NORWOOD SCHOOL:
Admission and DEI Working in Tandem to Build a Culture of Belonging and Allyship

by Billy Vargas, Director of Diversity, Equity, and Community &
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At Norwood, a PK-8 independent school just outside of Washington, DC, we believe that a sense of belonging is fundamental to sustaining a healthy and thriving community of learners. In schools with a deep appreciation for the inherent value of a diverse community, the admission and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) offices share a natural common purpose: to build and uphold a dynamic multicultural and inclusive community. We recognize that fostering a genuine sense of belonging, and a strong practice of allyship, must lie at the heart of our efforts.

For us, we found a unique opportunity when Alex Ragone joined the Norwood School community earlier this year as our new director of admission and enrollment management. During our first conversations, we opened the door to explore questions about the nature and purpose of equity and inclusion work; about the possibilities of partnership; about how our respective identities, perspectives, and experiences intersect and influence our work with various constituencies; and about what allyship truly means. Through ongoing dialogue, we have a shared understanding of why we do the work we do and how we can ensure we are supporting our departmental and collective goals. Together, we have identified three important areas for collaboration that reflect our commitment to building a culture of belonging at Norwood.

#1. Communication
Beginning with Norwood’s overarching commitment to culturally competent communication, we understand that our ability to engage in effective cross-cultural communication is key to unpacking difficult questions about the role of identity, privilege, and bias in our school. Understanding how these issues impact our community and modeling culturally competent communication in our work with one another are critical stepping stones to developing successful admission practices more broadly.

We also recognize the central role the admission office plays in sharing our school’s vision and culture with prospective families. Key to these efforts is being able to effectively communicate Norwood’s approach to equity and inclusion work, while providing well-
informed responses to questions that might arise around sometimes challenging topics. A priority for our collaborative work is making sure that the admission office is well equipped with the knowledge and tools needed to effectively communicate Norwood’s vision for equity and inclusion.

#2. Partnering with Constituencies

Over the years, Norwood has worked to build a robust set of programs dedicated to issues surrounding identity, diversity, equity, and inclusion. Nurturing a strong partnership that includes voices throughout our school community supports and strengthens a culture of equity and belonging. Additionally, this partnership provides the lens through which the admission and DEI offices consider further actions to support inclusion. Some of the specific systems our offices have jointly established include:

- Setting up open communication channels with the Norwood Parents Association’s vice president for equity, diversity, and inclusion and with the co-chairs of the Parents of Students of Color group.
- Creating a peer-to-peer space for prospective parents of students of color to connect with members of our Parents of Students of Color group.
- Inviting parents to serve on a DEI panel during our admission open house experience.
- Creating an opportunity for admitted families of color to meet with our Parents of Students of Color group during this critical decision-making time.
- Inviting prospective families to attend equity and inclusion events the School is hosting.

Our goal is to build a true partnership with families as we work together to ensure that we are racially and culturally aware in all communications from our offices, addressing real-world issues, engaging in open dialogue, and celebrating the differences in our school community as we establish new relationships with prospective families.

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Relatedly, the admissions office works in close collaboration with student ambassadors for equity and inclusion at Norwood. The DEI office runs a wide range of equity and inclusion programs for students, including SUCCEED (Students Understanding & Celebrating Culture, Ethnicity, and Diversity) and DREAM (a group open to seventh and eighth graders who wish to engage in conversations and explore ways to take action on issues of identity, diversity, equity, and inclusion). Many of these students attend admission events, such as our open house and accepted parent coffee, to answer questions and share their unique experiences at Norwood.

The admission office, too, works directly with students. Alex runs a “Story Corps” program for seventh and eighth graders focused on sharing and celebrating our students’ stories. The simple act of sharing a piece of one’s self through a story builds connections, teaches empathy, encourages allyship, and strengthens community and a sense of belonging. In fact, the sharing of stories deepens Norwood’s commitment to fully knowing our students.

