

# ER9 Boards of Education Approve DEI Surveys



The Easton, Redding and Region 9 boards of education approved four surveys to gather data to improve diversity, equity, and inclusion at Helen Keller Middle School, John Read Middle School, and Joel Barlow High School. The overall votes across all three boards, cast at a June 1 special meeting, were 16 in favor of approving the surveys as submitted, three opposed, and one abstention.

The surveys are the work of the ER9 Joint Boards of Education Diversity and Equity and Inclusion Task Force Committee that formed last year to advise the three boards on ways to address issues of diversity, equity and inclusion in the schools.

Parents must give their consent for middle and high school students to “opt in” and respond to the survey, and questions can be skipped. The survey is separate from the annual state-mandated bullying survey.

School Superintendent Dr. Rydell Harrison said the survey is a great opportunity to gather data from students who have otherwise not have felt fully seen or heard. “This survey is a way to get meaningful input from our students who are at the heart of every decision that we make, every policy that we put in place, every book we purchase, every dollar that is spent,” Harrison said.

More than 100 residents attended the public comment portion of the marathon May 25 regular meeting of the ER9 boards of education and the June 1 special meeting. The vote on the surveys was postponed until the June 1 meeting, which included a significant number of additional public comments from parents of current or former students, alumni, students, teachers, and community members. Many people spoke in favor of the survey and in support of the work the DEI Task Force is doing. Others opposed it and asked for it either to be rejected or delayed.

Easton resident Dana Benson told board members that he represents a group of 88 people who signed a letter asking the board to either vote down the survey or delay it. Benson's limited liability company, formed to advocate for political and policy positions, recently sent Easton and Redding households a mailer. It took issue with the schools' plans to increase their curricular commitment to examining racism and its consequences, and with the revised survey's inclusion of questions about gender and sexual orientation.

Easton school board member Christopher Hocker urged the board to approve the survey despite the pushback. "Both sides have presented this in kind of apocalyptic terms," Hocker said. "This isn't Armageddon. This is a survey. It is a tool. It is going to hopefully give us information that will be used in some form or fashion that will make kids' lives better."

Redding school board member Michael Hoffman cast a no vote because he felt surveying "11-year-old students about gender and sexual orientation crossed the line." Randy Hicks and Jeff Parker of Easton also voted against the survey because they felt that that DEI committee didn't make enough changes in response to the concerns expressed by some members of the public.

Before the vote was taken, Redding Board of Education Chairperson Christopher Parkin spoke about the importance of the survey:

*“How can we be serious in our efforts to ensure that we reach every student or respect one another ... unless we can establish a basic baseline? Who is being left out of our caring community? Who doesn’t feel supported? Who is scared to ask for help? These are not radical questions. We’ve heard emotional testimony in our meetings ... from former students about their experiences in our schools. Personally, I credit that experience with considerably more weight than the opinions of those who do not have recent lived experiences within the four walls of our buildings*

*We know there are students struggling due to their identity. Whether their experiences are discrimination, bullying, unfairness, or any other term that someone would like to load with a politically contentious connotation is irrelevant. We know that they exist. We hear stories of the courageous, but surely not of the less courageous, whose struggles are no less real.*

*We also know that students achieve academically when they feel safe, seen and supported. Do we not owe it to those underrepresented and marginalized students to understand their experiences? Who among us would reject the idea that classrooms should be inclusive spaces? If we are indeed committed to preparing students for a global world, we must embrace the diversity that exists in our own communities first, not demand that children be shielded from it or claim that bigotry or racism doesn’t exist so inclusion is irrelevant for our work. ... Let’s*

*practice what we preach and build a caring community.*

*Students learn reading, writing and math when they feel safe and included. Every student regardless of their sex, gender, race, body size, sexual orientation, mental or physical disability, religion or political belief deserves an education in school where they are made to feel comfortable not marginalized.”*

The Easton board voted three in favor and two opposed, the Redding board voted six in favor and one opposed, and the Region 9 Board voted seven in favor, zero opposed with one abstention.

Heather Whaley, a Redding board member and the chair of the DEI Task Force, said the approved survey gives marginalized individuals the opportunity to tell their stories in a safe and inclusive manner. “We have heard so many current and former students and families who have been waiting for years for a survey like this,” Whaley said. “It gives people the ability to be identified in the way they want to be identified.”

The video recording of the May 25 regular meeting and June 1 special meeting can be accessed below, along with links to the latest drafts of the surveys available on the ER9 website, and the document outlining next steps with a tentative timeline:

- High School Survey:

<https://www.er9.org/common/pages/DisplayFile.aspx?itemId=33956859>

- Middle School Survey:

<https://www.er9.org/common/pages/DisplayFile.aspx?itemId=33956861>

- Parent/Guardian Survey Questions:  
<https://www.er9.org/common/pages/DisplayFile.aspx?itemId=33956863>
- Staff Survey Questions:  
<https://www.er9.org/common/pages/DisplayFile.aspx?itemId=33956865>
- Clarifying Questions, Next Steps and Timeline:  
<https://www.er9.org/common/pages/DisplayFile.aspx?itemId=34046174>

June 1, 2021 Special Meeting of the Easton, Redding, and Region 9 Boards of Education.

May 25, 2021 Regular Meeting of the Easton, Redding, and Region 9 Boards of Education.