the Teen Health Survey.

5. **At least 10% fewer youth of color reporting symptoms of depression and anxiety** on the annual Teen Health Survey.

6. **At least 10% fewer youth of color reporting having first used alcohol, tobacco, or marijuana before age 13** on the annual Teen Health Survey.

7. **A decrease by at least 10% in the gap between white students and students of color on the survey measures listed above.**

[6] communitiesthatcare.org

[7] http://notracistmovie.com/

[8] https://www.virtuallyfreemovie.com/

[9] https://www.performanceproject.org/

REGIONAL SNAPSHOT FOCUS GROUP/INTERVIEWS PROCESS

A total of 52 people from nine school districts and three community-based organizations/groups were contacted for interviews. From the initial contact, 41 individuals were interviewed for this *Regional Snapshot*.

Schools included:

- Athol-Royalston Regional School District
- Four Rivers Charter Public School
- Franklin County Technical School
- Frontier Regional School District
- Gill-Montague Regional School District
- Greenfield Public School District
- Ralph C. Mahar Regional School District
- Mohawk Regional School District
- Pioneer Valley Regional School District

Community-based organizations/groups included:

- Collaborative Resolutions Group
- Joy & Justice Team at the Collaborative for Educational Services
- Racial Justice Workgroup

Interviews took place remotely and in person; most interviews were with an individual person, however seven groups of two or more people shared their perspectives in a focus group setting. Members of the Regional School Health Task Force, one of the original convening bodies of the ARJIS project, were contacted initially along with requests for interviews and referrals to other key individuals; all schools/organizations had at least two people interviewed with most having 3-4 people interviewed. Roles included students, teachers (academic and other types of teachers), counselors, nurses, building-level administrators and district-level administrators. In the future, a more comprehensive scope could include paraprofessionals, building care and food-service staff perspectives.

Interviewees and focus groups were asked **three broad questions:**

1. **Schools: What are some of the greatest strengths in your school community when it comes to advancing racial justice?**
    Organizations/groups: What do you see as strengths for schools in the region when it comes to advancing racial justice?

2. **Schools: What are some of the biggest challenges in your school community when it comes to advancing racial justice?**
    Organizations/groups: What do you see as some of the biggest challenges for schools in the region when it comes to advancing racial justice?

3. **Schools: What are some of your most pressing needs at this time when it comes to advancing racial justice in schools?** (Needs were clarified as ranging from concrete, e.g., 100 copies of a specific book, to broad, e.g., support with building student empathy)
    Organizations/groups: What do you see as some of the pressing needs for schools in the region when it comes to advancing racial justice?

Key stakeholder interviews and focus groups found major themes (named by individuals from all school districts) and minor themes (named by individuals from some school districts) for **strengths**, **challenges**, and **needs**.

NOTE: A theme not mentioned by all does not mean that some form of this theme is not happening in all school districts.

An example of this is the theme of **Strong Student Leadership and Involvement**. Comments connected to this theme came from some, but not all interviewees; however, this does not mean there is not strong student leadership and involvement happening in every school district. Although this was not said by all interviewees, it could be assumed that there is student leadership and involvement in every school district around racial justice and equity work. However, this information is being presented as it was shared - consequently, the *Regional Snapshot* is reflective of what was most salient to interviewees at the time and should not be taken as a comprehensive, evaluative report. The information collected is intended to provide the beginnings of a collective reflection into how community partners and school partners can work together in advancing racial justice and what is currently most pressing for some individuals in their school districts.

FINDINGS SUMMARY

STRENGTHS

ALL SCHOOLS:

- **Faculty and Staff Care and are Invested in the School Community.** Individuals from all school districts spoke strongly and positively of their staff and faculty being invested in the school and the community. This was the leading strength comment for the majority of individuals.
- **Some Existing Structures/Policies/Groups Exist to Advance Racial Justice.** For every district interviewed, there were at least some, if not many, structures/policies/groups already in place that held advancing racial justice as a primary goal.

SOME SCHOOLS:

- **Strong Student Leadership and Involvement.** All schools spoke of having some-to-many invested students, while some interviewees mentioned specific examples of Student Leadership and Involvement and supportive structures.
- **Supportive Parents and Caregivers.** Some interviewees mentioned parents and caregivers as partners in advancing racial justice.
- **Major Structural Change.** Some interviewees mentioned district wide planning and implementation, changes to professional goal setting and supervision and deep reflective individual work supported through professional development.

CHALLENGES

ALL SCHOOLS:

- **Racial Demographics/Fear of "Doing it Wrong".** The majority of interviewees referred to the primarily-white racial demographics in the environment, linked with perception of trepidation around explicitly addressing racial equity issues and topics, as the largest challenge.
- **Encouraging Participation/How to Get People to "Show Up".** Many interviewees observed challenges around trying to engage adults and students in the community who were not overtly invested in racial justice or who struggled with the topic.
- **Exhaustion/Burnout.** A deep concern for the mental and emotional health and well-being of adults and students was present in many comments.
- **Spiraling Effects of Covid-19.** This challenge showed up in two different themes including: 1) Lack of empathy/conflict resolution/social-emotional skills and 2) Feelings of isolation.

SOME SCHOOLS:

- **Need for Differentiated Professional Development.** Some school districts currently engaged in district-wide equity/antiracism work named that continuing to meet educators' learning needs on multiple levels was an ongoing challenge.
- **Ambivalent Leadership.** Some interviewees voiced uncertainty of the level of school/district leadership investment in racial justice work in schools.
- **Lack of Staff and Faculty Racial/Ethnic Diversity.** Some interviewees, both white interviewees and interviewees of color, spoke to the racial demographics of the adult school community and the ways in which they perceived that this affected racial justice work in their environment.