#3. Ongoing Learning & Allyship

This year, Norwood School is embarking on an ambitious plan that reexamines what it means to provide the knowledge and skills that students need to understand and address issues of race and racism. As part of this new Anti-Racism Plan of Action, Billy is leading a task force dedicated to building and mapping a racial literacy curriculum for grades PK-8. Alex’s participation on the task force demonstrates his commitment to action, which is the very hallmark of allyship work. And, as we launch the new plan, Norwood’s leadership team, on which Alex and Billy serve, is engaged in a shared reading and discussion of the book *White Fragility* by Robin DiAngelo.

As we continue through this tumultuous school year, we look forward to further exploring opportunities for admission and DEI collaboration. In many ways, this partnership builds upon itself in a cyclical manner, with deeper collaboration leading to more inclusive practices that harness meaningful relationships in the community and foster ever-growing learning and trust.

Belonging, in many ways, begins with an invitation—an invitation to participate in something greater than one’s self. Our hope is that through our collective actions we can continue to strengthen our community’s culture of belonging, leveraging opportunities for meaningful conversation and collaboration. In the end, this work serves the mission to which we aspire, creating a school where children will be known and where they learn the true meaning of our school’s guiding principle, how you lead your life matters.

Norwood School, located in Bethesda, Maryland, is a coeducational independent school serving approximately 450 students in grades PK-8. Norwood’s child-centered approach to education and its very intentional emphasis on being a happy place of learning, create an environment where each child is loved, nurtured, challenged, and truly known.
The White Mountain School: Internal Collaboration to Build Capacity for Belonging and Inclusion

The effects of the current layered crises of 2020 have permeated our school communities. We are navigating dueling crises: a long overdue reckoning on systemic and structural racism in this country coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic. The crises with which we are faced are fraught with inequities, disproportionately affecting racial and ethnic minority groups at alarming rates, creating rippling effects on our communities and the students and families with whom we work. At The White Mountain School, a gender-inclusive boarding school in Bethlehem, NH, we saw these crises as a call to action and a responsibility to accelerate efforts. In an ongoing collaboration between the Offices of Equity and Inclusion, Enrollment Management, and Teaching and Learning, we accelerated the work of several mission-driven initiatives aimed at building capacity for belonging and inclusion across and within our community.

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*Kim Cooper, Director of Equity and Inclusion*

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**Educational & Experiential Equity**

*by Kim Cooper, Director of Equity and Inclusion*

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When we started to examine our practices around attracting, enrolling, and retaining a diverse and mission-appropriate student body, we found that our financial aid budget accounted for the cost of tuition and not the cost of attendance. Covering the cost of tuition is certainly a necessary first step, but that financial aid award would not allow the student to participate in aspects of our school that come at additional costs, resulting in inequitable practices. In response to this inequity, in 2019 we created the White Mountain Scholars Program, a program designed to increase educational and experiential equity for Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) identifying students from low-income backgrounds in the United States. Students in the White Mountain Scholars Program receive a financial aid package robust enough to cover the full cost of attendance, which provides each student
an increased opportunity to access the mission and promise of a White Mountain education. In addition to receiving the financial support necessary to cover the full cost of attendance, students meet weekly on an individual and cohort basis with the director of the program. While this program cannot erase the emotional trauma that BIPOC students often face at predominantly white institutions, it allows for the scholars to develop a sustained sense of belonging.

Multicultural Competence & Curricular Commitments
by Mike Peller, Assistant Head of School for Teaching and Learning

We believe that questions drive real learning. The White Mountain School’s mission centers on inquiry. With greater urgency, we seek to make sense of these critical questions: How might we create mission-driven cohesive programs throughout our school, and thus a cohesive singular program, that inspires students to lead lives of curiosity, courage, and compassion? How might we create a truly inclusive community where all students and faculty feel a true sense of belonging? How might we actualize the critical work of anti-racism throughout our school? How might we create equitable grading practices? How might we inspire students to engage civically? We know this is not the work of a single person, often falling on the Director of Equity and Inclusion to be the sole champion. Rather, this is the work of all faculty, staff, students, and members of the school. Given this is the work of the entire community, we have recently accelerated our work in a number of areas—including (a) faculty development, (b) improved hiring initiatives, and (c) student programming—so that we can build multicultural fluency and an anti-racist stance throughout all members of our community.

