

Human Relations Commission
Meeting Minutes
August 17, 2022 5:00 p.m.

Attendance: Tasha Edens, Henry Fernandez, Anthony Gennaro, Ava Hart, Alicia Moody, Debbie Ruimerman, Howard Thody, and Faith Jackson, Director of Equal Opportunity and Diversity Management

Excused Absence:

Absence: Sanji Lawrence

QUORUM: *Yes:* X *No:*

Call to Order: Chairperson Hart called the meeting to order at 5:07 p.m. She noted for the record that there was a quorum present. She welcomed new member, Commissioner Moody.

Public Session: Dr. Alberto Vázquez Matos, Ed.D., Ph.D., Superintendent of Schools, and Dr. Jada Waters, Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion were invited to speak to the commission. Chairperson Hart introduced herself. She thanked Dr. Vázquez Matos and Dr. Waters for attending tonight's meeting. She asked the commission members to introduce themselves. She then asked Dr. Vázquez Matos and Dr. Waters to introduce themselves.

Dr. Vázquez Matos said that he completed his first year at Middletown Public Schools and is starting his second year. He is a Middletown resident. Dr. Waters said that she is proud to have been born and raised in Middletown and product of Middletown Public Schools. She indicated that she is the Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and the Title IX Coordinator for Middletown.

Chairperson Hart thanked Dr. Vázquez Matos and Dr. Waters. She explained why they were invited to speak to the commission. She indicated that the Human Relations Commission receives information from the public, positive and negative. At times, the commission finds itself addressing challenges faced by the community, by everyone, but particularly people of color. Recently, a parent contacted Director Jackson over issues and behaviors in the middle school as well as the high school. She explained that the commission tasked her with contacting Dr. Brooks, which she did. Dr. Brooks had communicated that a lot of the challenges being expressed were pretty much seen across the state and across the nation. Essentially, Middletown Public Schools is not an outlier. Some of the behavioral challenges and academic challenges, especially considering COVID, are not specific to Middletown or unusual. There are a lot of positive things happening, as well. However, positive things are rarely reported. She said that the commission wants to have an open door. It wants to welcome the new administration of Middletown Public Schools and provide support. Also, the commission would like to learn if there are any initiatives for which it can be present. She said the commission would also like to know from Dr. Waters some of the initiatives for the coming school year. She asked if Director Jackson would like to add anything.

Director Jackson said that Chairperson Hart provided a good overview of why the commissioners wanted to meet with the BOE administration. The commission wants to work collaboratively with the school system. She indicated that while a parent did contact her office, the commissioners were aware of problems from others in the community, as well. This was a bit of a red flag for the commission and the members wanted to reach out to the BOE administration to support the school system in any new initiatives and help to improve the overall atmosphere. She added that she and the commission are very interested in the results of the climate study, which was recently conducted and reported on in the Middletown Press.

Dr. Waters indicated that Dr. Vázquez Matos had charged the leadership team to conduct a climate study as a response to the concerns in the community about the upticks in fights in the schools in January. As a team, they all conducted pieces of the climate study. She explained her focus was on students. She also had the opportunity to work with the cafeteria workers. In working with the students, her goal was to get an understanding of their school belonging. She said she got really good data. Middletown students are very vocal and intuitive. They know exactly what's going on, and they're always watching adult behavior. What she gathered from the study is that the students wanted their voices to be heard. Dr. Vázquez Matos allowed her to create a Junior DEI Change Agent Program. A lot of the feedback they were getting from students was that they're not treated fairly or that things are racist. She said she wanted to listen to them and unpack what they were saying. However, she also wanted to give them language they could use to express their feelings. She is also working with a group of teachers, who are now known as the DEI Change Agents. Through this program, they learn about culturally responsive pedagogy. She said she ran a pilot of that program with teachers and then extended that learning to students at the high school. About 12 students participated. The program was really powerful. She said it gave her the understanding of their feeling of belonging in the school. Also, it gave her the motivation to create a racial equity policy for the school. During the program, which ran from March to June of 2022, students were able to create their own culture story from their own experiences in Middletown Public Schools. They used this data to create the racial equity policy. They had the opportunity to go on a field trip to the Black History Museum. The goal for the upcoming school year is to extend that learning to the middle school students so both middle and high school students will have an opportunity to engage in this type of learning and participate in after school programs. She said that's where they are with the DEI Change Agents program, which is a direct result of the school climate survey.

