

ANNUAL REPORT

from the

2005-2006 HUMAN RELATIONS ADVISORY COMMITTEE

to the

FAIRFAX COUNTY SCHOOL BOARD

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May 2006

The Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) Human Relations Advisory Committee (HRAC) received the following charge from the School Board for 2005-2006:

Charge

The HRAC examined in 2004-2005 the use and effectiveness of school-based Human Relations Committees (HRCs). After consideration of last year's study, the School Board charges HRAC to recommend guidelines for ensuring the HRCs remain proactive, viable, and serve our mission. These recommended guidelines will be considered as a possible addendum or revision to Regulation 4910, General Mission. The School Board asks the HRAC to gather such source materials as may be needed to develop these recommendations, including the following:

1. Factors that have been demonstrated to contribute to an ideal human relations climate.
2. "Best in class" organizational model(s) that
 - 1) promotes positive human relations
 - 2) demonstrably fosters an environment conducive to learning
 - 3) constructively embraces our parents and other community stakeholders
3. School climate assessment tools that may be available and are linked to known best practices.

The HRAC has identified the need for systemic policy changes in the following areas of HRC's in schools:

- Membership
- Communication
- Education
- Training/Feedback

In preparing the report the committee decided to divide the group into four subgroups. The groups are as follows: 1) Elementary Schools 2) Middle Schools 3) High Schools and 4) Similarly Situated Jurisdictions. The three school groups were charged with addressing recommendations 1 and 3 of the charge from the School Board. The fourth group was tasked with "best in class" organizational models. Given the uniqueness of the individual school communities, each school should tailor the recommendations to its individual community needs. Following are the findings and recommendations of the committee:

1. Factors that have been demonstrated to contribute to an ideal human relations climate.

There were recurrent themes throughout the three subgroups of factors that are essential to fostering an ideal human relations climate. The indispensable factors include:

- **Membership**

The HRC must make every effort to include in its membership representatives from all facets of the school community.

Ways to accomplish this:

- Have at least one student representative at the high school and middle school levels with situational discretion lying with the principal (e.g., personnel issues, confidential issues).
- Schools should make every effort to include all community stakeholders: administrators, staff, teachers, parents, community members, and students when appropriate.
- Eliminate the requirement for a student representative at the elementary level.
- Embrace a global definition of human relations and model the all-inclusive nature of the school community.

- **Communication**

The open dissemination of information is key to a functional HRC. The mission statement, activities, meeting minutes, and summary reports must be readily available to all stakeholders within the school community.

Recommendations:

- Informally meet through staff or parent monthly coffees.
- Utilize services available through the county, e.g., educational accountability, translation, or language services.
- Utilize the existing PTA or PTO to “advertise” the existence of the HRC and communicate its mission.
- School newsletters and bulletin boards.
- Provide an anonymous drop box for suggestions, comments, questions, and problems.
- Offer the opportunity for all to be heard; the existence of the HRC must be globally recognized.
- Provide a safe space for any community member to voice concerns about human relations issues that impact the school community.
- Involve parents, students, community members, staff, and faculty.
- Allow committee the discretion to delineate issues more appropriate for referral to the OEC.
- Increase resources for parent liaisons.

- **Education**

It is essential that the mission and purpose of the HRC be reflected in the attitude and understanding of the stakeholders from within the school in order to be internalized by all community members. The school climate should be a proactive one in creating a positive environment, both curricular and global.

Recommendations:

- Mandatory staff development and training covering a variety of topics impacting school climate such as celebration and respect of multiple cultures within the school community.
- Begin staff meetings with “what if” scenarios that provoke discussion and feedback.
- Provide written materials and suggestions for articles or books, which foster an environment of global thinking and provide opportunities for discussion of the information.

- Create opportunities for staff and the community which promote interaction and celebration of diversity such as International Night (food and talent), new teacher mentoring, newcomers clubs, after-school programs or clubs, and family tours.
- Create opportunities for parents and staff to interact during the school day in volunteer activities both in and out of the classroom.
- Provide “training” to students via counseling lessons or through morning announcements/news in a way that celebrates diversity.

- **Training/Feedback**

As important as implementation is to the process, so is the outcome. Feedback is essential to HRC so that it may develop and remain fluid in its ability to respond and react to the changing school climate and to keep itself ahead of any potential problems.

Recommendations:

- Require at least three (3) meetings per year.
- Submit an end of the year report to the principal.
- Workplace survey for staff.
- Self-assessment at the school level such that the school community may consider how accessible its programs are and how to make their school more “user-friendly.”
- Encourage class meetings and address modeling good human relations in the classroom.

2. “Best in class” organizational model(s) that

- 1) promotes positive human relations**
- 2) demonstrably fosters an environment conducive to learning**
- 3) constructively embraces our parents and other community stakeholders**

The human relations practices studied in this portion of the charge are those of school districts with similar percentages of ethnic groups as Fairfax County. We note that the percentages are not necessarily reflective of the same ethnic make-up as FCPS but are similarly diverse. Those school districts researched include: Arlington County (VA), Montgomery County (MD), Clark County (NV), Austin and Houston Independent School Districts (TX), Ginnitt County (GA), Boston (MA), Hillsborough and Dade Counties (FL), and San Diego (CA).