To inspire and encourage our faculty this year, we built an in-house, four-day White Mountain Equity and Inquiry Conference. The conference supported faculty in wrestling with our overarching focus this year: How might I lead with anti-racist actions while teaching and living with compassion and humility? While this question was written in July and continued to feel like a strong guiding question as we examined it in December, we knew that it is just lip service if we did not provide intentional, schoolwide learning to support faculty in this work. The idea behind the White Mountain Equity and Inquiry Conference was this: Transformation only happens when learning and conversations are shared across all members of an organization. How many times have you sent people to a conference—spending lots of money on a select few—only to have them return to the torrent of school life without the time and space to apply their learning to providing institutional change? What if, instead, the conference was brought to campus so that everyone can engage and, thus, increase the likelihood of institutional change?

Over the first week of January, all faculty engaged in the White Mountain Equity and Inquiry Conference. Faculty presented to one another, elevating the wisdom in the room. And then we brought in expert keynotes to motivate and inspire our collective focus. Topics and speakers include:

- **Grading for Equity** with Joe Feldman and Mark Boswell from The Crescendo Group
- **Four-Dimensional Education** with Charles Fadel from Center for Curriculum Redesign
- A discussion on equity in the outdoors with Mirna Valerio
- **Building an Anti-Racist School** with Paul Gorski from The Equity Literacy Institute

We used a large portion of our professional development budget on this event, which was a hefty price tag, but we knew the impact across all faculty—in their work with our students—would be great. In addition, we also extended an invitation to our board members to join the keynotes, building capacity across multiple and essential stakeholders, creating a sense of shared understanding and prioritization as we continue to engage in this important work.

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Allison Letourneau, Associate Head of School for Enrollment Management

Nurturing Connection in Community

by Allison Letourneau, Associate Head of School for Enrollment Management

The opportunity to build connectedness and belonging within our community begins the moment a prospective family embarks on an exploration of our school. Spanning from an initial interaction with the admission office to conversations and time spent with various members of our community, we hold an institutional commitment to ensuring that prospective families feel seen, heard, and known in their exploration of our school.

As an extension of their time spent with students, faculty, and staff, we recently launched our Parent and Guardian Ambassador Program, a collection of current parents and guardians across a range of identities and geographic locations that capture the diversity of our student population. They partner
with us in working closely with families from their initial point of inquiry through their first semester as a new White Mountain family. Key to launching this program was to create access to a wide range of perspectives and conversations in their exploration of and transition to our school, anchored in a commitment to belonging and inclusion.

In addition to the Parent and Guardian Ambassador Program, we have accelerated and enhanced our focus on current families and retention efforts. Given the unpredictable nature of this unusual school year, we are eager to understand: What is the experience of our current families? How are they inclined to measure value in this abnormal year? How might we build capacity for belonging and inclusion within our current parent and guardian community given the geographic constraints inherent in a boarding school? In service to these questions, we committed to two initiatives in hopes of enhancing our ability to create a sense of belonging and connection with our current family community.

Leading these efforts was an offer to each new family to join me in a 1:1 conversation as an opportunity to share their perspective, insight, and feedback on their student’s first semester. An incredible response rate of 88% created not only an opportunity for meaningful connection but also a window into the personal and unique experience of each new family at our school. The conversations with families necessitated rigorous listening on my part in service to creating a space where families felt seen, heard, and known.

In addition to individual conversations with the majority of our new families, we were excited to partner with Leadership + Design and their Design for Retention service. Driven by personal (and anonymous to us) interviews with a random sample of current families, the service helped us to map the customer experience in this unusual year, capturing impressions, touchpoints, and perceptions that shape the ways our families are engaging with our school. As we continue to dig into this work, we’re excited to partner with Leadership + Design in thinking about how best to build capacity for belonging and inclusion as a proxy for retention of our mission-specific families and their students—now and in the future.

Founded in 1886, The White Mountain School (Bethlehem, NH) is a gender-inclusive independent boarding and day school serving approximately 145 students in grades 9-12. Inspired, empowered, and guided by our mission, we are a school of inquiry and engagement. Grounded in our Episcopal heritage, we prepare and inspire students to lead lives of curiosity, courage, and compassion.

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