



May 19, 2021

Dear Wheeler Community,

On May 1, community members from ten schools from around the region gathered virtually – with students, alums, parents, faculty, staff, and trustees – as part of Wheeler’s second regional Diversity Conference, with a theme of “Identity and Belonging.” Together, we asked ourselves, our students, and our colleagues what our schools would look, feel, and sound like when each and every member of our community felt a sense of true belonging. While Wheeler has always been known for the community we foster, the sense of belonging that many feel has not been shared by or extended to all. The past several years have certainly been an inflection point, and have accelerated our efforts to do and be better on behalf of each and every one of us. Today, we want to update you on that progress on two concurrent and intertwined strands of our work.

As we reported last summer, the Board of Trustees charged a 14-member Equity Task Force to review all areas of The Wheeler School: to investigate and probe as many aspects of Wheeler as possible; to ask questions of our community – our students, faculty and staff, parents and guardians, and alumni – and to share the findings of that work with the Board of Trustees. The Task Force sent out surveys to alumni, to current families, to students, and to faculty and staff. Over 350 individuals responded to these questions, filling pages and pages with their thoughts, reflections, and concerns. Some were extremely positive and constructive; some were painful and raw. Over the past months, the Equity Task Force members presented these insights to the Board of Trustees, leadership, faculty, and staff. Their work resulted in a set of five recommendations, representing a true outgrowth of the voices of many who contributed.

Their full report can be found in the Parent and Guardian Portal, and it is important reading for both its scope and as the basis for its five central recommendations:

- To continue, through enrollment and retention efforts, to strive to reach a critical mass of students of color in every grade level, with special focus on Black and Latinx students;
- To increase access to financial aid, supports, and services within the school for traditionally underrepresented students;
- To further expand diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) work to all areas in the school;

- To ensure equity and inclusion support and opportunity for all faculty and staff;
- To expand the Office of Unity and Diversity and institutionalize the Equity Task Force's work itself.

Equally important, while the Equity Task Force process unfolded, the Wheeler community has been actively addressing what we saw to be important needs that could not wait to foster this shared sense of belonging and inclusion. While much of this followed from the work of previous years, it will not be surprising that many of these activities and next steps align with the report, and, in some cases, stem from the report's findings. These are summarized below.

To our minds, there is truly one critical message overarching this work: as an educational institution, we must continue to pursue listening, empathy and dialogue in our school with focus and urgency. We need to do this because not all voices have been included, and also because the only way to teach our children well is for them to learn and practice empathy and self-expression. If we believe, as we do, that productive struggle is at the heart of a great classroom, then facilitated dialogue across differences is a necessary and urgent priority. Some of the next steps we describe below are designed for this purpose.

We know the work on diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging will never be complete, because we will always strive to – and will need to – improve, and because new voices will join us and will challenge us in new ways. Indeed, the work of a school is to promote and elevate diversity of thought and access to the best opportunities and experiences our world has to offer. So we are glad to share that the Board of Trustees will be integrating the Equity Task Force into the work of its standing Board Learning Committee, and thus the formal work of the Board of Trustees; this ensures that we will revisit and monitor our commitments continually and revise our goals and next steps annually.

We want to thank the members of the Equity Task Force; the hundreds of alumni, parents and guardians, students, faculty, and staff for their participation; the Board of Trustees for their commitment to the imperative of this work; and our whole community that loves Wheeler enough to hold it accountable to its mission to “learn our powers and be answerable for their use” in every way.

With appreciation,

Allison Gaines Pell P'23, '25
Head of School

Alisia St. Florian '86
Chair, Board of Trustees

Summary of Actions Taken 20-21 and Next Steps for 21-22:

Student Experience:

- Established a system for any student to reach out for support after a bias-related incident.
- Conducted departmental review of curriculum to ensure that students gain access to the world's most enriching intellectual and social traditions and discoveries, spanning many cultures.
- Increased the visibility of Breakthrough Providence with opportunities for Wheeler students.
- Expanded U&D days into weeks to encourage wide-ranging and diverse discussion topics led by both students and teachers.
- Continued focused efforts on increasing diversity within faculty and staff.