While several school districts have committees that overlap into human relations, it appears that FCPS is the only school district to have a separate committee dedicated to human relations. In addition, it became apparent that some committees are reactive in nature rather than proactive, which is what this committee envisions FCPS striving to be.

We feel that the best organizational models seem to have a broad definition of human relations and seem to foster an environment in which all stakeholders will “learn” together. For example, Texas and Florida require “School/Campus Advisory Councils (CAC).” In Austin, Texas the mission statement includes that the CAC “will strive to create a climate of respect and inclusion by reducing the social acceptance of hurtful teasing, bullying and harassment among students.” A more expansive approach to diversity is also noted in some of the school districts include sexual orientation in the context of discrimination.

In two districts: Montgomery County (MD) and Clark County (NV), the mission statements refer to our global environment. For example, we “prepare students to live and work in a global multicultural world, and foster an atmosphere where each member of the community is an integral part of the educational process.”

FCPS policies represent the most comprehensive multilevel statement of expectations and responsibilities as they relate to human relations. However, the committee believes that more comprehensive definitions and improved programs may contribute to a better overall human relations program.

The following is a proposed policy statement: “To provide a school climate that enables every student to prepare for success in the multicultural, global society of the 21st century, and to achieve their full potential without discrimination of any kind, including but not limited to: ancestry, ethnicity, national origin, race, color, religion, creed, gender, sexual orientation, age, socioeconomic status, marital or parental status, pregnancy, physical or emotional disability, physical characteristics, intellectual ability, and without any harassment -- sexual, hazing, or bullying in a drug and violence-free environment.” (See Clark County and Montgomery County Public School’s statements on harassment in Appendix A.)

Other definitions and “best in class” programs are included in Appendix A including expansive statements on philosophy and guidelines, Arlington County (VA); a special policy on training and a workforce diversity policy, Montgomery County (MD); a two page policy on parental involvement, Clark County (NV); a separate Human Relations Advocacy Department, San Diego (CA); and a “full service schools” concept that integrates educational, medical, and human services beneficial to meeting the needs of children and their families on school grounds, Hillsborough County (FL), not unlike FCPS disparate activities.

The organizational models we found to be most beneficial include members of the community such as business leaders. It is also important to encourage and facilitate parental involvement. Some school districts had portions dedicated to parental involvement in their student handbook.

3. School climate assessment tools that may be available and are linked to known best practices.

Climate assessment tools are important to evaluate the level of functioning of the HRC at the school and community level. We believe that the best way to gauge the success of the HRC’s is through “stakeholder” feedback. Therefore, workplace surveys such as the survey which was utilized in the 2004-2005 charge would be helpful in information gathering. In addition, we recommend outside party assessments, followed by staff development and training. Tap the resource of Dr. Larry Bussey for regular staff training, development, and feedback to assess the progress and keep ahead of issues involving school climate.

4. Recommendations:

In order for the HRCs to be “proactive, viable, and to serve our mission” and based on the above, the HRAC recommends as follows:

- A. The school-based HRC must:
 - Ensure that the membership of the HRC accurately reflects the demographics of the school community and those impacted by the school.
 - Have two components--one reactive (addressing problem as they arise) and one proactive (to encourage a positive) learning and teaching environment.
 - Increase resources for parent liaisons.
 - Mandatory staff development and training.

- B. The committee further recommends that the School Board mandate the following practices for the schools:
 - Adopt the “best in class” models and adapt them to the needs and culture of FCPS.
 - Each school should create an evaluative report and hold an end of year closure conference between principal and cluster assistant superintendent.
 - The cluster assistant superintendent reports the challenges faced by the schools of that Cluster and how they were addressed to the Superintendent.
 - Create a mechanism by which the School Board may monitor HRC effectiveness (for example, by requiring the Superintendent to annually report on the state of human relations in FCPS).

- C. The HRAC recommends that changes be made, through amendments and/or additions to Regulation 4910, to separate the personnel issues from the school community issues and to reflect the above recommendations.

- D. In the course of our discussions several issues came to light as concerns from the members of the HRAC and their constituencies. A list of discussion topics are included in Appendix B. This information is supplied for the benefit and discretionary use of the School Board.

APPENDIX A

Research documents are available upon request.

APPENDIX B

Following is a list of issues that were discussed as concerns, comments, and questions from the committee based upon the members' individual constituencies and thoughts. This list is by no means exhaustive, however it does give a sense of the discussions of this committee. This is information supplied for the benefit and discretionary use of the School Board.

1. Bullying and Harassment.
2. Ensuring personnel sufficient to achieve the School Board's vision for the County.
3. Parent Support - A feeling that the schools are inviting to parent involvement, whether mothers, fathers, or caregivers and including parents from other cultures.
4. Ensuring fair treatment of all citizens and closing the minority achievement gap.
5. Emphasize school climate and take into consideration different learning styles and educational equity.
6. Allowing time for teachers to be able to accomplish the tasks they have. Being aware of wanting a world class educator and offering salaries not in line with our goals.
7. Getting over the obstacle of the language barrier.
8. School safety.
9. Ensuring that the needs of special needs students and their teachers are met.
10. Raising awareness and sensitivity to cultural, ethnic, and racial differences.