Dr. Vázquez Matos thanked Dr. Waters for her explanation. He said he wanted to speak on the behaviors that surfaced in the schools the last academic year. They looked at many aspects of the data and started to triangulate. He said he wanted to be clear that sometimes there is the narrative of what actually happens and then a narrative that is created without having the facts. They had to navigate through that while both protecting the privacy of the students and being transparent with families. When they did the comprehensive study, certain things surfaced that required them to have some serious conversations about what they need to do differently. He added that the student population is very diverse, and at this time, they are at majority minority. That factor is important when they talk around cultural proficiency or understanding multicultural education. Many students have come to them with their own values and their own family beliefs, and they must learn how to respect them, embrace them, and make them the fabric of their school culture. He explained that they have done a lot of work around providing support for the students and staff. He said that at the December Board of Education meeting, he shared discipline data. They don't just look at things on a superficial level, but also at the subgroups. An example is adding a full-time social worker at every school, which will be

happening for the first time. He added that they know from many focus group meetings that there is trauma and mental stress with both students and adults. He added that they have hired a Supervisor of Social Emotional Learning, who is already putting in place social emotional activities for teachers throughout the district. They have also looked at their hiring practices to ensure that new hires understand and embrace the diversity of the school district's population and really want to work with their students. Also, there are community variables that they have to address, as well. The behavioral issues that they have seen surface do not start at the school level. The more they can educate parents and guardians around monitoring their child's cell phone and social media use, the better. This is key in training students on how to behave in the professional world. He also touched on the vaping problem. He said that they've installed a vape sensor, and they continue to work with the social worker on plans and wrap-around services for the students. A lot of work went into planning to have much more successful school year than last year. He said that students will have disagreements and fights, but the goal is to have a restorative approach and educate students around conflict resolution. He added that the DEI Change Agents leads to having positive role models in the school on the level of teachers and peers.

Dr. Vázquez Matos indicated that he is focused on five priorities for this new academic year: culture and climate, innovative pathways, systems, communication, and operational efficiency. He added that every department in the district needs to have a goal around culture and climate. The staff at the Board of Ed are role models. Central Office should be a welcome environment. If they expect it of their students, they should expect it of the staff, as well. A term they have been using in book discussions is psychological safety. When the environment is psychologically safe, students can thrive. Every department will create a mini strategic plan that will be embedded in the larger strategic plan to identify goals and inform the work moving forward.

Chairperson Hart said before she opened up discussion and invited questions, she wanted to thank Dr. Waters and Dr. Vázquez Matos for sharing the goals and where they are with the commission. She added that she applauds the initiative and effort of Dr. Waters to get students engaged. Previously, when Justin Carbonella conducted a survey across Middletown Public Schools, it was learned that there was a disconnection. The students may have felt one way, but the parents were controlling the narrative. Also, sometimes they collect data and aggregate it but do nothing with it, so it's good to see positive action. She then asked if any commissioners had anything they would like to add.

Commissioner Thody said that he had a hypothetical question for the superintendent. He asked if a different governor takes office and enacts laws similar to those being enacted by a certain southern state what would he do or what would other superintendents in the state do? Dr. Vázquez Matos answered that it's a natural conversation to have in regards to appropriate curriculum, cultural issues, and the mention of the word gay in the classroom. He added that even in his short time in Middletown, he and others on the Board of Education have received concerning letters. When he receives letters, he reports them to the appropriate officials, including the Anti-Defamation League. At the end of the day, he has to know that he did right by all students, which may require him to lobby and be the voice for the marginalized and the voice-less, because he was that student. He said if he has to fight the fight for LGBTQ students or other marginalized groups, that's his job. He's lucky to have a team that believes that, as well.

