

DEI TRANSFORMATION

**How to build consensus,
maintain energy and remain
mission-aligned when your
school faces questions
regarding its diversity,
equity and inclusion efforts.**

By Casper Caldarola, Pollyanna Inc.

When it comes to the difficult, important work of diversity, equity and inclusion, the 2020-21 school year was a time of commendable progress for independent schools. Countless schools found new ways of engaging with historically marginalized members of their community. They listened with intention and open-mindedness. They instituted action plans. Many repaired harm. Many even transformed their cultures.

School business officers, while not necessarily teaching on the forefront of this transformation, keep their finger on the pulse of a school's culture as it shifts and changes. These incremental steps toward justice can help steer a school into a brighter future, toward a stronger program, operations and growth.

It is clear, however, that current discourse on DEI-centered education can also be contentious — both on the national stage and within our respective communities. The discord is such that it may be easy to lose sight of all that was accomplished and transformed in the last year. It's also understandable that some school leaders are feeling defeated or, worse yet, losing hope. And as vocal opposition to this work becomes louder, business officers may begin to feel a sense of worry. With significant growth and change, it's not unusual to experience significant pushback. Schools may be wondering what shape that pushback might take. Reputational attacks? Financial blows? Enrollment declines?

DEI work is about ensuring that every child in a community is able to come to school each day as the fullest, most authentic version of themselves without being subject to harm based on their identity. This is a foundational promise within schools, and because it is so essential to creating healthy, identity-safe communities, school leaders must think critically and creatively about how they engage with those who question the goals of DEI work.

Clearly there is much work that remains to be done. And when it comes to effecting meaningful change within school communities, the 2021-22 school year will be even more consequential than the year that just ended.

As business officers prepare their outlook for the coming year, questions yet to be answered swirl. Will independent schools slowly abandon this work in the face of a

challenging and politically charged national dialogue? Or will they continue the efforts that are closely aligned with their missions? And if the latter, can they maintain the necessary energy to sustain efforts in their communities? These are essential questions for senior leaders, as the answers impact the work of every department.

“People start from different places.”

Tell me if this sounds like a familiar message from a parent: “You only ever write to us about COVID or DEI.” Rather than viewing DEI as an extension of the school’s mission, they see it as a distraction from it; one DEI director reported some parents treating DEI work as “‘add-on work’ that blurs the focus on providing an outstanding education.” Other parents believe DEI work elevates historically marginalized populations at the expense of others. Specifically, many fear their white children will be harmed, demeaned or made to feel guilty in the process. Still others fear this work turns students of color into perpetual victims, denying them appropriate power and agency. They use buzzwords like “critical race theory” to portray cautious and purposeful DEI work as a slippery-slope to extremism.

In the midst of recent vocal, public pushback, Pollyanna conducted two surveys of school heads and DEI directors to share insights into this moment. Specifically, respondents were asked what were the main sources of challenge and pushback to DEI work in their schools. One response from an independent-school DEI director resonated: “We are a mosaic of a community with many, many ideas and beliefs. People start from different places.” How true.

The hardest work of the 2020–21 school year was, in many ways, defining and communicating a shared vision and building consensus for the need for DEI reform within school communities.

Where a chasm may exist between schools and their most vocal detractors, DEI practitioners would be naïve to not accept some responsibility for closing the gap. The contentious national discourse notwithstanding, DEI planning, how schools communicate, when, and in what channels, and how they spur the participation of the community all determine the ability to effectively create equitable environments for students and families.

As we enter another year of DEI transformation within school communities, I fear some leaders will be tempted to step on the brakes as a risk management measure. But schools should avoid pulling back the trajectory of their initiatives, and they don’t need to cease DEI work to generate positive dialogue and outcomes.

Consider these strategies and tactics to help sustain energy, build consensus, and ultimately integrate DEI work into a school’s culture without a distracting spotlight.

Speak in terms of mission when taking action.

A hallmark of the independent school experience is the universality of mission statements. For students, parents, alumni, faculty and staff, the school’s mission is a common touchstone. It at the forefront of decision-making in just about every aspect of a school’s operations. It is a shared aspect of school culture that is both ubiquitous and indefatigable. For those schools that accept DEI work as a central tenet of their mission, they should never tire of saying so.

Look back at your DEI-related communications from the past year. In sharing the details of your action plans, how often do you tie this work to mission alignment? Half the time? A third of the time? Almost never?

In our recent survey, directors explained that making explicit the connection between the school’s mission and DEI goals helped to clarify the intention of the work and dispel slippery-slope thinking. In the words of one DEI director: “We work to identify our concerns clearly, to continue to see the big picture, to reaffirm our overall mission and sense of purpose, and to see this work as part of that broader and longer historical set of commitments that have always been central to who and what we are as a school.”

