Fall 2022

COMMUNITIES IN SCHOOLS NATIONAL REPORT

COMMUNITY MATTERS

Focus on

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Communities In Schools®

Public schools across the nation face extraordinary challenges and opportunities. The COVID-19 pandemic continues its relentless path in creating uncertainty amongst parents, students, and teachers. Gun violence remains painfully familiar, causing devastation deeper than we can know for families and communities. Gender, sexuality, and expression continue to divide perspectives of how students should be seen and treated. And, our country's long struggle with how to tell, learn, and grow from the legacy and impact of racism continues to be a focal point in our discourse of what our public school systems should look like. School board meetings, curriculum decisions, and teacher shortages are now at the front lines of a culture war that is often driven by too much emotion and too little common ground. We can acknowledge the truth that race and income disparities are at the root of the systemic inequities faced by our most vulnerable students every day. The impact of these inequities is easily seen in the data on differences by race and income in graduation rates, access to resources, and opportunities after graduation.

That's why this year's Community Matters Report takes a different approach than recent versions. Our 2022 report is one part of our effort at Communities In Schools® (CIS®) to thoughtfully, productively, and collaboratively address systemic inequities in our public school system. The report shares our Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) journey, including a view of the overall issue and how we've approached DEI in our organization. We also share lessons we've learned so far and tools we've found helpful.

The work of CIS is valued now more than ever. Reengaging students as they return to school and uniting communities to support strong, equitable education environments has always been at the core of our work. Our latest strategic plan outlines the bold steps we are taking to create equitable learning conditions for the more than 2,900 schools we serve – and the thousands of schools we will serve in the future.

We hope this year's report can help others working to advance DEI. We do not present it as the one right way to do this work. We've learned that one, single right way does not exist for any individual, organization, or community. Rather, we present this document with a message to all to commit to this work, to continue to improve, to face the fierce resistance with resolve, to work with humility, and to focus on ensuring the success of all students and young adults.

Share your thoughts and comments on this year's report by sending an email to me at diversityequityinclusion@cisnet.org

Steven McCullough
Chief Operating and Equity Officer

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WHY DEI? WHY CIS?

As we were planning this year's Community Matters Report, the rationale for focusing on DEI was impossible to ignore; a relentless pandemic that exacerbates the existing harms caused by inequity; racial upheaval and violence that remind us how inequity excludes some from being safe even in their own homes and neighborhoods; and, a public school system where parents, teachers, and administrators increasingly struggle to find common ground and too many students are left behind simply because of their zip code. As schools try to navigate all this turbulence, it's clear that all of us in U.S. public education must work together to build a more equitable system that works for all students.

Equity is a founding principle of CIS. For more than 40 years, our work has been grounded in the belief that every student, in every school, should have what they need to thrive and to develop the skills they need to overcome the cultural, economic, and societal barriers they face.

It's a simple idea. When each student is empowered with the support they need, then each student has an equitable opportunity to succeed in school and achieve in life.

But that simple idea is far from reality. Neither equity of support nor equity of opportunity exists in U.S. public education today. Black, Brown, Indigenous students and students living in poverty do not have access to the same support as their white and more affluent peers.

At Communities In Schools, we believe this is a moment of opportunity; a time to build a system of public education that works for all students, not just some. We're taking a more deliberate approach to act on this opportunity. Our 2022 Community Matters Report is one part of that approach.

Grounded in Equity

By definition

Definition of Equity Promise54	**CIS National Statement**
In an equitable organization, **each individual** experiences fairness,	In an equitable education system **every student** receives
has **access to the support and resources needed** to enable success…	**the integrated student supports they need** to achieve in school and life,
and the **predictive links between identities and outcomes have been broken.**	**regardless of race, zip-code, and historical marginalization.**

Our Belief and Commitment to DEI

Communities In Schools believes that transformative relationships are key to unlocking a student's potential.

We will succeed by integrating the behaviors, principles, and practices of **diversity, equity, and inclusion** into our strategies, culture, and behaviors.

As a result, we break down immediate and systemic barriers to create and sustain equitable outcomes.

