

Dear Putney Alumnx, Parents, and Friends,

We have heard from many of you with hopes, fears, exhortations, and questions about our work to make Putney a better anti-racist school and community, one in which all students can equally learn and thrive. This letter endeavors to answer those questions, to explain some of the thinking behind how we are doing this work, to outline the actions we have taken already and those we are in the middle of, and our commitments going forward. We hope that you have already read through the Winter 2021 Putney Post, which provides a variety of windows and mirrors on this work. If you have not, here is a [link](#) to a virtual copy.

The work of the Board of Trustees

There has been a Diversity or Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Committee on the board for decades, but the focus has sharpened and the urgency of the commitment has risen in the last several years. Our goal is to have the DEI lens be automatic and intuitive in all aspects of board work. Much of the implementation happens at the administrative and community level.

- The board is responsible for the long term **strategic planning** for the school (see p. 6).
- The Committee on Trustees and Governance is clear on the need to have greater **diversity** of all kinds on our board. Since we have term limits, the recruitment work is ongoing. All potential trustees must have a good understanding of DEI thinking in education.
- There have been ongoing **DEI professional development** sessions in board meetings for the last several years, as well as expectations of work done between meetings. This work is led by outside facilitators, Nkomo Morris '94, DEI committee chair, and members of the committee. Many trustees are also learning in their own workplaces and communities.
- The board is clear that there needs to be **targeted fundraising and increased budgetary support** for our DEI goals to be met. Support in this area for faculty, staff, and students has been built into our fundraising strategy and goals.

- **Communication** with alumna and other stakeholders has clearly been insufficient. The website is not the best avenue, and we are exploring how the board can both reach a wide audience and also make space for two-way discourse.
- More details on board planning can be found on page 6.

Student Recruitment, Admissions, and Enrollment

In order for Black and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) students to consistently thrive at Putney we recognize that all students need to have their identities affirmed and reflected back to them in programming, curriculum, and the composition of the student body, faculty, and staff. There needs to be a vibrant BIPOC community and that community needs to be both on campus (affinity spaces) and off campus (partnerships and mentors). Lastly, we need to be cultivating student leadership (both loudly and quietly) as students navigate the agency given to them with a Putney education.

Currently, the admission goal is to maximize diversity of all kinds (racial, gender, socio-economic, sexual orientation and learning profile). That being said, one of the goals has been to extend an active preference for African American enrollment. The demographic data we provide is our best effort to compile a picture of the representation of Black and BIPOC students at Putney. Because we have not explicitly asked adults how they identify, and some students and families choose not share that information when they begin the admissions process, we do not have consistent data over time. On one hand, we are actively looking for ways to capture student data more accurately, and inform students about what we do with data. On the other hand, we do want to reserve the agency of students to be partners in gathering that information, and allow them to decide how they identify themselves, or do not. *Over the past 5 years, 49% of admission applicants overall have chosen not to identify themselves racially.* Please read the numbers below with that caveat.

- 7 students who self-identify as Black are currently enrolled and attending Putney.
- 25 students who identify as BIPOC (including Black and multi-racial students but not including international students) currently attend Putney.
- In the past 5 years, 43 applicants self-identified as Black.
 - Of those applicants, 18 were accepted.
 - Of those accepted, 12 chose to attend Putney.

- 4 of those 12 students chose to leave before graduation. Stated reasons varied.

Black students and families are obviously not a monolithic group, and in order to reach a critical mass of African American students we will need to attract more families through broad programming and strategic recruiting in different constituencies. Our benchmark for recruitment is that the number of Black students closely mirror the national average of the population. Last year's new enrollment of Black students was particularly low, as six of eight Black students that were accepted chose other schools.

Because of national income and wealth inequality, significant enrollment of Black students will require there to be substantially increased financial resources available to the Admissions Office. We work with a number of partner organizations such as Beacon Academy, Esperanza Academy, Daniel Murphy Scholarship Fund, NJ Seeds, and A Better Chance in order to raise awareness and the profile of Putney amongst Black and BIPOC students and families. These are sending institutions which work with outstanding BIPOC students, most of whom require full financial aid awards.

A number of our Black and BIPOC students in recent years have come from academic families with parents teaching in schools or universities. We are working with the board to create and implement strategies for making Putney more broadly appealing to all Black and BIPOC families, but also specifically appealing to Black and BIPOC families of means, and to do more effective outreach; some of these are outlined in the strategic planning section below. We hope that Black and BIPOC alumna will join us in pushing forward with this work.

Our admissions process is not designed to encourage large numbers of applicants for whom we do not have funding. We ask sending organizations and consultants who work with students to choose mission-strong candidates to apply, rather than putting many students through the rigorous admissions process in order to appear more selective to families looking for selectivity instead of the learning experience unique to Putney. A better measure of admissions success is to look at how many admitted students choose to come to Putney, and of those, how many stay and graduate.

