

Expanding Inclusion

DISTRICT 7 LAUNCHES NEW INITIATIVE PROMOTING DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION, BRINGING THE COMMUNITY TOGETHER

BY CLARA MAULTSBY

According to the Spartanburg Racial Equity Index, a study published by USC Upstate that documents community conditions in relation to racial equity in Spartanburg County, "...persistent gaps in health, wealth, income, employment, education, and opportunity prevent low-income people and people of color from realizing their full potential, and in places where inequities are ignored and perpetuated, quality of life is limited for all residents."

Motivated by this study's findings, District 7 superintendent Dr. Russell Booker has created a new administrative structure in order to promote equity and inclusion throughout the district. With the support of numerous nonprofits and government and community organizations, District 7 is putting a strategic approach into place that will close the gaps for students that exist within the district. Booker says that resources and tools are being developed that will help teachers and families to become aware and informed to help kids achieve their full potential, "regardless of race, income or zip code."

In a letter to a community regarding the strategic initiative, Booker noted that plans to promote diversity and inclusion have been in the works for the past few years.

"It is not a new focus for District Seven, but rather a deepening focus to become more intentional and strategic in our work to create broad and sustainable change by weaving it into the fabric of our culture," Booker said.

One new position in administration is Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer, filled by Dr. Carlotta Redish. She has led the district's human resources division for the past five years.

"Our diversity is our strength," Redish said. "Our ability to be inclusive exemplifies the practices and values that support the rights of all students, regardless of their ability, to be fully engaged in their total school community."

Redish noted that a Diversity and Inclusion Alliance comprised of representatives from school sites is being created.

The district's communications department is also placing links throughout the webpage with information, such as recommended articles, books, and events, accessible by faculty, staff, families, and the community.

Redish looks forward to working with all stakeholders to include students, parents, faculty, and staff members in nurturing and supporting diverse and inclusive communities throughout the district.

District 7 has also implemented a Compassionate Schools Initiative, which has emphasized the need to acknowledge the many factors that impact kids' choices and behaviors while they are at school. It encourages responding in a manner that will help kids thrive and it addresses their individual needs. The initiative promotes mindfulness for stress management, self-control, healthy eating habits, and building social and emotional skills. Teachers also go through training that provides strategies for supporting kids impacted by variables outside of school.

Booker believes there is a critical need for the strategy.

"Consider the child who doesn't participate or follow directions because she rarely gets a good night's sleep due to disruptions in her neighborhood," Booker said. "Consider the child who acts out in anger because he is hungry from not having enough food at home. We come to understand how ACEs, which stands for adverse childhood experiences, impact a student's emotional, mental and physical state while they are at school."

Booker believes it is important to have an appreciation for diversity in order to bring the District 7 community together.

"My overall goal is for the 7500 students and 1200 staff members is to deepen our understanding and appreciation of the unique gifts we all bring to the table," Booker said. "As we approach this work in the early stages, I see the need for us to do a lot of listening. From our listening, I am hopeful we will enter into a deeper level of learning. And from our listening and learning, I am hopeful we will all commit to leading in a way that moves us all forward." □



PHOTO COURTESY C. REDISH

Led by Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer Dr. Carlotta Redish and comprised of representatives from multiple schools throughout District 7, the Diversity and Inclusion Alliance works to support their administrators and peers in promoting diverse and inclusive cultures in their respective schools.