



# BURLINGTON SCHOOL DISTRICT

Building a Learning Community

February 23, 2007

Robert Kiss, Mayor  
City Hall  
Burlington, VT 05401

Dear Mayor Kiss,

In 2003 the Burlington School District was pleased to participate in the city's Study Circles on Racism. As we welcome so many different cultures and races into our schools, addressing racism is of utmost importance to our mission. The District also was pleased to collaborate with a group of Burlington residents after the Study Circles ended to create a School Action Team to address challenges schools face around racism.

For the past three years, our School Action Team on Racism met regularly. Enclosed, please find a report on the actions and outcomes of our group. This time was well spent, with some significant changes taking place in the school district for our curriculum and our culture.

We plan to continue this work internally, engaging community leaders in conversations about what they hear and see in our schools. We are working with our administrators to identify what barriers exist in the recruiting and hiring of faculty and staff of color, in order to provide all students with a diverse faculty on a daily basis. Also, our diversity/equity coordinator is offering a Diversity Series of presenters to all faculty, staff and administration on a monthly basis to help support the dialogue of the adults in our schools.

We ask that you share our report in any way that makes sense, including with the city council and the community. We are happy to invite ongoing community dialogue about this important issue in Burlington.

Sincerely,

Jeanne Collins  
Superintendent of Schools

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# BURLINGTON SCHOOL DISTRICT

Building a Learning Community

## **An update on diversity initiatives within the Burlington School District Feb. 2007**

The Burlington School District has made significant strides in dealing with racism and diversity over the past three years, through internal changes as well as participation with the community Study Circles on Racism. This is an update of the work that's been accomplished, a vision of how that work will continue and an invitation to continue the rich community dialogue that has helped foster change.

### **Study Circles on Racism**

Since the start of the Study Circles on Racism in 2003, the School Action Team has worked on shared initiatives, set goals and envisioned change to address racism in the schools.

The School Action Team met regularly for three years and was made up of community members, parents, teachers and school administrators including the superintendent and the District diversity/equity coordinator.

The School Action Team meetings provided a forum for community members, parents, teachers and school administrators to talk together about the ways racism manifests in the Burlington schools. During the initial meetings of the team, several long-term goals were identified. To address these goals, the Study Circles School Action Team:

- Held a forum (2004) on racial harassment in Burlington Schools that was attended by over 100 community members, parents, teachers and school leaders.
- Provided input that was incorporated into the Burlington School District's updated anti-harassment policy (2004).
- Hosted two annual celebrations (2005, 2006) to recognize students and community members who are working in the Burlington schools to address issues of racism, harassment, and diversity. This celebration is called the Sundae in June.
- Met with the co-director of curriculum to discuss concerns about bias in curriculum and to learn more about how curriculum is established in the Burlington School District (2005-06);
- Hosted a workshop for community members and teachers about racism in classrooms and school curricula (2006).
- Help to host a Martin Luther King celebration at the Boys & Girls Club in the name of a long-time Study Circle member and long time advocate, Barbara Stewart. (2004)

### **Burlington School District change**

The Burlington School District has dedicated significant resources toward diversity awareness over the past 10 years, beginning with the creation of a full-time diversity/equity coordinator in the state. The position is one of only two full-time diversity/equity coordinators in K-12 education (the other is at the Vermont Department of Education) and among the few positions dedicated to this work in the state. District efforts over the last decade have included professional development on diversity and culture, the purchase and distribution of curriculum materials, collaboration with other community

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agencies and the city as well as Vermont's first K-12 education initiative to recruit teachers and other staff of color.

In the last three years, much additional work has been done including:

- Implemented programs that give students an active role in addressing racism and harassment. A World of Difference is an anti-bias program from the Anti-Defamation League that trains a group of middle and high school students who train their peers. Reading to End Racism brought about 50 guests into classrooms at four of Burlington's elementary schools to read a book on diversity and talk with students. This will be expanding to all faculty and staff in all six elementary schools.
- Provided professional development in the area of race, culture, diversity and socioeconomics.
- Revised the District harassment policy to align with state law. The changes addressed community and parent concerns that victims be informed of the outcome of their complaints.
- Dedicated time and attention by District administrators and principals to improving communication among school staff and the community about these issues.
- Embedded diversity training into new staff and all-staff training each year.
- Continued to lead state-wide efforts to recruit school staff of color through a collaboration with other school districts and the Vermont Department of Education.
- Hired what is thought to be the first African-American principal in Vermont. Bonnie Johnson-Aten, the District's first diversity/equity coordinator, now leads Edmunds Middle School.
- Elevated the position of diversity/equity coordinator to director level. As part of the change, English as a Second Language services have been added to the position's responsibilities.
- Assessed multicultural sensitivity as part of the hiring process. Adopted a definition of and created a protocol to assess multicultural sensitivity.
- Created a diversity series for Spring 2007 to support teachers' efforts to talk about related issues in the classroom and teach multicultural curriculum.

### **A commitment to future dialogue and change**

The District has valued its participation in the Study Circles, has seen the positive outcomes related to the changes it already has made and is committed to continuing this work. It is in keeping with the School District's mission -- -- "the Burlington Schools, in partnership with families and the community, will educate and inspire students to influence and shape the future" -- that it ensure all Burlington students have an equal education and opportunity for success.

To continue this work, the superintendent and diversity/equity director will hold a meeting with community leaders during March 2007 to discuss the next steps in the District's process of addressing racism in the schools.

If you have questions, comments or would like to be involved in the District's work in this area, please contact District diversity/equity director Lashawn Sells at 864.8494 or [lsells@bsdvt.org](mailto:lsells@bsdvt.org).

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