NEEDS

ALL SCHOOLS:

- **Professional Development.** Almost every single interviewee cited a need for professional development regarding culturally-responsive teaching/pedagogy and how to have brave conversations.
- **Regional Student and Adult Networks.** Interviewees recognized the need to connect with other people in schools doing racial justice and equity work and that student leaders needed to be connected with other youth working for social change, as a way to reduce isolation and build capacity.
- **Time and People as Resources.** One of the biggest needs across all districts was a request for an increase in community-based support.

SOME SCHOOLS:

- **Restorative Practices.** Some interviewees spoke explicitly to Restorative Practices, while others spoke to ideas, values and beliefs that are within the scope of Restorative Practices.
- **Focus Groups.** Some schools named focus groups of staff, students and families as a need, while other schools had already conducted this work.
- **Increase in Racial/Ethnic Staff Diversity.** Some districts emphasized that they needed to work diligently to increase the racial/ethnic diversity of faculty and staff in their buildings.

FINDINGS DETAIL: STRENGTHS

ALL SCHOOLS:

1. Faculty and staff care about and are invested in the community.

The strongest theme that came out of the Strengths conversations was that staff and faculty deeply care about and are invested in the school community. Almost every single person interviewed started with this as a core strength regardless of role or school district.

Many acknowledged that family engagement in schools was often due to the efforts of school faculty and staff, with one interviewee stating, "Families and students feel connected because of the hard work of staff."

Many individuals spoke to their investment in racial justice and equity, as well as the investment of their colleagues. One person shared, "We WANT to do the work, we aren't being forced to do these things. We want the students to have a voice and to feel cared for." Another said, "Teachers here are really committed, everyone in this building is really

invested in these kids. No one here is phoning it in, everyone here genuinely cares about the kids. I would say that every kid has at least one adult that they are connected to here."

Interviewees also spoke to a genuine desire to act as advocates for all of their students' various social identities ("Most of the faculty has a real desire to grow and learn and do better") as well as enhance the adult culture and community ("[There are] individuals in the schools who are committed to the wellbeing of the people in their community, from the youth on up").

2. Some existing structures, policies, and/or groups to advance racial justice.

While the range of structures/policies/groups to advance racial justice varied widely across districts, every single individual interviewed named multiple structures/policies/groups dedicated to equity.

Every school district named some type of racial justice

Posters on the Greenfield Town Common celebrating black excellence in February 2022 to commemorate Black History Month. The posters were created by students at Frontier Regional High School.

group that was currently in operation. Some schools had groups for both students and teachers to join, other schools had only a group for one of these two demographics. A few groups operated at the district level for planning and training, providing district-wide policy, plans and professional development priorities based in racial justice/equity and delivered to all schools in the district. A few interviewees working at the district level spoke to assessing and shifting policy change in multiple areas including school discipline, curriculum and instruction, Codes of Conduct, and other school rules as one of the biggest growth areas in the district-level adult groups.

> *For every district interviewed, there were at least some structures, policies, or groups already in place that held advancing racial justice as a primary goal.*

More adult groups focused on faculty and staff learning as a Professional Learning Community, while other multigenerational groups operated as spaces for adults and youth to come together to do action planning, cultural celebration and learning. Almost all groups are places where the majority of racial justice/anti-oppression actions, events and celebrations are planned and implemented, as well as where systems changes are being discussed.

Outside of groups, interviewees spoke to conversations happening within the school district on many levels. Some schools reported explicit district-wide work in antiracism with teachers being supported in creating professional evaluative goals linked to inclusive, culturally-responsive practice. Some of this antiracist work mentioned during interviews included partnering with consultants who supported the district's equity intentions through providing professional development and other learning opportunities for teachers.

Other schools put effort into utilizing an advisory or homeroom class structure to deliver instruction to students that was rooted in the district goals of equity and relationship-building. One interviewee said. "We use advisory to do SEL [Social-Emotional Learning] and build connections with caring adults. We are also addressing yearly themes and big topics. Some themes last year were lessons around Black History Month and the need to celebrate achievements outside of the month. We have a bigger picture we are working on for advisory."

In some cases, anti-oppression work primarily operated as a small group of caring individuals deciding to come together to think about inclusive practice and subsequent actions and in other places, multi-level, district-wide plans were implemented, however one theme was constant across interviews: For every district interviewed, there were at least some structures/policies/groups already in place that held advancing racial justice as a primary goal.

SOME SCHOOLS:

1. Strong student leadership and involvement.

All schools spoke of having some-to-many invested students, while some interviewees mentioned specific examples of student leadership and involvement and supportive structures. A few student interviewees shared their insight and subsequent action steps: "We took it upon ourselves to research restorative practices and made a document filled with restorative practices to try to make new rules because the old rules and the old punishments just don't work anymore. So we are trying to bring in new rules." One student spoke regarding an upcoming event where their racial justice project is being shared with the whole school community: "Part of the problem was that people using harmful language, they don't know the history behind the language and they don't know it's hurtful, so we wanted to make this to show them the history behind these words." Another student said, regarding the same project: "The reason we made this [project] is because many students feel like they are not treated with dignity by others students and some adults. Some people are afraid to speak up and so we made this [project] to show that we have a voice and students shouldn't be afraid to speak up."