SYSTEMIC INEQUITY
IN U.S. PUBLIC EDUCATION

See the Issue with Unflinching Honesty. Help Others See It.

Some students have enough food to eat for breakfast every day, and some go hungry. Some have parents who are great at helping with homework, and some have parents who are losing a battle with substance abuse. Some sleep in a safe, healthy home every night, and some aren't sure where they'll sleep any night.

The U.S. public education system was not built for equity. It's doing what it was built to do.

Any educator knows that some students need more support to be ready and able to learn than others. In fact, Black, Brown, and Indigenous students and students living in poverty face more obstacles but have fewer resources available to overcome those obstacles. Our education system was simply not designed to address the inequities these students face.

A shared understanding of hard truths is an essential step toward a shared commitment to hard changes. There is an urgent need for all educators, parents, and policy makers to 'see' and help others 'see' that U.S. public education is not meeting the needs of all students because it was not designed to meet the needs of all students. To improve understanding, we must state the current reality in stark terms. To commit to hard changes, we must be unapologetic about upsetting the status quo.

The promise of public education is rooted in our common humanity – a commitment to serve the public; to benefit all of us, not just some of us. The design of our current system ensures it will fail to meet that promise. Until all of us see and accept that reality, it will continue to fail.

Stories of Progress and Change

CIS of Baytown

Engaging Internal and External Communities

To help guide their DEI journey, Communities In Schools of Baytown (CISB) is engaging with both their internal organization and their external community. For example, externally, CISB is networking with the local community college to develop DEI events, host diverse cultural groups on campus, and make existing events more inclusive – all to explore how these efforts can impact student achievement.

Internally, CISB is implementing a series of trainings to ensure staff and board members have a solid, foundational understanding of DEI to better understand how implicit bias can impact student achievement and to better incorporate DEI practices in ongoing operations, meetings, training, and development. CISB has also implemented a task force to help align DEI strategies with increasing the effectiveness of student supports. In addition, current staffing policies and hiring practices are being reviewed to ensure they are designed to advance DEI.

Why do we have an inequitable public education system?

School systems ignore the impacts of generational poverty, systemic racism, and student trauma.

Students of color are far more likely to attend high poverty schools than White students – This has remained unchanged for the past decade.[1]

High poverty schools have **teachers with less experience and lower salaries,** are **less likely to have math, science, and advanced coursework.**

Students living in poverty get **fewer supports** both outside and in school.[2]

What happens outside the classroom has more impact on learning than what happens in it.

Schools rely on a system of reward and punishment that doesn't work.

Opportunities for students of color are limited.[3]

"even among students with high standardized test scores, Black students are less likely to be assigned to gifted services in both math and reading…"

Schools discipline students of color more often and more severely.[4]

"Racial disparities in suspensions begin as early as preschool. … evidence does suggest that students with disabilities and racial minorities tend to be punished more severely than their peers for the same offenses."

Public schools have learned to live with lower outcomes for some students.

"During COVID-19 most students fell behind, but **students of color fared worse."**[5]

Persistent gaps in public high school graduation rates between White (89%), Black (80%) Hispanic (82%), and Native American (74%)[6] students.

Only 1% of college graduates are Black or African American. **59.1% are White** or Caucasian.[7]

Our schools prevent systemic change by failing to address the extent and root causes of the problem.

"America's long history of legalized racial inequality is still affecting people today, **and people of color continue to lack resources and equal opportunity in education."**[8]

"The education sector remains **grossly unrepresentative of the students served,** and organizations continue to struggle to build and sustain inclusive cultures and equitable systems and structures."[9]

From disproportionate discipline and special education rates to a lack of representation in curriculum and teacher/leadership positions, education systems have **more so succeeded at sustaining inequities than dismantling them.**[10]

[1] National Equity Atlas, PolicyLink/poverty
[2] Unequal Opportunities: Fewer Resources, Worse Outcomes for Students in Schools with Concentrated Poverty, The Commonwealth Institute
[3] Discretion and Disproportionality: Explaining the Underrepresentation of High-Achieving Students of Color in Gifted Programs
[4] What do we know about school discipline reform? Education Next, Fall 2021
[5] McKinsey, Mind the Gap, COVID-19 and Learning Loss, December 2020
[6] https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/2021/coi_508c.pdf
[7] Number of college graduates, 2022, Gender, Race, Age, Ethnicity, Research.com
[8] Inequality in Education and the Opportunity Gap, Brown Political Review, March 8, 2015
[9] Unrealized Impact 2.0
[10] ibid

This is everyone's work.