There is an inherent tension in financial aid strategy between (a) choosing to offer more financial aid to fewer students, or (b) choosing to spread the financial aid dollars across more students.

The first option creates the "barbell effect": a campus community which largely excludes the middle class, of any race or ethnicity. The second option means we can not always compete successfully for highly talented students who need full aid. At this point Putney is following a middle path—we offer a small number of full scholarships, and many partial scholarships. Overall Putney gives 22-24% of net tuition each year in financial aid, which is a high number in independent schools. 40-45% of students get some tuition support. We do not give "merit aid," which is offered by some schools to attract top students whose families could actually pay full tuition.

Recruiting and Retaining BIPOC Faculty and Staff

Our goal is to have a diverse faculty and staff, reflecting more closely the national demographics than the numbers in Vermont. Because we have not historically asked adults in the community how they identify, we do not have accurate data. That said, some past and current numbers include:

- 15 BIPOC faculty (whose primary function is working with students) in the past 10 years
Average tenure: 4.6 years
Average tenure of all faculty in last 10 years: 9 years
- 10 BIPOC faculty currently at Putney
- 3 current faculty who self-identify as Black
- 3 BIPOC faculty hired in the past 2 years
- 2 current BIPOC staff
- 0 of Putney's staff self-identify as Black

When we have open positions for faculty, we use a variety of search organizations which specifically serve Black and BIPOC job seekers, including Nemnet, National Association of Independent Schools Diversity Hiring Forum, and Educator's Ally. This year we will use Black Parent Forum hiring fairs for the first time.

Informal networking in DEI professional groups is increasing now that we have Lisa Muñoz in the DEI director position, leading workshops at the Association of Independent Schools in New England (AISNE) and attending DEI institutes with other Putney faculty. Another member of the faculty, Abelardo Almázan-Vázquez, is also active as a speaker on equity issues, and is increasing Putney's visibility in a number of ways. Kate Knopp, dean of faculty, has made

recruitment of faculty of color a priority since she came into her role in 2014. Since the December 2018 People of Color Conference we have renewed our commitment to hiring BIPOC educators with clear language on our job postings, carefully crafted questions about cultural competency in the interview process, and implicit bias training for search committee members.

Every part of our program at Putney, from curriculum development to faculty professional support and development is about sustaining adults so that they can engage and challenge students. Every faculty member has different needs, and as with our students, we work to meet people where they are and support them as well as we can. Again, with the addition of the DEI position, we have more nuanced and effective ways of listening to our BIPOC faculty and are working to make Putney a place where they can thrive long term.

Curriculum

The Putney Core, which defines our graduation expectations for students, has seven throughlines, which are major themes that run through all academic and non-academic curriculum. The first of these is **Ethical, Cultural and Social Justice Perspectives**. The rubric for this throughline has three elements, which are:

- Demonstrates ability to perceive the ethical implications of questions raised in each discipline.
- Demonstrates understanding that all fields may be viewed through differing cultural lenses. Demonstrates ability to take another's cultural perspective.
- Understands the complexities of social justice.

There are four levels of achievement/understanding for each element. Starting in 9th grade, students put evidence and reflections of work in these areas into their portfolios.

This year, the focus of DEI curriculum work has been to question “Why we are teaching this specific material? How does it speak to, confront, question the narratives that run through our classrooms and pedagogy? How are our discussions and questions about discrimination, protests and racial violence intergrated into our curriculum? How is the curriculum experienced by students in the class?” For example, the American Studies teachers have spent the majority of the year critically examining how white students are trained up to talk about anti-Blackness,

discrimination, protests and racial violence, and “isms” during their time at Putney and making shifts in materials and assessments.

Because Putney is a residential community, we believe that everything we do here is part of the curriculum. Students learn as much from how the school culture operates, how people interact, and how decisions are made as they do from academic classes. This means DEI work must involve all aspects of the school, including workshops for all employees on racial equity and anti-racism, examination of admission and hiring practices, a review of board governance practices, affinity programming, codified grievance processes, faculty and staff evaluative and accountability processes, and regular programmatic reviews.

Strategic Planning

In 2019 the Putney board amended the [Fundamental Beliefs](#) of the school, originally written by Carmelita Hinton. A statement on environmental sustainability was added, and the social justice language was updated. It now reads:

“To combat prejudice and injustice wherever it appears; to strive for a world outlook, putting oneself in others’ places, no matter how far away or how remote.”