Adult perspectives spoke to similarly inspiring student work and intentional space for highlighting the experiences of students. One adult interviewee

said, "Kids came and spoke to the staff about their life experiences and that was really powerful," indicating a structure or forum that facilitated students sharing lived experience with faculty and staff. Another individual said, "A few students went to [social justice program] and tried to start a club when they came back," indicating student leadership and student efforts to create a structure for social change. Another said, "On the [subcommittee], the focus is trying to generate some norms/values from students to create a framework to address racial justice issues to support common language and agreements," speaking to a student-centered process in building both structure and policy. One interviewee stated: "Students want more content and infrastructure, they want spaces where dialogue can take place. Students are leading the way and are expressing what they want in their school community," while another shared, "Students persist in naming their vision as to what a better school could look like." Comments like these may be indicative that not only are at least some students experiencing an environment where they feel comfortable and safe enough to speak and advocate with adults, but that most importantly, *adults are listening*.

2. Support of parents, caregivers, and community.

Some interviewees mentioned parents/caregivers/ community members as partners in advancing racial justice. One person shared, "The community [referring to parents] is welcoming to progressive ideas, and they value the 'others' voice. Our teachers want to hear from parents and caregivers, the parents are deeply invested in student experience." Another stated, "We anecdotally know that [students of color] experience microaggressions and incidents of bias, and we have heard from community members and parents that they wish that the school had addressed certain things through curriculum and practice." A third reflected, "We tried to have a community group talking about this work to determine how the community sees the school and what the needs are. [We saw] community members wanted to advise about curriculum, staff wanted the community to do related projects." Community groups and forums for community feedback were mentioned as a positive and productive engagement/participation strategy by several interviewees, as well as community-school events supporting racial justice, such as movie screenings and speakers or presenters.

Staff from the Partnership for Youth and the Greenfield 4SC tabling at a Summer Eats kickoff event.

3. Major structural change.

Some interviewees mentioned district wide planning and implementation, changes to professional goal setting and supervision, and deep reflective individual work supported through professional development. One person said, "The district as a whole has a goal of equity and inclusion, teachers have equity [professional] goals and are using the three evaluation indicators around diversity and equity." This comment speaks to structural change that embeds equity work through a district-aligned vision and a supervised process to support adults in growing as antiracist educators. Another comment shared, "Elementary teachers felt that they didn't have foundational knowledge to talk to their students, so we did a virtual seminar that was specifically to support elementary teachers in how to talk about race." This comment speaks to targeted and differentiated professional development that is responsive to the expressed needs of the faculty. Another person shared, "There is a staff-wide commitment to make sure our projects aren't just one-off experiences but that they are part of more ongoing integrating into the curriculum." Many individuals coming from districts that were currently engaged in intentional antiracism work mentioned curriculum evaluation for inclusive design as a key component of their equity plan.

ALL SCHOOLS:

1. Current racial demographics/fear.

The strongest theme that emerged for challenges showed up as two sides of the same coin. Interviewees spoke to the complicated nature of navigating the overwhelmingly white racial demographics of their school environments as a factor in their efforts to advance racial justice. Interviewees understood that the current racial/ethnic composition of their environments affected how actions unfolded or didn't unfold. "Being a predominantly white school, we have the privilege of slowing down when we feel burnt out," said one interviewee.

The other side of this coin was the perception of a sense of fear around addressing racial equity coming out of the mostly white environment. Some of this fear was rooted in interviewees' perceptions of colleagues' self-doubt, allies who wondered if they were effectively supporting students of color and if they were truly creating equitable learning spaces. One interviewee noted, "We need faculty training. [Some] people who don't want to talk about this, it's not because it's not important to them but mostly people who don't want to say the wrong thing and they want to be helpful but don't know what to say."

Some of this fear showed up in what was termed by one person as "rocking the boat" or disturbing the status quo of racial dynamics in the environment. An individual shared, "Stuff was happening and I wanted to try to get a sense of what was happening in the school community. My sense was that the school was a little bit afraid that a student would say something to a parent and the parents would say something to the paper and then it would be out there that there's a racial problem at [school district]. There might be, there might not be, but I just wanted to ask the question." One interviewee spoke to the link between the fear of rocking the boat and the mandates of education: "Another big obstacle is the bureaucracy of school, things move very slowly and I think there's a fear in the administration of white parents. There are so many requirements around education, so we might talk about an issue of racism and we might address it with that one kid, but we don't address the systemic issue. We lack people and resources to drive that work from the top down. Even in

terms of this grant, I heard of it last year from an admin who was excited and then I heard nothing after that."

Many people observed a level of fear from their district around taking explicit antiracist actions, with a perception that some districts preferred to be vaguer about action: "There has always been a trend to not really call things what they are but try to reframe so as to not upset people." One person spoke to the influence of the wider community, "We have a lot of [homogeneous] families here, but we are diversifying I would say even despite ourselves. There are people here doing the work, but it's slow. Racial justice work is different here and, I might be wrong, but we have to go slower because people do get really upset when it feels in their face."