Director Jackson thanked Dr. Waters and Dr. Vázquez Matos for being here to discuss with the commission the efforts to change the climate in the schools. She said the commission would be happy

to support their initiative to move forward. She said she was pleased to hear about the ongoing work, especially the effort to make sure the teachers they hire understand the diverse environment and that they are educating all the students.

Commissioner Fernandez mentioned a number of incidents at Beman, for which he was present. He asked how these initiatives are working considering this occurred. He also remarked on the effect of long-term teacher absences due to COVID. He said parents have an obligation here, also. He added that he is working with the Principal of Beman to put on a program to bring positive role models, people of color, to the school for students to see and meet. He asked how these changes are going to be achieved.

Dr. Vázquez Matos said that with retirements and teachers transitioning out of the school system, there were a number of vacancies. This academic year, there will be 55 new teachers coming onboard. He acknowledged that in some situations, students do not feel connected to a caring adult. That was demonstrated in the panoramic survey they conducted in April and May, which was quite eye-opening. The Board of Ed was very concerned about this data, which is why initiatives and training have been put in place. They have sent a clear message that bullying is unacceptable, and there have been times when students have been expelled. He has also presented to the Board of Ed a civility policy that applies to parental and adult behavior. Adults must be cordial with each other because they are examples for students. He indicated that he is also creating a faith-based advisory group. The more they can educate community leaders, the better. Also, he is working to consistently become more informed on social media.

Dr. Waters said she wanted to add something. She said since working with Dr. Vázquez Matos, she has learned that he is very intentional in modeling what things should look like. And, he allows for not only the professional team but also parents, staff, and administrators to have a seat at the table when decisions are being made. One of the biggest things to hopefully come from this meeting is to have one voice. She said in the future when incidents come up, the commissions should contact her or Dr. Vázquez Matos to let them know about it. One of the biggest issues right now is that people need to recognize that everyone has just gone through a pandemic. The pandemic exposed a lot of disparities that were invisible before and now are very present. Those disparities are showing up in the classrooms and school buildings. She added that they can't do this alone. They need the community's support. It's one thing for people to go on social media, but if they come directly to them, they can problem solve together. She said that they are actively trying to show the community that they are there and ready to partner and work together. However, they need to change the narrative. It's not the city versus the Board of Education; it's the city and the Board of Education working together. She said that Middletown has a lot of benefits for students. There is an on-site clinic. Each school has a social worker, and they are working to meet the social emotional needs of the students. She added that the DEI Change program will be evaluated every month. There are systems and inventions in place to address what they learned this past school year. She said that the DEI work is not hers alone. Everyone will be accountable.

Chairperson Hart said that she's excited. She said Dr. Vázquez Matos articulated so many of the concerns and barriers that have frustrated her. However, she's happy to hear him advocate for working with the stakeholders and the natural supports. There are paraprofessionals in the schools who know the students. With proper training, everyone can work together and accomplish a great deal. She added that this time is unprecedented. The adults are struggling just like the kids. She then spoke on school

governance councils. She said they are valuable and so important. She said as people have moved around, she's concerned about the fidelity of the school governance councils and wanted to put that on their radar. Dr. Vázquez Matos said that by statute, they have to have a full governance council at every school. As an accountability measure and as a part of the school improvement plan, a member of the school governance council must be on the committee of putting together the school improvement plan.

Commissioner Gennaro said that he grew up in Middletown. He and his family value the diversity in Middletown. He was a police officer for 20 years. He was also a School Resource Officer and did that shortly after Sandy Hook. He agrees that the issues they're seeing are not just Middletown. There is a loss of teachers everywhere. When any new programming is implemented, it needs to be done mindfully and clearly. He said he had concerns about the plan to retain quality teachers. Additionally, he wanted to know about steps that are being taken to reduce the number of fights and increase the safety in schools. He said that mostly his questions were answered, already. He also thanked Dr. Waters and Dr. Vázquez Matos for their time, effort, and communication this evening.