Inequity in public education is a systemic problem. It can't be solved by changing one part or one group. It's everyone's work.

Every person working in public education must reassess both what we do and how we do it. From the services we provide, to the resources we offer, to our internal practices, we must evaluate our outputs to ensure we are living up to our commitment to DEI.

At CIS, this re-assessment is underway and is an incredibly important shift. This report highlights some of the key processes we've built to be more intentional in our actions, break down our own institutional barriers, and build more equitable systems. The next section of this report covers these in more detail.

sys·tem·ic

/sə'stemik/. *adjective*

relating to a system, especially as opposed to a particular part.

Deconstructing white supremacy is not solely the responsibility of People of Color and people with other historically marginalized identities. It is everyone's work.[1]

[1] Unrealized Impact 2.0, Promise54

Stories of Progress and Change

CIS of Michigan

Ensuring DEI at All Levels

At Communities In Schools of Michigan, a key priority was to engage the entire organization in its DEI journey. In the early stages, CIS of Michigan committed to improving the diversity at the leadership level – the board of directors. After a thoughtful, deliberate process, the diversity of the CIS of Michigan board improved – increased female membership from 28% to 44%; increased non-white members from 20% to 39%. In addition to building diversity at the most senior level of the organization, CIS of Michigan worked to diversify across all staff levels. In recognition of these efforts, CIS of Michigan received Congressional Recognition from Congresswoman Deborah Dingell, who serves districts in Ypsilanti and Dearborn, MI.

CIS APPROACH AND PRACTICES

WHAT WE'VE LEARNED. WHAT WE'RE DOING.

"How" Matters More than "What"

To guide our own DEI journey, we established The CIS Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Planning Committee. The committee was made up of diverse members of the CIS team who represent a variety of functional roles, including Site Coordinators, Program Directors, Executive Directors, and Chief Operating Officers, and who bring deep experience and knowledge in the key elements of CIS' work to support students – e.g., Integrated Student Supports, School Outreach, Community Engagement, Organizational Strategy, Human Resources, Learning and Practice, Training and Compliance, and more.

The committee spent its initial 20 months learning and listening – including researching best practices from the field, discovering insights from our own network, and talking with leaders in DEI from across the country. Those first steps helped define an important basis for deciding what actions would be most effective for CIS.

What to do? Form a DEI Committee? Hire a Chief DEI Officer? Create a DEI Budget?

"Our take-away ... is that how an organization implements any specific structure, policy, or practice matters more than which they create. In other words, context, intention, and depth matter." [1]

[1] Unrealized Impact 2.0 Promise54 p 39

"How"

These Principles:

- Clear, intentional prioritization and action
- Holistic, comprehensive planning
- Tailored for the organization and the moment
- Culture shift
- Responsive to feedback

"What"

Drove these CIS actions:

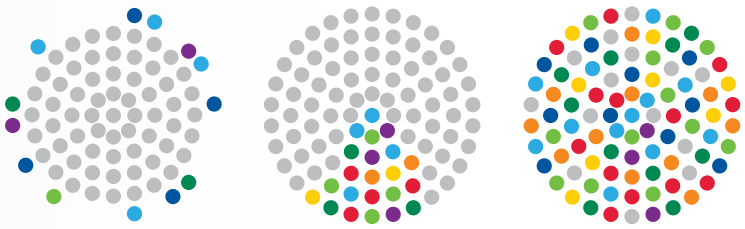
- Strategic Plan Refresh – Elevate DEI as a more central, more important focus across the CIS Network
- CEO/Leadership Commitment – raise voices of CEO and senior leadership to advance DEI initiatives
- Create DEI Roadmap
- Clearly define terms and expectations
- Define Stakeholder Continuum
- DEI Design Team – establish and empower staff from across the CIS network
- Create DEI Resource Guide
- Develop DEI Alumni Activation Guide
- Develop Assessment Tool for internal and external stakeholders

Definitions: Ensure Clarity and Understanding.