Another spoke in the same vein of racial justice work connected with the wider community, "The community is a strength and a challenge. The town is changing and people are noticing that the schools don't look the way they did before. It's important to bring the community along in a way includes them. For some people in power in the community, equity work is not really understood and not really important."
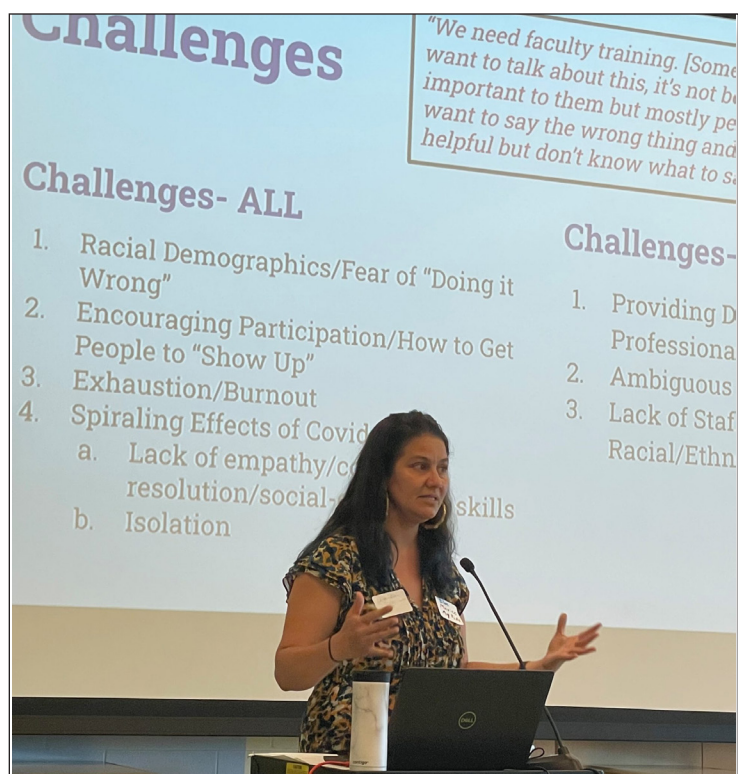
Leigh-Ellen Figueroa presents a summary of this report at the June 2022 Communities that Care full coalition meeting.

Some observed fear in students of color, perceiving a lack of engagement as a self-protection strategy: "I work with a handful of students of color and there is an anxiety around starting new groups because of the school culture and their fears of what they might experience around backlash. I see students of color trying to protect their white peers." One person concluded their observations with the statement: "I think our main problem is that we just try to keep the peace."

2. Encouraging participation/how to get people to "show up".

Many interviewees followed up their biggest strength (a caring and invested adult community) with observations around challenges experienced in trying to engage adults and students in the community who were not overtly invested in racial justice or who struggled with the topic. One person queried: "The biggest challenge that came out of that work was people who wanted to, they were the ones who did it. How do we continue to build the expertise and comfort of those who aren't drawn to this work?" Other interviewees shared thoughts around what barriers might be present for colleagues who they perceived as resistant to discussing racial equity practices: "There are ways that we all [as adults] stereotype each other, but we all need to be doing this work together in a way that we aren't currently."

3. Exhaustion/burnout.

At least one individual from each district, if not multiple people, named Exhaustion/Burnout as challenge. One person stated: "We are dealing with burnout, adults and students. We used to have [group] that met and discussed issues, this has fizzled. Adults are spread too thin. This is a large concern." Another individual spoke to the struggle to fit in all the necessary work during the actual workday, "We have to work outside our contracted hours on these projects which doesn't leave a lot of time and there isn't a lot of time set aside for adults and young people to work together. There are a lot of competing needs." A deep concern for the health and well-being for adults and students was present in many comments such as, "We are experiencing a mental health crisis among our students and our staff." Staff also referenced "fires" happening throughout the school day, conflict or mental health concerns that also increased stress and limited intentional planning time. One person concluded their remarks by saying: "The hard part is knowing what is needed but not having the space to do it."

4. Spiraling effects of Covid-19.

This challenge showed up in two different themes including: **1) Lack of empathy/conflict resolution/ social-emotional skills** and **2) Feelings of isolation**.

Regarding **Lack of empathy/conflict resolution/ social-emotional skills**, interviewees made reference to their perceptions of the impact of remote learning and the lingering effects of socializing digitally for over a year. One person shared, "The social media and other challenges make it hard for kids to hear others' perspectives. Shutting people out who don't agree. They are not able to talk across barriers and divides." Another individual stated: "There is a noted increase of avoidance of anything uncomfortable. There can be only so much growth if there is fear, we need to develop students to have hard conversations." Further, it was stated by a community supporter of schools: "We hear a lot about challenging behavior dynamics and fights in schools and youth development delayed by several years. The expectation from the top was 'resume to business as usual' when the reality was that no one was over what had happened in the last few years. There were just more rules."

> *"...a large number of interviewees referenced the need for empathy as a core value and the need for empathy-building interventions."*

Interviewees also spoke to perceptions around underlying feelings experienced by students: "I see kids being angry, and they have a lot to be angry about… they are teenagers and there is a lot that is out of their control." An interviewee spoke to the developmental needs and the effect on relationship-building: "Students are so focused on their own experience. It's so hard to get them to consider to look at viewpoints

that are not their own. They need to value others and feel valued." Some interviewees also spoke to the lack of opportunities to experience diverse settings and ideas: "They just don't know a lot of people who have different experience than them."

Many interviewees who spoke to the lack of diverse experience opportunities understood that the school environment and their personal role at the school held a lot of power for introducing ideas and perspectives that might not otherwise happen in the course of life for some students: "For a lot of kids, they may never see or interact with someone from another race outside of school" and "The hard part is that the people who need the education are the people who never had a Black friend, so when they meet someone who is Black they act in a way that they think Black people act. They don't know that mimicking what they think a Black person is, that is not the way. We need to give them education and empathy for different experiences."