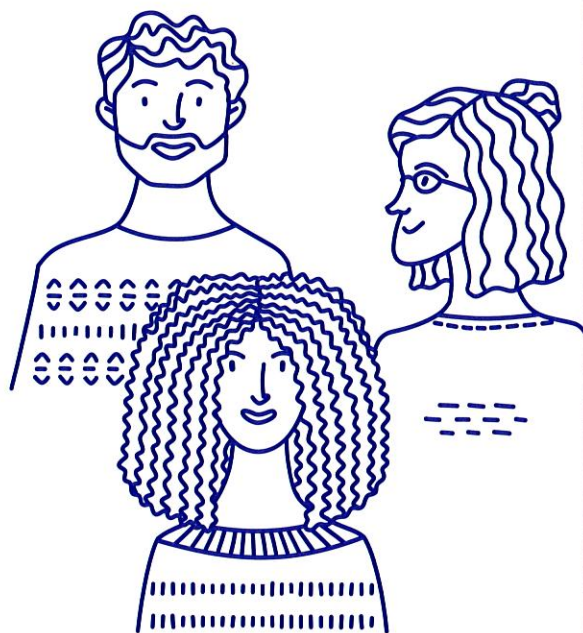
Use disruptive forms of communication.

In preparation for the 2021–22 school year, I encourage you to reflect not only on what you communicated during the 2020–21 school year, but how you communicated. Strategic communication happens not only within the school community, but also outside it — public relations should remain top of mind, intentional and thoughtful.

For many schools, most of their DEI work was communicated via email blast, a letter from the head of school, a website landing page or social media post. These are ubiquitous and easy forms of communication, but they are far less effective in helping doubtful or cynical people move past their oppositions.

Put simply, if you are feeling uneasy, concerned or threatened, you’re unlikely to change your mind because you read a letter — if in fact, you manage to read the entire letter; statistically, most readers do not. But following an in-person or phone conversation, you are apt to change your mind, or at least become less guarded and more open to persuasion. After all, so much of our trust in others is built based on non-verbal communications — eye contact, arm positioning, head nods and demonstrated attentive listening.

Essential to building community understanding is trust and sincerity. To move in this direction, complement your community-wide messages with focused outreach that puts these qualities front and center. For some schools, this means out-of-the-blue phone calls to DEI advocates and detractors alike. Thank them for their support, their interest, their feedback. Remind them of the mission-oriented nature of this work. Assuage their concerns. Be frank, but be firm. It’s OK to disagree — just know that the very conversation indicates progress.





Embrace those who strive for progress, but remain self-directed.

There is no shortage of factors that have led to last year's reinvigoration of DEI efforts on independent school campuses, but one must credit the strong alumni/ae who have organized Black@ pages on social media to hold their schools accountable for their past shortcomings.

When these pages peak in activity and organize specific asks or demands for school leadership, you might find yourselves in a position when you almost want to resist progress, lest you feel you're doing it for the wrong reasons, out of coercion, perhaps. It's an understandable reaction, albeit a hasty one, to presume that your interests are not in line with those individuals calling for change. But, in most cases, your goals are in lockstep. These students and alumni want accountability, progress and justice.

Recognize the validity of their voices. Recognize that while their calls for justice were a shot in the arm for your own efforts, you aren't simply acting in response to their calls; you are doing it because it is mission-aligned.

Build resilience among board members.

It isn't just school business officers and other school administrators that have



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to maintain a steady, mission-oriented position in the face of opposition. Your trustees — stewards of the mission and community ambassadors — can be targeted by community members who feel progress is welcome or, for that matter, too slow. As school leaders outside of the day-to-day operations of the school, it is essential that trustees have a sense of stability, purpose and mission-alignment in the school's DEI work.

You cannot assume that because the board committed to a DEI strategy weeks, months or years earlier, that they aren't feeling the effects of the contentious discourses within our nation and within the community. Focus not only on reassuring your detractors but also on maintaining the support of those tasked with stewarding your mission.

In discussing DEI work with detractors within the community, trustees can feel vulnerability and even helplessness. After all, they set the strategic framework for the school while the head of school and their team execute against the strategic framework. But when championing — or, in some cases defending — the school's DEI work within the community, trustees are often forced to do so in detail. Why is this book being taught in grade 6 instead of this book? Why would the school invite this speaker for grade 11? And so on.

School leaders can do much to help school trustees communicate about their DEI plan and, specifically, prepare them for contentious conversations. Consider workshops aimed at helping them understand the DEI work's mission alignment. Dedicate a few minutes at each board meeting to demonstrate not just the school's work in DEI but also its alignment with the school's mission. Arm them

with talking points that can contextualize the school's work in a way that does not wade in the minutiae of execution and help them understand how they can bridge difficult conversations back to the positive. Remind them, too, how they can punt difficult conversations back to the school administration. Giving them these resources will do wonders for sustaining board support.

Craft and return to attainable goals, tracking your efforts.

We must treat the commitment to DEI work as a marathon, not a sprint. Change doesn't happen overnight, and there is no clear finish line that you can run toward to signify a checked box. This is an ongoing process. Set realistic and attainable goals that are mission aligned, and hold everyone at your school accountable for achieving them. Integrate these initiatives into your strategic plan. Own and embrace this work while honoring and celebrating the differences within your community. Be sure to identify opportunities to communicate key milestones and progress with your community, and, to gain their full support, be purposeful in involving them in the process along the way.

Fostering a diverse and inclusive school community through education, discourse and events lays the groundwork for improving and advancing school culture and beyond. Families, faculty, staff and especially the students you are sending out into the workforce and life will be better equipped for what's to come. **N**



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developing stronger communities. Caldarola previously served as communications director and community life + diversity co-director at the Allen-Stevenson School and has been deeply involved in diversity initiatives at schools for many years as a parent, trustee and administrator.