Putney’s Strategic Plan is a combination of a ten-year Vision Statement, and a series of three-year action steps to be taken by the board and administration. We are currently in the last year of a three-year cycle, so both the board’s and administration's action steps for DEI work are in the process of being revised for approval by the full board in June.

While it is still in draft language, the **DEI Committee of the Board** is proposing the following action steps for the next 1-3 years:

Diversity Equity & Inclusion (DEI), Anti-Racist and Cultural Competency

The Putney School will be an anti-racist institution, which means that we will make active and conscious efforts to work against multi-dimensional aspects of racism. We will be a culturally competent institution, engaging all of our constituencies in the work of moving towards outcomes of cultural fairness, and social justice.

The Board will create specific and measurable goals to hold ourselves and the school administration accountable in the following dimensions:

- Board composition
- Recruitment, retention, and the community/campus experience of BIPOC faculty, staff, and student body
- Multi-cultural aspects of the school's curriculum

Trustee Recruitment:

The Board of Trustees is committed to the philosophy and tenets of anti-racism.

The Board of Trustees must reflect the diversity of our nation. The Committee on Trustees & Governance will actively seek and recruit trustees to reflect this diverse population and a diverse slate of trustee applicants will be annually presented to the Board.

The needs of the entire community are best served when at all times BIPOC and other marginalized persons are present on the Board in sufficient numbers so as to provide voice to diverse experiences and perspectives.

Trustee Development:

In addition to regular forums that will be held during board meetings, each trustee will commit to deepening their awareness of diversity and equity issues in the greater community and on campus, including learning about anti-racism through literature, workshops, or forums.

Each trustee will be given the opportunity to share their sources of expanded awareness and education in the annual year-end self-assessment.

Trustee Communications:

External

The Board's DEI strategies, accomplishments, and intentions will be communicated to the greater community on the school's website, through the annual forum held during alumnx weekend, and the Board's designated email address which would afford two-way communications.

Internal

In recognition that there is a history of a culture of privilege in our society, the Putney Board will make conscious efforts to allow all voices and perspectives to be heard and considered. In harmony with this document, we anticipate that voices of BIPOC participants will be accorded full respect and consideration.

DEI Fundraising:

The Board will ensure that Putney's development efforts specifically include funds to be allocated towards meeting DEI goals. This includes raising funds earmarked for tuition support for BIPOC students, for DEI programming, and staff support. The Board will evaluate these financial efforts in the context of the broader fund-raising goals of the school on a systematic basis so that the importance of this work is not neglected.

While it is still in draft language, the **administration** is proposing the following action steps for its own work over the next 1-3 years:

- Identify and name current challenges in the program for BIPOC students and families in the following areas: admissions; travel; curriculum; residential life; college planning; tuition; being BIPOC in a predominantly white school and state; access to cultural enrichment and community.
- Identify and name patterns of attrition among BIPOC students and staff
- Identify solutions, including:
 - Find more effective ways to recruit, enroll and retain BIPOC students. Aim to have no underrepresented racial and ethnic identity be "the only one" in a classroom or in a dorm.
 - Create a strong mentoring program for underrepresented students, including alumnx, current staff, and local adults.
 - Clarify the expectation of faculty and staff to build capacity in working effectively with all students, demonstrating clear outcomes for improved equity and inclusion work with all students. Ensure that adults have the skill set to offer access, safety, and flexibility to every student in their purview.

- Recruit and retain BIPOC employees and build a critical mass of teachers of color. Broaden networking practices in the hiring process, and increase intentional support for our employees on campus.
- Augment our curriculum so that all students are learning about the underpinnings of racism and oppression and each of the social justice and civil rights movements so graduates have a shared content knowledge around these essential topics.
- Ensure that all job descriptions for faculty and staff include the centrality of an antiracist, pro-LGBTQ+, pro-disability rights stance for candidates.
- Create curriculum across the program to build skills needed to work/collaborate across difference.
- Create a system to respond appropriately to major events in the news connected to ableism, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, racism, classism, homophobia, transphobia, misogynoir, and anti-Blackness.
- Develop a strategy to achieve time-bound goals.
- Draft a budget.
- Seek targeted philanthropic support for DEI work.

Collaboration with Alumnx and Others in the Larger Putney Community

The call is to do better by our students and our larger extended community. We will work in continued dialogue with Black alumnx and all alumnx. A virtual session is being planned for the larger community during March, with a chance for questions and discussion about what has been outlined here. The session will specifically focus on curriculum, admissions, strategic plan for equity and inclusion, and where we are headed. We are grateful to the many alumnx who have offered help in this past decade, whether by board service, shared wisdom and resources, or cogent critique.

Sincerely,

Josh Laughlin, '82, P'21, '23 Chair, Board of Trustees
Emily Jones, Head of School