Finally, a large number of interviewees referenced the need for empathy as a core value and the need for empathy-building interventions: one adult interviewee stated, "Since the pandemic, [students] are interacting as humans but empathy is a real challenge," while a student interviewee shared, "There is a majority that don't encounter this experience with discrimination and so it's hard for them to understand other experiences."

Regarding **Feelings of Isolation**, interviewees spoke plainly about their own feelings of isolation as well as what they observed from the student body and their colleagues. "We feel siloed, I think this has to do mostly with Covid. We are also rethinking our meeting structures and trying to see how we are using PD time to build adult connections and relationships," shared one participant. Another person stated, "Societal challenges that are very real, isolation coming off the pandemic and being able to communicate. I know [staff name] is in the building and I know he is doing this work but I can't connect with him. Communication has really been a challenge this year." A counselor shared, "This is different than any other school year. Isolation has resulted in behaviors we haven't seen in 20 years, and it's not just us it's everyone. Kids don't even know how to talk to each other".

Staff also spoke to a clash of cultures they observed between the home community and the school community: "Kids come from non-diverse [communities]

and come to a diverse environment at school. Being at home during the pandemic reinforced the home mindset." One interviewee reported on their feelings of alienation, "I feel isolated and on an island in this room in my own. Another teacher was hearing a lot of anti-Semitic comments and felt that other teachers must not be caring or calling things out. I'm pretty attuned to what happens in my classroom but I'm not sure what is happening other places, in real ways."

SOME SCHOOLS:

1. Need for differentiated professional development.

This was a challenge named mostly by administrators, although a few faculty and staff spoke to it as well. Over the last two years since the inception of the ARJIS project, some school districts engaged in a deep dive in structural, antiracist professional development and systems and policy change. An emerging challenge that was spoken to was the difficulty in scaffolding learning for teachers and staff. One person said, "We need levels for teachers, like Equity 101 and Equity 201."

> *"We need to be able to move from conversations and learning to actual practice."*

Another person named their perception of the effect of fundamental teacher learning on the student body: "We had some teachers who really wanted to do more, so they focused in on slavery and Jim Crow and all of that. I want people to focus more on the joy and strengths and beauty and achievement of communities of color. I think some of our adults have needed to do this basic work but I think it's been to the detriment of our students of color." Another person shared, "We need to be able to move from conversations and learning to actual practice" and "There is turnover of staff. So you have people who have been having discussions and professional development and then there are brand-new people and you have to start all over."

2. Ambivalent leadership.

Some individuals spoke positively of their perceptions of leadership investment in racial justice, while other individuals named Ambivalent Leadership as a critical issue. One person reflected, "It's a lot on individual teachers to keep progress moving forward. That being said, there are a lot of teachers who do bring in diverse perspectives, but it feels very uphill. I wonder sometimes if it's because we are trying to please different groups of people [at the same time] and it's hard to do that." Another person shared feelings around a perceived lack of vision, "On the admin side, it doesn't seem like there is a clear idea of how to change it. I think there is a perception of this school that it is not welcoming and safe for students of color and LGBTQ kids, but it's also not just a perception there is a certain truth to it."

One interviewee also stated regarding vision: "I can't tell you how many times I've sat in meetings where they waited two weeks after an incident and then brought us in to talk and I know that after I walk out of the meeting nothing is going to happen, nothing real is going to happen. We do surveys and conversations but nothing happens. It's also real that these are kids and they don't always think, so I don't want to make kids into pariahs because they need the chance to learn but without a really clear vision of who WE are in terms of race/gender/etc., it's going to be hard for them to do that." Another individual shared thoughts around motivation for taking action regarding racial justice: "Admin response has been a response to pressure, so if the pressure goes away I'm concerned that the actions will go away."

> *"Our superintendent put together an incredible training for all the principals and that got everyone on board. Having a supportive admin is a big piece of us being able to move forward."*

One person perceived that the pressures of leadership have an impact on racial justice work," I think admin are really supportive but they are just overwhelmed like the rest of us." Another mused, "There are some [admin] that are deeply invested and want to do right by the kids. For others, it feels like it's a thing that they have to say that they care about, but they don't actually do anything about it."

One individual who spoke positively of their school leadership shared: "Our superintendent put together an incredible training for all the principals and that got everyone on board. Having a supportive admin is a big piece of us being able to move forward." Another experiencing positive leadership summed up their thoughts by saying, "Anyone who is in power of any kind MUST be thinking about these things, or the argument CANNOT be made that you are considering those who are powerless, those who are denied power."

3. Lack of staff and faculty racial/ethnic diversity.

All districts interviewed spoke about the racial demographics of their student body, however not all interviewees mentioned racial/ethnic demographics of staff. DESE states "A growing body of educational research demonstrates the positive impacts of teachers of color on short- and long-term academic outcomes of students of color. Specifically, the research finds that having a single teacher of color can boost academic achievement, high school graduation rates, and college enrollment for students of color. In light of the research, recruiting and retaining a diverse and effective educator workforce can be a promising strategy for districts to address educational inequity" [10].

In Massachusetts, approximately 40% of public school students are of color while this is true for only 10% of public school educators[11] . In Franklin County Schools the numbers are much lower (see table on next page).

One person of color interviewed said "If I wasn't here I wonder what would be happening, would they be doing [this work] anyway." Another white staff member shared, "We need better hiring practices, and we need our district to make a committed intention to diverse hiring practices we are still waiting for that to happen." Another white individual shared, "We have very few staff

[10]MAssachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, n.d.
[11] Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, n.d.

of color, that is something our students crave and I think there is sadness and anger and confusion around that. I also think that has been used as a barrier to moving some of the work forward, people saying that we can't do some of this work without staff from certain groups." Another shared, "If you looked at the staff diversity, you wouldn't put those two words together. For years we didn't have a social justice group because we didn't have a diverse staff but then we just couldn't put off the work any longer. Our staff diversity is [a] big weakness."