Diversity includes all of the similarities and differences among people, not limited to gender, gender identity, ethnicity, race, native or indigenous origin, age, generation, sexual orientation, culture, religion, belief system, marital status, parental status, socioeconomic status, appearance, language, accent, ability status, mental health, education, geography, nationality, work style, work experience, job role function, thinking style, personality type, physical appearance, and political perspective or affiliation. A person is not diverse—they are a unique, individual unit. Diversity is about a collective or a group and can only exist in relationship to others.

Equity recognizes and addresses power dynamics by making sure that everyone has equal access to the same opportunities. Equity takes into account that people have different access to resources because of systems of oppression and privilege, and seeks to balance those disparities. Tackling equity issues requires an understanding of the root causes of outcome disparities within our society.

Inclusion is celebrating, valuing, and amplifying perspectives, voices, and values that have been disadvantaged and/or marginalized. An inclusive environment creates equitable access to resources and opportunities for all, and helps individuals and groups feel safe, respected, engaged, and valued for who they are and for their contributions to community and society.



Organization Roadmap: Mark the Journey.

CIS established a collaborative process for our network to engage in the development of our national organization's DEI roadmap. While there is no ideal endpoint to our journey of growing, learning, and evolving as the world continues to change, creating a shared roadmap helps us set goals and milestones and articulates the actions we must collectively take on our journey towards positive change. The roadmap not only emphasizes our focus along this important organizational journey but demonstrates that this work takes time and there are no short-cuts along the way.

Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6
• Draft framework and roadmap • Stakeholder engagement identification and strategy development • Create common language and "Case for Action"	• Create and implement stakeholder engagement strategy • Define success and establish baseline data • Develop **DEI Resource Guide 1.0**	• Continue stakeholder engagement • Collect and analyze data to monitor and assess/report progress • Identify the desired changes in student outcomes • Pilot and refine **DEI Resource Guide 1.0** and associated resources	• Measure/ report on improvements in student outcomes • Implement continuous improvement loop	• Expert staff members leverage skills and resources	• Student outcomes improve • Continue implementing continuous improvement loop
			• Student outcomes improve		

CIS of Eastern Pennsylvania

Mobilizing for Focus and Action

For the Core DEI team of CIS of Eastern Pennsylvania, it didn't take long to see that the depth of DEI work required a truly inclusive approach. One of the key steps they took to engage the organization was to create working groups focused on four critical areas for CIS of Eastern Pennsylvania; Student and School Engagement, Training & Continuous Improvement, Policies & Procedures and Recruitment & Retention. These working groups were an effective way to mobilize additional staff to make important action-oriented contributions to advancing DEI in the most critical areas for CIS of Eastern Pennsylvania. In fact, each group developed an action plan for its specific focus area.

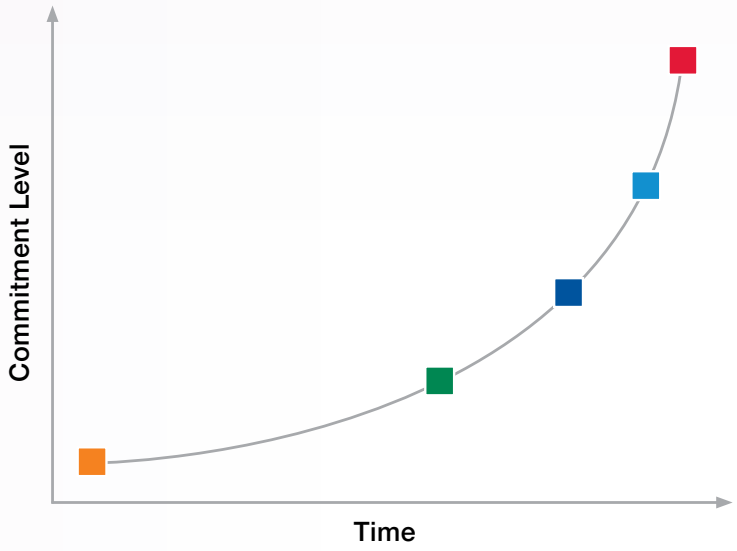
DEI training was widely used, beginning with the board of directors' participation in an intense two-day session which was then extended to the entire organization. Both the DEI Core Team and the working groups committed to ongoing training and development in SEED (Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity) for ten months. Finally, CIS of Eastern Pennsylvania President & CEO, Tim Mulligan recently published an op-ed on positive school climate and inclusivity in a key local newspaper.

