

Prep Develops a Strategy to Address Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, Now and in the Future

New Board Committee and Consultant Set

by Mel Malmberg

Towards the end of the spring 2020 semester, Prep faculty and staff, joining much of the nation, began to more formally explore and confront the meanings and effects of racism. As the COVID-19 pandemic provided stark evidence of disparities in jobs, social programs, health, and wellbeing for people of color in the U.S., killings of unarmed Black people by police ignited nationwide protests, civil actions, and unrest.

Though faculty and staff have been discussing diversity, equity, and inclusion in education through individual professional development and conferences, our teachers and administrators recognized the urgency of taking greater action and holding more conversations around racism and inequities that exist in our school, our community, and our society.

At a unique point of transition between then-Head Peter Bachmann and incoming Head Jim Pickett, the two leaders came together with the school's leadership team and Board of Trustees to proactively address equity and inclusion in thoughtful, meaningful, and actionable ways. On June 18, Pickett, Bachmann, then-Board Chair David Codiga, and incoming Chair Kris Leslie sent a letter announcing the school's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiative.

The announcement came around the same time that Prep, like many independent schools, received a petition started by alumni that "respectfully implore[d]" the Prep Board and administration to create a publicly shared plan that addresses systemic racism. The letter eloquently stated the school "must usher in a new era of accountability, education, and advocacy, ensuring that the future does not mirror the past."

Altogether, 683 Prep alumni, parents and guardians, students, and faculty signed the petition, which cites Prep's honor code and culture of critical thinking.

"Your voices inspire our intentional, purposeful, and immediate commitment to this important work: to

ensure that Prep stands up against racism and makes our campus a place where everyone feels truly welcome walking through the gates," wrote Pickett in his July 20 email to the community. In that email, Pickett and the school announced the leadership and structure of a Board of Trustees DEI Committee, and sought nominations for a community-led working committee.

Headed by veteran Board member and longtime social justice and equity advocate Carol Ramsey, the DEI Board Committee was elevated to a standing committee at the first Board meeting in September 2020.

"This action reflects that this is hard and serious work that will take time, perhaps a long time," Ramsey says. "And it recognizes that the work cannot be episodic but must be both steady and steadfast."

The Board committee will also have on-campus oversight by Assistant Head for Student Life Vanessa Walker-Oakes and Assistant Head for Academic Life Sarah Cooper. This structure reflects what Pickett wrote in his August 28 email, that we at Prep are "on a journey to make Prep a place where everyone feels they can bring their whole selves to campus."

Ramsey's service and leadership in the worlds of social equity issues and the independent school landscape includes work as VP of Philanthropic Services for the Entertainment Industry Foundation, directing grant-making for Children, Youth and Families at the James Irvine Foundation, and serving as a vice president at A Better Chance and at the Council for Advancement of Support of Education. She was head of the Wilmington Friends School and worked at Vassar College and Bowdoin College.

The Board Committee has been tasked with the creation and oversight of a comprehensive action plan to examine curriculum, experience, and environment at Prep that will result in culturally competent students, confident and comfortable at the intersection of race and identity in America.

Ramsey outlines five points that her committee would first address (see box below).

GOALS FOR PREP'S DEI INITIATIVE	
INFORMATION	Identifying, and causing to be collected, relevant data.
DEFINITION	Defining what we mean when we say the term diversity, equity, and inclusion in the context of the social and geo-social realities of Flintridge Prep. This means understanding the lived experience of our community when it comes to race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, and other factors.
A SHARED UNDERSTANDING	We must be clear about what we intend to accomplish and how we will accomplish it. Faculty, staff, trustees, families, and alumni must have the same understanding so that all efforts converge to success.
A COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGY	DEI does not begin and end in a committee or class or circumstance. It is central to our total operation and must be integrated throughout.
AUTHENTICITY	The Flintridge community will decide for itself what it must do and how it will accomplish effective and sustainable diversity, equity, and inclusion. We will seek and hear the authentic voices and perspectives of our community, using as our source material the perspectives and experiences of our own students and alumni.

"We began work in the summer with a seminar and exchange among the staff and faculty who must guide the academic and extracurricular, student-centered engagement with the subjects of race and justice in America," Ramsey says. "The collection of data relevant to a review of the issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion at Flintridge is underway. In addition to the mining of demographic data of the school and the surrounding communities, data will help the Board set discernible and measurable goals, and set standards of success and failure specific to Flintridge Prep."

More than 100 students, faculty, parents, and alumni have volunteered to participate in the working committee. Once that committee is formalized, each person will be able to provide immeasurable insight for the Board, Ramsey says, helping to "develop fact-based approaches, informed by the authentic voices of the Flintridge community."

Guided by the Board DEI Committee's parent and alumni representatives, Ramsey shares that the committee must discover, understand, and agree upon the details of inclusion: "What do we mean? How is it expressed in the experience of Prep students? What are the indicators of success?"

Much of the committee's present work will include collaborating with noted DEI expert, Pasadena native, and social justice advocate Christina Hale-Elliott, who was hired over the summer as a consultant to Prep. Hale-Elliott's work of information gathering was beginning as *PrepTalk* went to press. Pickett, Ramsey, and the leadership team are exploring how to best to use the energy and commitment of the volunteers who nominated themselves to be part of the working committee. "We are grateful for the whole community's interest, engagement and patience," Ramsey concludes, "because this is hard and serious work that will take time."

"The interest and energy around this issue reflects a genuine love of Prep and what it stands for, and can stand for, as everyone continues to reckon with the legacy and effects of racism and discrimination in this country," Pickett says. "It also asks each of us to reflect on our own lived experiences as well as those of others. We look forward to working with every constituency to understand, address, and create concrete steps forward, for as long as it takes."

The school is committed to communicating updates. Visit www.flintridgeprep.org/dei for information and updates, and contact DEI@flintridgeprep.org to ask questions and participate in the dialogue.