Another educator frustratedly shared: "We had a chance to hire a [person of color] but the [committee] went in a different direction. They decided to hire someone else because of a reason that didn't seem real to me…The [committee] had a chance to make an important gesture, but they did not choose to do so".

"In Massachusetts, approximately 40% of public school students are of color while this is true for only 10% of public school educators. In Franklin County Schools, the numbers are much lower ."

Racial & Ethnic Diversity Among Students and Staff in Local School Districts, 2021-22[12]			
School District	Total # of Full-Time Equivalent Teachers	% Full-Time Equivalent Teachers of Color	Total % Students of Color
Athol-Royalston Regional School District	213	1.6%	19.4%
Four Rivers Charter School	38	10.8%	15.6%
Franklin County Technical School	84	3.6%	11.7%
Frontier Regional School District	101	2.9%	15.8%
Gill-Montague Regional School District	173	4.6%	24.7%
Greenfield School District	306	5.2%	29.2%
Ralph C. Mahar Regional School District	90	3.2%	13.9%
Mohawk Trail Regional School District	192	2.5%	8.8%
Pioneer Valley Regional School District	144	0.7%	8.6%

[12] Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

FINDINGS DETAIL: NEEDS

ALL SCHOOLS:

1. Professional development.

All those interviewed cited a need for professional development (PD) regarding culturally-responsive teaching and how to have brave conversations. The number one strength listed (Faculty and Staff Care and are Invested in the Community) generated Professional Development as the biggest need. Faculty and staff recognize that the adult school community needs training that will build practical and actionable toolboxes for an equitable school community. Staff interviewed recognized that this type of training is not "one-size-fits-all" and that effective antiracist professional development cannot be a "checkbox".

One teacher perceived: "I don't see enough facilitation that makes the difference between a conversation that feels unsafe and a conversation that feels uncomfortable. In order to be at discussion of solutions you have to be ok with being uncomfortable. We need to be a little better at being uncomfortable at sitting with race talk." Another shared thoughts around how to deepen adult skills: "We are having pockets of courageous conversations, but we need more training for staff as to how to talk about race and current events. We need training for staff on how to set up a space that will help kids talk about courageous conversations."

One teacher stated: "There is a lack of [racial justice] PD for teachers. Any PD I've had about racial justice in my 16 years of teaching I've had outside of school, there has been nothing [specific] in school about it at all. The only message we've had about how to handle racist comments is to send the kid to the office immediately. So those comments have decreased in my classroom but it doesn't mean that they aren't saying those things outside of class." Another teacher from a different school district spoke similarly: "[Racial justice] PD is nonexistent, it's just been to take care of logistics. So I feel like we need some PD around something having to do with equity and bias. I can't know if sometimes if an outsider coming in is more effective for us, but I think we need someone to come in and teach people."

One interviewee spoke to the need to have interactive training, "We need PD where we as faculty aren't talked at but are engaged in a process of problem solving."

2. Regional student and adult networks.

Interviewees representing school districts are hungry for opportunities to connect with other people in schools doing racial justice and equity work. Staff spoke to the few numbers of students and staff of color in their communities and mused about if it was possible to connect across the region. Interviewees emphasized that their student leaders needed to be connected with other youth working for social change as a way to reduce isolation and build capacity. One asked, "Can our students collaborate with other students on projects they are working on? We could be sharing our information with others so we aren't working in silos. Could there be a Communities That Care coalition person who coordinates student meetings with other schools?" Another faculty member proposed, "We need to be able to meet up with other people to see what other people are doing. We could share some of our resources with other schools and learn from each other."

> *"People want to connect with other people around questions like what does change look like, what are you doing for racial justice, we keep hearing that as a need."*

This desire was echoed with comments such as: "We want to do things across districts with other students. We could plan community events and education" and "We need to know what other districts are doing and what they are doing that is working". One interviewee spoke to sharing resources around school climate and behavior, "We need support in best practices in responding to [behavior] on a prevention and a responsive level. A regional piece to this would be helpful", while another spoke to specific sharing around racial justice work, "People want to connect with other people around questions like what does change look like, what are you doing for racial justice, we keep hearing that as a need."

Adults interviewed also identified that students needed access to district and regional support, "We need more peer-peer interactions. It's good when adults talk with

students about things but ultimately they respect each other and each other's opinions more." One interviewee recognized, "Our groups aren't necessarily attracting the kids of color, which is fine, but whatever we are doing isn't meeting the needs of those kids. We need more mentorship and support for our kids of color."

3. Time and people as resources.

School staff report being exhausted and burdened with expectations to constantly do more, an endless list of sometimes competing demands and expected outcomes. Interviewees spoke emphatically to their desire to engage with racial justice work as being strongly present and the necessary resources being perceived as nonexistent. One of the biggest needs across all districts was a request for an increase in community-based support.

One interviewee plainly said, "We need real live people to come in and do the work and collaborate with our people." Another lamented, "We are understaffed everywhere and many people are doing multiple jobs. We need help to do this work." A third shared, "We need support in helping adults and students reckon with privilege productively. We also need help for teachers in learning what culturally-responsive pedagogy and teaching looks like." Finally a staff member shared, "[There are] people shortages and difficulty knowing where to go to find resources. Some adults are hurting and don't know how to help the students when they need help themselves."