Assessment Tool: Listen, Learn, and Begin Together.

As CIS engaged in our DEI journey, we realized that different parts of the CIS network were starting from different places of experience, acceptance, and education. That's why our Stakeholder Commitment Continuum was a valuable tool to use as part of our first steps. Even though we begin at different points along the developmental continuum, we can all reach milestones together. DEI isn't about identifying a few key people to drive change. It's about how solutions can only be achieved when we all learn and collaborate together and bring as many partners along with us as we can. We invite you to learn more about the Stakeholder Commitment Continuum in the Communities In Schools DEI Resource Guide on our website.

The Stakeholder Commitment Continuum

The DEI Stakeholder Commitment Continuum has five levels as outlined below:



Awareness
Stakeholders are aware of basic scope and concepts of the change.

Understanding
Stakeholders understand the impacts of the change to the organization and their role.

Adoption
Stakeholders are willing to implement the change.

Ownership & Promotion
Stakeholders consider the change to the status quo and understand the benefits.

Innovation
Stakeholders make the change their own and create unique ways to use and improve.

STORIES OF PROGRESS AND CHANGE
THE CIS NETWORK

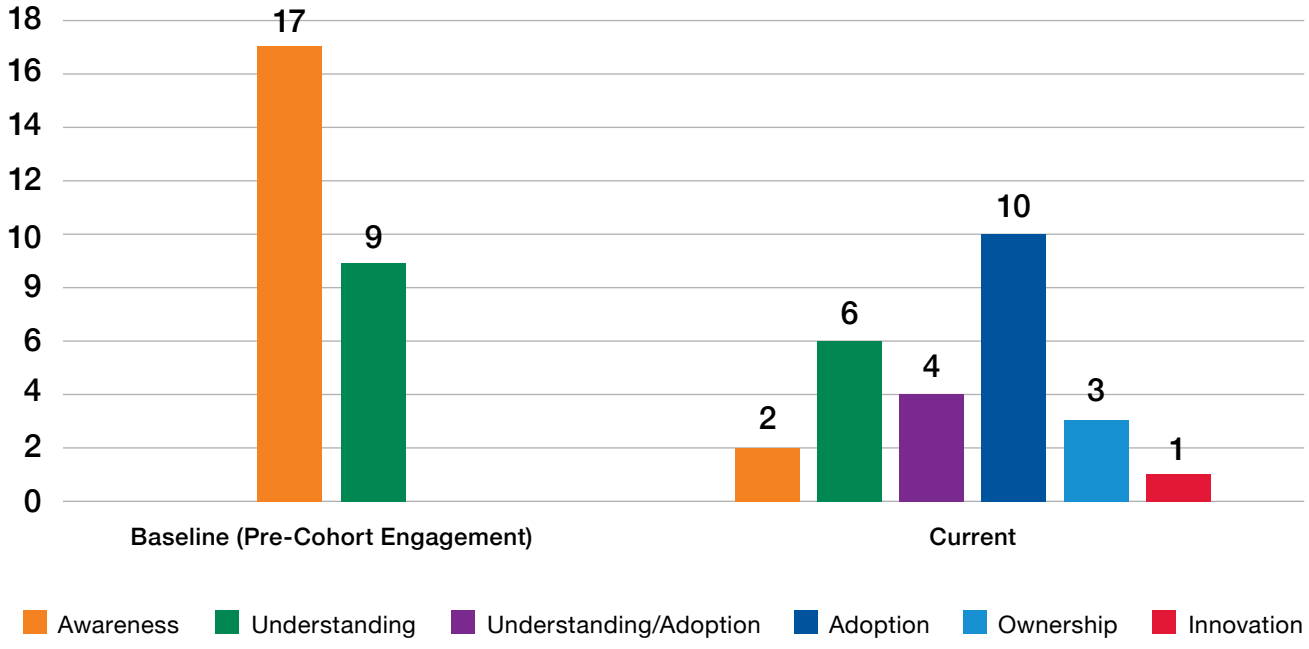
CIS National Office and Affiliates Collaborating to Advance DEI

