In each issue of *The Yield*, we ask three professionals within the independent school world three questions about a current topic that impacts enrollment practices. For this issue, we asked three diversity, equity, and inclusion practitioners to share their perspectives about the state of DEI work in the independent school industry, at their schools, and through their own experiences. Thank you to the three participants who shared their insight: [Alex Scott](#), Consultant on transgender and gender non-binary issues in schools; [Kemi Nonez](#), Director of Diversity, Equity & Engagement and Associate Director of Enrollment Management, Durham Academy (NC); and [Dr. Naomi R. Taylor](#), Director of Intercultural Life, St. Paul Academy and Summit School (MN).

### 1. What are the industry-wide DEI issues that schools should be addressing?

**AS:** There are four key things schools should address. They are purposeful and mission-driven.

- Re-appropriation of budget and fundraising dollars to dramatically support financial aid specifically committed to racial, economic, and cultural diversity.
- Re-appropriation of budget and fundraising dollars to fund social justice education, curriculum overhaul, and community outreach.
- Shift in curriculum to include attention and time spent developing emotional intelligence growth and sensitivity to others, collaboration skills, and global awareness of and solutions for climate change, hunger, and the debilitating impact of poverty. There is no reason, given our understanding of technology and natural resources, that we cannot feed, shelter, clothe, and educate everyone. We choose not to.

- Intentional diversity training, bias education, and concrete strategic planning for every facet of the school community—board, administration, faculty, students, parents.

**KN:** Currently, as a nation and as school communities we have a sense of obligation to commit to diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. The payoff for time committed to this work is often immeasurable. When families are looking to send their students to an independent school, they are in search of excellence of all kinds. By no means should that exclude DEI work. Are we addressing the importance...
of embracing individuality, which encompasses much of the progression of a school? Obligations of diversifying the board, administration, faculty, staff, and student body need to be met with sincerity and integrity. Well-defined structures aid in supporting this goal, including procedures within the enrollment management office. Ideally, when we speak about diversity, we are moving beyond students who identify as a person of color. We must be asking ourselves the following questions:

- Who is assisting in shaping our school community?
- Who is on the enrollment management staff?
- Who has a critical role in the admissions process?
- Can everyone in the enrollment management office speak to the DEI efforts being done in our school?

A comprehensive self-audit within the enrollment management office will uncover the answers to these questions.

**NT:** Cultural safety and belonging, equity leadership identity, and culturally responsive antiracist practices, procedures, and policies are universal DEI issues that schools should be addressing. Cultural safety and belonging through the lens of DEI is beyond the standard of state regulated safety protocols to which each school building must comply. All constituents in an organization must be able to answer yes to the following questions: As a Black, Indigenous, Person of Color (BIPOC) do you feel safe when you are in small/large spaces, in meetings, or in classes on campus? Safe that you can bring your full authentic self, your identities, your voice? Do you feel seen, heard, and valued?

Belonging is indicated by the following statements: I feel ownership in this space. I have agency in this space. I feel seen, heard, and valued. There is no negotiating or second-guessing that I have a stake in my organization as a valuable community member.

Culturally responsive antiracist practices, policies, and procedures are all-encompassing from the mission statement, strategic plan, admissions, recruiting/hiring, windows and mirrors curriculum, and more. It is the organization that needs to adapt to its diverse members rather than promoting an assimilation process. As cultural human beings, we bring who we are *culturally* to all spaces that we occupy. It is vital for any organization to thrive to be able to adapt, change, and correct where damage has occurred.

### 2. How should schools adjust their enrollment practices based on increased awareness of racial injustice and diversity? Or, for school employees, how has your school adjusted enrollment practices to address/include racial justice, diversity, and inclusion?

**AS:** Beyond shifting dollars from building projects, etc., to financial aid, it is critical that we reevaluate curriculum to reflect the culture, history, literature, and arts of disenfranchised people; create an anti-bias framework for the admissions process; and extend anti-bias training for everyone. At the same time, we need to teach our students the skills to actively listen, engage, and appreciate the world views and experiences of others—a form of multicultural fluency. Curriculum (in its broadest sense) reflects the mission, vision, and core values of a school. How enrollment professionals present and articulate that curriculum informs the attitudes and expectations families bring to the school community and their willingness to participate in growth and social change.

**KN:** At Durham Academy, the enrollment management team in conjunction with my office of Diversity, Equity & Engagement (DEE) found it helpful to conduct an annual self-audit. It has been our way of holding ourselves accountable. Without a doubt, we found it imperative that the director of DEE read and score all applications. Members of our reading committees have also been asked to undergo anti-bias training. It became clear that prospective
families appreciated knowing our commitment to racial justice and equity. This messaging is not lost but actually highlighted in our welcome during our tours and information sessions from our Head of School. It also became clear that we needed to strengthen and not necessarily expand our partnership with access organizations and feeder schools. We understood that accessibility is a key driver for many families, and our board of trustees agreed, approving a sizable increase for our financial aid budget. We soon turned our energy to further meet the needs of our community. This scenario played out by our office adding an additional staff member who could work with our Spanish-speaking families during the admissions process and beyond, including parent-teacher conferences.