SOME SCHOOLS:

1. Restorative practices.

Some interviewees spoke explicitly to Restorative Practices, while other interviewees did not use these words but spoke to ideas and beliefs that are within the scope of Restorative Practices, such as relationship-building. Because all interviewees did not use this language, this need was identified as pressing for some school districts, however it is noteworthy that all school districts spoke to needs that lie within the scope of a restorative lens. One shared: "We need to revive restorative practices. [New leaders] want to start again and are looking for trainings. We are more solid with elementary, but we need support in middle and high school. We are moving as a district towards restorative

practices and are taking steps to make that more explicit, like rewriting our handbooks."

Another staff member spoke to alignment of school leaders in moving towards restorative practice implementation: "There are people in positions of power in schools that want to change policy in a way that aligns with restorative practices." Finally, a student shared their insight: "We need to bring people together to educate, to heal, to move past mistakes, to remove the veil and to help people speak up. We need to bring everyone together to speak up about the current situation through restorative practices."

2. Focus groups.

Holding focus groups was an original key goal of the ARJIS project and so during interviews, interviewees were asked if they felt focus groups would still be useful to their environment in service of ascertaining whether or not original goals were still relevant. Some schools named focus groups of staff, students and families as still useful to them, while other schools had already conducted this work. For schools still asking for whole-community focus groups, this ARJIS project will provide that service for the next school year.

3. Increase racial/ethnic staff diversity.

Some individuals spoke to the need to intentionally and explicitly diversify their adult populations in their school buildings. Some interviewees linked difficulty making progress in racial justice work to the lack of diverse racial and ethic identities in their buildings, sharing thoughts such as, "We can't make meaningful affinity groups which is a need and desire because we lack diverse teaching staff." Other interviewees expressed that they felt that it was critical to expand the racial demographics of their teaching and admin staff in order to foster the type of overall inclusive environment they wished to see. A white educator spoke poignantly to this topic, going beyond the need of hiring a racially diverse adult population into the building: "We are told people of color don't apply but I think we could do more, we could form alliances and have mentors to create a more inclusive staff. We also need help supporting diverse hires. If I wanted to be in a place that had palpable support and palpable systems and not be the one person of color in a white world, it wouldn't be too appealing to apply [here]. We need systems of support so that staff of color don't feel burned out and isolated."

RECOMMENDATIONS AND ACTION STEPS

While it is important for each school district and supporting community organizations to foster racial equity in a way that is uniquely suited to each particular environment, there are several action steps and universal recommendations that can be elicited from all the interviewee reflections. These recommendations are offered as potential guiding steps and come from the collated stories shared by interviewees, paired with community-based knowledge of regional resources and supporting organizations.

Every recommendation below can be supported and implemented in partnership with the Communities That Care Coalition. People with interest or requests for more information are warmly welcomed to contact Partnership for Youth staff at the addresses listed in the Resources section.

1. Visible and comprehensive district-wide vision and action plan development.

Many interviewees spoke to the need for a plan, the absence of a plan, not knowing if there was a plan, and wondering how to make a plan. One person named the need as, "Leadership training, continuity and vision that goes from elementary to high school" while another said "[There is] no district vision and goal on behalf of racial justice. It might be a goal for one teacher but not for another, so it creates an inconsistency for students that can make it challenging for them to navigate and at times harmful." One school developed a plan with outside support: "We jumped into anti-racism work without a fully formed plan, but a lot of good work has been done. It became apparent help was needed from the outside, so we hired [school equity professionals]." The district-wide plan is an important vehicle to make equity work sustainable and system-based, rather than person-based. When turnover occurs, the district is not returned to Step 1 and can continue the work that has been adopted by the district. One district

involved in equity plan creation in partnership with the student body shared, "One thing the equity team has in its Plan for Action Steps and Belonging is having training sessions for staff to actually practice what to say in uncomfortable situations." Creating district plans offers a structure to provide differentiated professional development and learning opportunities for all members of the school community.

Some schools have used and are using the DESE Safe and Supportive Schools grant to fund school climate planning and implementation with an equity lens; applications for the new grant cycle are open until July 18th 2022, more information is available under the resources listed below. Also under resources, a list of school equity professionals currently being utilized by school districts to develop equity plans in the Franklin County and North Quabbin regions are provided. Some schools that have developed an Equity Plan have offered to share their plans and planning process with other districts, please contact Leigh-Ellen Figueroa (lfigueroa@frcog.org) for more information.

2. Increase learning opportunities outside of formal professional development.

While professional development is a more structured learning process that is limited in scope, any motivated individual/group within a school district can increase racial justice learning opportunities within their school community. These opportunities can center student leadership and student voice through student-led workshops and presentations. Other opportunities can be offered through racial equity professionals giving whole school presentations and workshops. Some districts are availing themselves of specific trainings to meet specific needs for faculty and staff, however it is necessary to increase learning opportunities for all members of a school community by utilizing community supports and school equity professionals.

3. Invest in regional support networks.

Schools can support the need of regional connection and support by allowing contracted time for faculty and staff to make these connections, providing transportation and time for students to make these connections and investing leadership time in learning about what is available in the regional and connecting with those resources. While many individuals expressed a level of overwhelm at the idea of creating and maintaining a regional network, Franklin County and the North Quabbin region is fortunate to already have existing networks that school adults and youth can tap into.

There is a resource list with current regional support networks already in existence to be found in the Resource section of this document.