The National Office of CIS is working alongside affiliates to help advance our DEI journey. Using a cohort strategy, affiliates gather once a month to dig deeper into DEI topics and strategies. To date, 26 affiliates have participated in these cohorts and have taken steps including establishing DEI taskforces, taking the CIS DEI Stakeholder Continuum Assessment, creating DEI Equity Officer positions, and creating and implementing work plans to advance DEI within their affiliate.

Mapping Our DEI Journey: Starting Points and Progress

All affiliates participating in the cohort completed the CIS DEI Stakeholder Continuum. The majority of affiliates placed themselves in awareness with some showing understanding of important DEI concepts and principles. Almost a year after intentionally focusing on DEI, almost every affiliate experienced growth along the continuum, with the majority moving to adoption and beyond. While everyone recognizes there is still much work to be done, the most important learning from the assessment was that stakeholder groups (e.g., leadership, board members, staff) were at different points along the continuum at different times in this process and that was okay. This work is about first understanding where you are and knowing where you want to be. Then, it is about putting in the work to get there.

CIS DEI Stakeholder Continuum Journey
(N=26 Organizations)



One of the important goals of the collaboration is to help affiliate staff and board members take the steps that will be most effective for them to build a clear, foundational understanding of DEI. Some of the steps affiliates have taken include regular training, book clubs, events, and creative forums for dialogue. For example, CIS of North Carolina launched a monthly training series for its state network. The series is easily accessed through an online DEI training website where affiliates can review and register for upcoming activities, including presentations from the field, topical discussions, and book clubs. This approach makes it easier for all affiliates to engage their staff, especially those affiliates without the capacity to create their own training series. Another example is CIS of Kalamazoo's monthly Chat and Chew series, where affiliate staff have the opportunity to discuss and learn about DEI overall and at CIS in a relaxed, informal setting.

In addition, cohort members have been reviewing job descriptions, hiring practices, performance management practices, and policies. CIS of Benton Franklin reviewed job descriptions to ensure that qualifications are equitable and inclusive. CIS of Central Texas used the DEI Stakeholder Assessment to help staff members create individual, personal development goals. Another key focus is helping board members engage in their own DEI journey through activities including board-specific task forces, training, commitment statements, and board member participation in cohort sessions. For example, a member of the CIS of Bay Area board is personally participating in the cohort. In CIS of Los Angeles the board has been heavily involved in assessing data, creating recommendations for closing equity gaps, and reviewing policies to maximize racial equity and justice. In addition, each board member made a personal commitment to "do the work" of unpacking their privilege, examining practices that maintain inequities, and changing those practices.

CIS of Nevada

Integrating Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging At Every Level

CIS of Nevada has taken a top-down approach to integrating DEI practices and principles throughout the organization, honoring the importance of organizational leadership taking ownership of their role in advancing a DEI mission.

Prior to engaging state offices and staff, the Board of Directors (BOD) completed the DEI Assessment to plot themselves on National's five-point DEI Stakeholder Commitment Continuum. Afterwards, they participated in a comprehensive education series to understand the importance of key DEI principles, cultural competencies, and barriers to equity in the education space. Inspired by their learning, the BOD formed a DEI Committee that directs on-going quarterly trainings for all members, and ensures the board's strategic plan includes goals filtered through a lens of inclusivity and equity.

