Montclair Public School District Embarks on Two-Year Journey with the National Equity Project as a BELE District Network

(Montclair, N.J., November 12, 2021) – Montclair Public Schools has joined the National Equity Project’s Building Equitable Learning Environments (BELE) Network, a cohort of 16 districts from across the U.S., committed to the overall goal of “centering the wellbeing of Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) youth and communities in our education system.”

The National Equity Project’s BELE District Network is an intensive two-year program for districts “committed to dream, disrupt, and co-design more equitable, healing-centered, and joyful purposes of school and approaches to teaching and learning in partnership with BIPOC students.”

“We could not be more excited and honored to be working with the National Equity Project,” said Dr. Kalisha Morgan, Assistant Superintendent of Equity, Curriculum, and Instruction. “They are truly the leaders in this work, and there is no better time to be centering the social emotional health and academic success of our students.”

Montclair’s diverse BELE Design Team of 20 administrators, teachers and students who will meet monthly to provide leadership coaching, as well as ongoing in-district meetings and inquiry to support the team’s work. Teams will be working to co-design a system that centers the whole child’s wellbeing and racial equity from the classroom all the way up to the systemic level.

Rather than being a curriculum or training program, the NEP BELE Network is a framework for building and engaging a deep partnership and collaboration among all district stakeholders. “What makes the BELE Network different is it isn’t some rigid prescription or framework we are buying into and then making it fit for Montclair,” said Morgan. “Instead it is an ongoing partnership to develop, create, support and change our schools in partnership with all the very people who are our school community: administrators, teachers, and students.”
Last month at a launch event, members of Montclair’s BELE Network Team had the opportunity to meet members from the other cohort schools and to begin dreaming about what a more equitable school looks like. BELE Network teams will be working to disrupt racism in public schools by centering student experience and development. “Hearing first-hand student accounts and experiences shed a light on some of the systemic issues that this town faces,” said Troy Mullins, Nishuane kindergarten teacher and member of the team. “The bravery and honesty of these young people should be commended. We must use our combined voices to not only magnify the problems these students face daily, but we must also be the catalyst for continued progress and change.”

A key component of being a BELE District Network is recognizing the power of youth in positions of change and leadership. A growing group of students from Montclair High School are key members of the Team, and during the launch event, NEP leaders emphasized the need for teachers and administrators to resist getting stuck in the hierarchical mindset where adults’ ideas are prioritized over students. “I think the inclusion of student representation is fundamental because without knowing and prioritizing our needs, there would be a lack of authenticity in this work,” said MHS junior and Team member Sofia Batres. After meeting with NEP teens from across the country, Batres noted, “It felt incredibly refreshing, and I came out of the meeting feeling extremely empowered. It was amazing to hear from other students how big of an impact we can truly have.”

Funding and programmatic support for this initiative is being provided by The Montclair Fund for Educational Excellence (MFEE) and The Schumann Fund for New Jersey. “MFEE is honored to be supporting such a thoughtful process that centers student voices to address root causes of racial inequities in our schools,” said Masiel Rodriguez-Vars, Executive Director.

To learn more about the National Equity Project BELLE District Network, visit https://www.nationalequityproject.org/bele-district-network

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