Director Jackson said she could tell that they have strategically built on a good foundation and given a lot of careful thought about what is going on in the schools. That foundation is solid, and eventually it will bring change to the quality of education in the schools. It won't happen overnight, but this work and the foundations they are building will move this school system to the next level.

Chairperson Hart spoke on a previous initiative and partnership with the Board of Education called I CARE, Identifying Children and Responding Early. Those values are already imbedded in some of the schools.

Chairperson Hart said to Dr. Vázquez Matos and Dr. Waters that the commission really appreciates their time and expertise. Dr. Vázquez Matos thanked the commission and said he looks forward to more conversations. Director Jackson encouraged Dr. Vázquez Matos and Dr. Waters to reach out to the Human Relations Commission for support.

Dr. Vázquez Matos and Dr. Waters exited the meeting.

Chairperson Hart moved the discussion to the regular meeting.

Regular Meeting:

Approval of Agenda: Commissioner Thody motioned to approve the August 17, 2022 Meeting Agenda. Commissioner Edens seconded. The motion properly carried.

Approval of Meeting Minutes: Commissioner Gennaro motioned to approve the June 15, 2022 Meeting Minutes. Commissioner Fernandez seconded. The motion properly carried.

Old Business: Chairperson Hart moved the discussion to revision of the Working Definition of Antisemitism for resolution to go before the Common Council. She clarified that in going back and forth in email, it was determined that antisemitism is not hyphenated. Director Jackson said that in communication with Councilman Nocera and Linda Reed, Common Council Clerk, Councilman Nocera recommended that the commission put together a draft of the resolution. She explained that she

did that, which is when the issue of the hyphen arose. She said that she requested a copy of what the other towns had passed as a resolution. However, Myra Clark-Siegel again sent the almost three-page document, which is too long to go before the Common Council.

Chairperson Hart asked about the email message from Jay Tulin and wanted clarification on what he was asking. Director Jackson said the message indicated that he wanted to attend the meeting tonight. However, there was no reason for him to attend tonight's meeting, as the commission is still working through the process. She said she advised Kasey Maurice to respond to his message and ask his purpose for attending the meeting. He then responded that he was not available to attend.

Commissioner Gennaro asked what month the commission would like this resolution to go before the council. Chairperson Hart answered that they should do it as soon as possible, as this process has been going on for some time.

Director Jackson attempted to bring the revised resolution up on the screen to share with the commission. Chairperson Hart suggested moving to the next agenda item while she works to share the document.

Chairperson Hart moved the discussion to the thank-you card that was sent to Commissioner Ed Ford, who had recently resigned.

Director Jackson indicated that she could not bring up the document to share on her screen. However, she said that she was able to condense it so that it will fit on a plaque. She said she would forward the revised draft to the commission for them to review. She explained that as they were looking over the document for typographical errors, the issue of the hyphen in antisemitism came up. According to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, antisemitism is the preferred unified term without the hyphen. The document the commission puts forth to the Common Council will refer to the longer one, which will be placed on the City's website. She said she will make the necessary changes and ensure that antisemitism is consistently one word. The commission members can approve via email for the document to then go the mayor.

Motion: Commissioner Gennaro motioned that the commission approve via email the final draft of the Working Definition of Antisemitism to then go before the mayor. Upon approval from the mayor, the resolution can then go before the Common Council. Linda Reed, Common Council Clerk can review for content and form. Commissioner Fernandez seconded. The motion carried through a unanimous vote.

New Business: Chairperson Hart moved the discussion to New Business. She said that she wanted to bring up something that had come to her attention. She said that Councilman Ed McKeon communicated to her that there had been some sort of reprimand of two officials in the City that pertains to some sort of bias or racial discrimination. She said that the employees have been mandated to take some type of racial bias training. She asked if anyone had heard anything about that. Director Jackson said she was aware of it.