Gratitude

Many thanks to all of the people interviewed for this review. I was privileged to receive your words and hope you feel my deep respect and gratitude for what you chose to share with me and subsequently with the entire region.

Your passion, care, and love for your community, your schools, and your students is not unseen. You are the backbone of our region and who you are in your school is irreplaceable.

You are appreciated and valued more than anyone can ever express.

"Don't wait for a Gandhi, don't wait for a King, don't wait for a Mandela. You are your own Mandela, you are your own Gandhi, you are your own King." - Leymah Gbowee

REGIONAL RESOURCE LIST

Current Regional Support Networks

1. *The Meeting of the Minds*, an ARJIS project monthly meeting for school-based and community people to come together and share information and action steps. In-school youth and adult equity group support for individual schools offered. Contact Leigh-Ellen Figueroa (lfigueroa@frcog.org) and Keyedrya Jacobs (kjacobs@frcog.org). https://communitiesthatcarecoalition.com/

2. *The Racial Justice Workgroup*, a community-focused workgroup under the Communities That Care Coalition umbrella. Contact Shaundell Diaz, (SDiaz@communityaction.us), Matt Allen (mattallen@masshirefhwb.org) and/or Lee Collins-Lambert, (lcollins@fourriverscharter.org). https://communitiesthatcarecoalition.com/workgroups/racial-justice/

3. *Restorative Practices Learning Community*, a network of school-based people and community supporters to build restorative practices in a collaborative setting. Contact Christopher Sabo (csabo@crg-collab.org). https://www.collaborativeresolutionsgroup.org/

4. *BIPOC Affinity Groups*: A network for educators of the Global Majority to come together to feel a sense of belonging, support, and care. These spaces intentionally center the practices of joy, healing, and action as an antidote to the isolation and stress of racism that we often feel and experience in schools. Contact Sabine Jacques (sjacques@collaborative.org) and Tom Chang (tchang@collaborative.org). https://www.collaborative.org/services/consulting-services/social-justice-and-equity

5. *NCCJ Camp Anytown/school partnership*, a youth leadership social justice camp and school program that provides advising and support. Work is being done with ARJIS staff to investigate the creation of a regional youth network and camp for Franklin County and the North Quabbin. For more information Contact Leigh-Ellen Figueroa (lfigueroa@frcog.org, CTC) and/or Christina Gray (cgray@nccj.org, NCCJ) . https://www.nccj.org/

Professional Development/Consultation/Presentations/Resources being used in the region

Please reach out to Leigh-Ellen Figueroa, Health and Equity Programs Coordinator at the Communities That Care Coalition (lfigueroa@frcog.org) for more information about these resources

1. **UMass, Center for Racial Justice and Youth Engaged Research.** Resources and support.
   https://www.umass.edu/education/center/racial-justice

2. **Pat Romney and Associates.** Professional development, training and support.
   https://romneyassociates.com/about.html

3. **I'm Not Racist, Am I?** Movie Screening. http://www.notracistmovie.com/

4. **Dr. Gholnecsar (Gholdy) Muhammad.** Consultant and author

5. **Blackprint.** Professional development, training and support. https://theblackprintinc.com/

6. **Tiffany Jewell.** Presenter and author

7. **Quabbin Mediation.** Conflict resolution, communication skills training, active bystanders training.
   https://quabbinmediation.org/

8. **Collaborative Resolutions Group.** Mediation and peer mediation training, Restorative Practices planning, training, networking and support, focus group facilitation.
   https://www.collaborativeresolutionsgroup.org/

9. **Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.** Culturally Responsive Teaching and Leading
   https://www.doe.mass.edu/instruction/culturally-responsive/

10. **The Collaborative for Educational Services, Joy & Justice Team (Formerly Social Justice Education Team).** Consultation, professional development, training and planning, focus groups, institutional assessment, youth support, and dialogue groups.
    https://www.collaborative.org/services/consulting-services/social-justice-and-equity

11. **Mass Partnership for Youth. Youth focused projects and leadership.**
    https://massachusettspartnershipsforyouth.com/

12. **National Conference for Community and Justice (NCCJ).** https://www.nccj.org/

13. **Amherst College Center for Restorative Practices.** Funding, training and support.
    https://www.amherst.edu/offices/restorative-practices

14. **"Influence 100"**, Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.
    https://www.doe.mass.edu/csi/diverse-workforce/influence100.html

15. **Sarah E. Fiarman and Tracey A. Benson.** Authors and consultants

16. *"The Hidden Nature of Whiteness in Education: Creating Active Allies in White Teachers".* Megan E. Lynch (2018). Journal of Educational Supervision, 1(1).
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GLOSSARY

Affinity Group - a group of people who share a social identity in common

Anti-Racism - Anti-Racism is the practice of actively identifying and opposing racism with the goal of changing policies, behaviors, and beliefs that perpetuate racist ideas and actions.

BIPOC/POC - Black, Indigenous People of Color/People of Color- preferred collective terms for referring to non-white racial groups, rather than "minorities."

Equity - fairness or justice in the way people are treated, free from bias. Different from equality where each person gets the same regardless of circumstances, equity refers to each person getting what they need to survive and thrive.

Inclusive Practice - implementing teaching and learning practices for all students, regardless of difference across all identities, in order to have equitable opportunity to be included in all educational environments.

Racial Justice - The systematic fair treatment of people of all races, resulting in equitable opportunities and outcomes for all. Racial justice is not simply the absence of discrimination and inequities, but also the presence of deliberate systems and supports to achieve and sustain racial equity through proactive and preventative measures.

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