**NT:** SPA is embarking on a Defining Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Initiative that will investigate all aspects of the school to keep race a centered focus while examining the influence of gender, sexual orientation, ability, and socio-economic factors to answer the following questions: Does every student at SPA have an equal chance to thrive? Are there habits and practices that inhibit our quest to create an inclusive community? The results from the qualitative and quantitative measures to answer these questions will influence how to better adjust enrollment practices to continue to increase diverse enrollment. SPA takes a holistic approach to student applications and embedding culturally responsive welcoming practices to seek to learn about families’ values, interests, and concerns and to offer warm, inviting opportunities to feel seen, heard, and valued.

**3. What do you wish everyone understood about your perspective?**

**AS:** We must embrace the power and critical importance of unconditional love as the driver in crafting mutually supportive and purposefully eclectic school cultures that mindfully honor our responsibility to lead us out of societal and individual narcissism into lives of collaboration and creativity.

**KN:** When I approach my work in DEI, I find myself reimagining our school community. It’s so easy to get caught up in the weeds of assemblies, parent programming, and faculty professional development, but DEI requires our attention. It is imperative to continue to work outside the school’s momentary needs and place emphasis on strategic long-term initiatives. Identifying inequities in our policies, procedures, and traditions can propel most schools into a sustainable inclusive environment, where equity is the norm. Most days I am motivated by elevating the pain of hurtful and harmful language or actions and replacing it with good intentions and empathy.

**NT:** That we all have identities that are intersectional. We all have intercultural competence work to do and there are no passes. Even for me as a DEI practitioner who identifies as a cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, multi-racial woman of color, I have ongoing interpersonal and cultural introspection reflection work in order to be effective. I strive to increase awareness and understand the intersectionality of my identities in order to lead with an equity lens as a part of my identity.

**BONUS QUESTION:** How would school communities be improved if more schools had a better understanding?

**AS:** See 1, 2, 3 above. Think of the positive energy that can infuse a school if everyone shares common social justice goals and experiences the joy of collective work and change. Learning becomes even more real and urgent and necessary. Mindfulness becomes a way of life. A butterfly flaps its wings in Costa Rica.

**KN:** Communication is key in the field of diversity, equity, and inclusion. The more transparent we are about our goals and objectives, the more our achievements can be embraced. Courageous conversations around social justice, equity, and race must continue beyond the classrooms and into the dining rooms and boardrooms. Never is diversity, equity, and inclusion work done in a silo.

The work being done by many should not be seen as an obstacle, but an advantage for our families. Diversity
embodies differences, individuality, and uniqueness. It remains imperative to understand the critical significance the enrollment management office has on curating a community of happy, moral, and productive global citizens.

**NT:** School communities that have fully embraced DEI will develop and use models outside of their traditional practices, policies, and procedures. Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) would benefit from partnering with BIPOC constituents and local community organizations to develop cross-cultural models of hiring, recruitment/retention, budget allocation, and curriculum development. Schools will know they have made DEI progress when:

- White graduates can name their identity and privilege and how they will use that privilege toward dismantling racism and other inequities.

- Graduates of color report that they felt, seen, heard, and valued. They would recommend the school to prospective BIPOC students and they express a desire to be engaged as alumni/ae of color because they are proud to represent.

- The student body and faculty/staff’s demographics are equally ethnically/racially diverse, including representation from LGBTQ+ and various socio-economic backgrounds.

- Ultimately when ALL students feel safe, have secured belonging vs. a sense of belonging, and have access to opportunities that help them to achieve their dreams as defined by them. Anyone at your school can do this!

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**Kemi Nonez** is a proud graduate of North Carolina Central University, an HBCU located in the heart of Durham, North Carolina. Much of her 11 years in Durham Academy’s Enrollment Management Office has been dedicated to providing an independent school experience full of academic excellence for marginalized students. Her commitment to Durham Academy’s institutional values of equity and inclusion have created lasting relationships with both students and families.

**Dr. Naomi R. Taylor** is a social justice, racial equity educator, researcher, and writer who brings a wealth of experience to lead in the areas of diversity, equity, and inclusion. She is currently the Director of Intercultural Life, a K–12 position at St. Paul Academy and Summit School, in St. Paul, MN. Spending time with family/friends, meditation, reading, writing, and yoga are ways that she practices self-care.