Cascading off the momentum created by its Board, CIS of Nevada formed an Internal Change Team made up of representatives from all levels of staff. Meeting every other week for two hours for six months, this group:

- Authored CIS Nevada's DEI Commitment Statement.
- Launched a state-wide feedback system on their payroll portal to ensure all team members have their voices heard.
- Conducted an organizational assessment to aid in developing future trainings and DEI resources.
- Elevated their team member communications to include a DEI and feedback response section to its organization-wide monthly newsletter, as well as "Coffee Talks" with its CEO.

The first Internal Change Team cohort has concluded with many accomplishments and the second cohort will launch in the 2022-2023 school year. Team members volunteer to participate in developing resources related to DEI, including exploring best practices, authoring updates for the agency-wide newsletter, and responding to feedback.

Mapping Our DEI Journey: Areas of Focus

The table below provides a summary of focus areas for each DEI cohort affiliate organization.

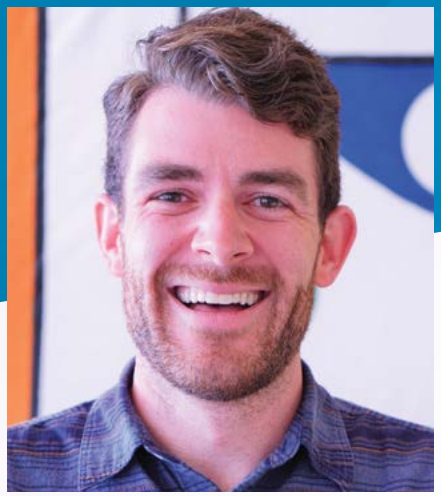
DEI Cohort Affiliates	Organizational Assessment*	Onboarding/ Training		Dedicated DEI Staff/ Team/Working Groups	Organizational Policies and Practices	Organizational Culture	Communications/ Marketing	Community Coalitions/ Advocacy	Programming
		Board	Staff						
CIS of Bay Area	x	x	x	x	x	x			x
CIS of Baytown	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x
CIS of Benton Franklin	x	x	x	x	x	x			x
CIS of Central Texas	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
CIS of Charlotte-Mecklenburg	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x
CIS of Greenville	x		x	x					x
CIS of Gulf South	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x
CIS of Hampton Roads	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x
CIS of Heart of Texas	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x
CIS of Houston	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x
CIS of Kalamazoo	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
CIS of Lehigh Valley	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x
CIS of Los Angeles	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x
CIS of Michigan	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x
CIS of Mid-America	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x
CIS of Nevada	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x
CIS of North Carolina	x		x	x	x	x	x		x
CIS of North Texas	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x
CIS of Ohio	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x
CIS of Pennsylvania	x	x	x	x	x	x			x
CIS of Petersburg	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x
CIS of Robeson	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x
CIS of San Antonio	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x
CIS of Tennessee	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x
CIS of Virginia	x		x	x	x	x	x		x
Volunteers of America-North Louisiana**	x		x	x	x	x			x

**Examples included Promise54, CIS DEI Stakeholder Continuum, etc.*

***Represents a certified licensed partner of CIS*

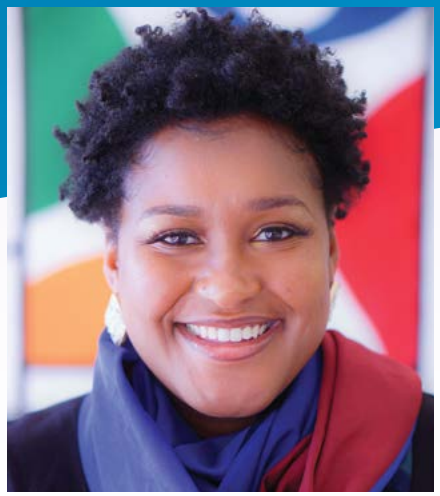
Q&A with CIS of the Heart of Texas

Stories of Progress and Change



Aaron Mize

CEO



Tonee Shelton

Chief Impact Officer

Q: What first brought you to DEI work? Why did you choose to get involved?

Aaron: It began as part of our strategic planning. We were using the Appreciative Inquiry process and many of the staff's dreams revolved around DEI. They wanted to see more of it in our work. For me personally, it's not just that DEI is important; at CIS we're tasked with being excellent on behalf of our students. It's hard to do that when the systems aren't set up to meet the needs of the students we serve. Being a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive organization is directly connected to being better at serving our students.