Next Steps:

- Increase explicit teaching of tools for dialogue across difference, ensuring that students have experiences with a diversity of viewpoints, and with listening, affirming others, disagreeing, and debating ideas.
- Conduct a review with an equity lens of placement processes throughout the school in honors and AP courses.
- Complete the three-year implementation plan for our N-12 WHEELS (Whole Life Seminar) curriculum, integrating social-emotional learning, DEIB, and health and wellness into one course focused on identity, dialogue, empathy and courage.
- Conduct a full review of the Unity and Diversity course curriculum and methods.
- Establish a clear restorative justice process focusing on learning, reconciliation, and empathy.

Enrollment:

- Analyzed grade-level demographics to identify and strive to address situations in which a student is the only identifying individual of their racial or ethnic heritage in their grade level.
- Updated Wheeler materials and the website to include our commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging.
- Updated the admissions requirements to include more holistic assessments of achievement and potential than standardized testing.

Next steps:

- Develop enrollment office strategies for 21-22 to increase targeted outreach in various communities of color in our region.
- Align fundraising initiatives to maintain and accelerate the investments we have made in our financial aid endowment over the past 15 years, over which time we more than doubled our financial aid budget.
- Build upon existing financial aid support programs (e.g Building Tall Scholars, Malone Scholars).

- Undertake a feasibility study to plan for an ambitious and impactful fundraising campaign with financial aid as a key pillar.

Support for Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging Work Throughout Wheeler:

- Increased a position in the Unity & Diversity office from part-time to full-time to focus on the Student Support Program and the goals of the office itself.
- Continued to revise and use our Wheeler Faculty and Staff Hiring Guidelines to prioritize anti-bias hiring practices.
- Held the second Wheeler Diversity Conference on Identity and Belonging with ten schools from around the region.
- Expanded the Hamilton School’s free reading screenings to more than 100 families in our region.
- Completed the pilot year of the new Polaris program, extending support for language based learning differences into the Upper School program.
- Expanded the purpose of the Carrie Waters Fund, established over 30 years ago to provide “inclusion support” for traditionally underrepresented students, to encompass not only social and extracurricular needs but also academic needs.

Next steps:

- Revise the mission of the Board Learning Committee to integrate the Equity Task Force.
- Establish additional ways to honor the Narragansett and Wampanoag land.

Professional Culture and Growth:

- Integrated professional development into every division with specific focus on diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging (DEIB) in the context of teaching and learning and our students.
- Established voluntary faculty/staff-led white anti-racist groups that meet biweekly.
- Continue schoolwide professional development at beginning and throughout the year.

Next steps:

- Explore possibilities for expanding Human Resources support with a particular focus on organizational culture, equity and belonging.
- Ensure more direct and sustained links with Breakthrough Providence as a vital part of the institution.
- Update the Employee Handbook and relevant policies and processes.

Aligning our School Mission for an Anti-Racist Future

The Equity Task Force aims to further meet Wheeler’s mission and begin the process of healing by building an anti-racist school community where all students feel affirmed and supported in their identities so that they can actively pursue joy, meaning, and impact as ethical, engaged, creative, equal citizens of the world.

Co-Chairs of the ETF

- Princess Sirleaf Bomba
- (faculty, former trustee, alumni parent)
- Mohammed Abdalah (faculty)
- Sarah Palomo (faculty)
- Charlene Queen (staff and alumni parent)

Board Members Serving on the ETF

- Shankar Prasad (parent)
- Abby Stranahan (alumni parent)
- Jayashree Nimmagadda (former trustee, alumni parent)

Staff, Faculty, and Parent Members

- Sam Abeshouse (faculty and parent)
- Valerie Allen (parent)
- Kelly Clifton '02 (staff and alumna)
- Ryan Davis (faculty)
- Sean Kelly '02 (faculty, parent, and alumnus)
- Christine McNamee (faculty and parent)
- Kristin Murphy (faculty and parent)
- Marco Rodarte (faculty)
- Charlotte Stutz (faculty and parent)
- Maria Terrero-Kamara (parent and alumni parent)
- Maria Xavier (staff and parent)