Chairperson Hart said she was asking who exactly got reprimanded. Director Jackson said she knows about the situation but is limited in what she can communicate. The issue is in the HR department and she had to mediate between the employees. She said that it is a culmination of a lot of things. It has to

do with the HR Specialist job and how it was created. Comments were made. Over time, a number of things were said. They are trying to work this out, but there are a lot of variables. She further explained that the HR Specialist position was born out of the charter revision. Chairperson Hart, Affirmative Action Monitoring Committee Chairperson Browne, and she were present at the meeting when HR Director Richardson was asked about recruitment. He indicated that he couldn't properly do recruitment because of limited staff. Chairperson Hart said she remembered that meeting. Due to the budget cycle coming up, the department moved quickly to put together a job description for the HR Specialist, and what was created included much of the HR Generalist job description with some minor additions for the HR Specialist position. When the person got hired, she found out that she was doing a lot of work for the Anti-Racism Committee, which affected her ability to learn and do other functions of her job. She brought these issues to the Office of General Counsel.

Chairperson Hart asked if the mandate of racial sensitivity training was a consequence. Director Jackson said it was not a consequence. It was a part of learning to be front-line employees. She explained that they will later bring on the consultant to do training for the whole City. After that, they will bring on NCCJ to do additional racial sensitivity training. Chairperson Hart said that what she's hearing is that the person who is in charge of HR and the General Counsel have used language that is racially insensitive. She asked about the department's response and asked why this isn't something that everyone knows about already. Director Jackson answered the commission doesn't need to be aware of how internal issues are addressed. Chairperson Hart countered that she should know about it, as well as the commission members. They should all be concerned about it. Director Jackson said they can address it directly to the mayor if they wish to do so, but it's still an internal matter that needs to be addressed. Commissioner Fernandez questioned if the current Director of Human Resources came from East Haven, CT where there were multiple racial issues. There was further discussion on this.

Chairperson Hart asked when the matter is no longer an internal one. Director Jackson answered that City employee issues are internal matters. They are not public matters. The public can't rule on the employee when they're not managing the employee. Chairperson Hart indicated that the tax payers are paying the salary. Director Jackson said as a citizen and a tax payer, she can go to the mayor and discuss what she's heard and her concerns.

Commissioner Gennaro said that as a council person, he was not aware of this matter at all. However, he is concerned that another council person was aware of it and talking about it in the community. Employees have a right to due process before all the facts come out. He would think that Director Jackson would have the most accurate information. Director Jackson agreed and said she was limited in what she could say because this is an internal matter. Commissioner Gennaro said the possibility that this is being talked about in the community and leaked out incorrectly isn't good. When due process is tainted or interrupted, sometimes that can lead to the person responsible for the issue getting out of it without consequence. People should wait until all the information is out before they speak on it.

Chairperson Hart said she thinks people frequently speak on things about which they don't have all the information. This situation is important enough that they should all be aware of it. She said she understood that Director Jackson is not in a position to talk about it. However, she will contact the mayor, as recommended. Commissioner Gennaro said he wasn't sure the mayor would be able to divulge any information either, as an executive branch member.

Chairperson Hart said she understood and completely respected Director Jackson's position and the importance of following internal processes. However, these accusations are concerning. She will contact the mayor as a private citizen without representing the Human Relations Commission. She added that it's frustrating to her that nobody knew about this serious issue.

The commission agreed to move on from the discussion. However, members expressed interest in revisiting the situation if they have more information. Director Jackson said she would not be commenting further on it.

Review: The commission reviewed the attendance. There was no discussion on the attendance.

Announcements:

The next regular monthly meeting of the commission will be September 21, 2022.

Adjournment:

Commissioner Gennaro motioned to adjourn. Commissioner Fernandez seconded. The meeting adjourned at 6:51 p.m.

Respectfully Submitted by,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kasey Maurice". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Kasey Maurice,
Administrative Sec. III