Tonee: Well, I didn't really make the choice. They pursued me! But, I'm a novice. I'm not a DEI expert. I am a creative person, an artist, a people person. I'm always asking; "How can we do this better?" "What can we learn from it?" I believe strongly that equity matters and that you lead with humility. I try to "stand in the gap" and bring people together. Doing this work was a chance to align with my values.

Aaron: The idea of being an "expert" can put a cap on learning. We're committed to ongoing learning in our DEI work. We think of our efforts like a spiral. Over time, the line moves up over time. But every once in a while, the line falls back – and we keep going. One step forward and two steps back can be OK. We're always learning, gaining knowledge and confidence.

Q: You emphasize the idea of DEI as a journey. How would you describe the DEI journey for CIS of The Heart of Texas? What adjectives or phrases would you use?

Tonee: Committed. Better together. Growing together. Progress over perfection. Lead with humility. It's all about identifying the gaps. I often say, Diversity means everyone is different. Equity means everyone matters. Inclusion means everyone has a voice.

Aaron: I would describe the process as being exciting but frustrating. We aim to be precise but it gets messy – there is a push and pull between frustrating and rewarding. The process was also focused on wellness – our goal is for people to be whole and experience wellness.

DIVERSITY = everyone is different ■ EQUITY = everyone matters ■ INCLUSION = everyone has a voice

Q: CIS of the Heart of Texas decided to have a Chief Impact Officer as part of your effort. Why was it important to add this role?

Aaron: We settled on a CIO instead of a Chief Diversity Officer because I don't believe DEI is one person's responsibility when the systems are designed to favor some groups over others. Also, we wanted to focus on our impact beyond metrics. For example, getting to know the community better, understanding how the community perceives our impacts. A CIO role would lead the needle and thread of how we weave DEI into our organization and work. To fill the role we wanted a person who would think creatively and innovatively; someone who would be a fresh conduit and light a fire under the wings of the organization – and that was Tonee.

Q: Tonee, you wrote a poem about your DEI efforts. Why did you choose to write a poem?

Tonee: When I was in school, I was the "Tammy Talk a Lot" of the class. My report cards would say – "very intelligent, but talks too much." For a long time, I thought I had to keep that part of me hidden. Now, I've learned that when you're aligned with your gifts and strengths, you can change the world. I wrote a poem, because I'm a poet! At CIS we help people align with their interests. Here, I have the trust and confidence to be a poet.

As a person of color and facilitator of this work, I want to emphasize the importance of trust, confidence, and a sense of belonging. At CIS, we have to create opportunities for inclusion and belonging. We want everyone to know it's OK to speak up – to say "I don't think that's going to work" or "We can change this." If we don't build that here, we'll never build the environment students need. A place where they can trust, feel a sense of belonging, and have the confidence to raise their voices.

DEI is a Journey

DEI is a journey with no destination in sight
The win is in the effort to fight the good fight.
We are all in this journey together
Come rain, racism or stormy weather.
DEI is about the pursuit of unity
Despite the differences within our community.
DEI is a journey with no destination in sight
So lets work together to make our future bright.

Poem by: Tonee Shelton

Q: A book club is part of your DEI efforts. What is it about a book club that works for DEI?

Tonee: The book club is one of my favorite things about our DEI efforts! It's also one of the most successful. A book club is one of those opportunities for inclusion – a place where people build trust and relationships, feel a sense of belonging, and are comfortable talking about their interests and dreams. We meet monthly and read fiction and non-fiction from historically under-represented groups. I facilitate the discussion and use question prompts that hone in on DEI issues. It's a safe setting to ask questions and have open, honest dialogue. We're trying to build a culture of inclusivity and belonging and the book club has been one of our most consistent spaces for learning and open dialogue.

Aaron: At one of our meetings, I looked around at the people and realized there was no other place in our organization where this group would come together. They interacted with trust and a sense of belonging. Their purpose was simply to be better people. Their connection and interaction were great examples of what our DEI efforts are meant to achieve.

Q: What advice would you offer to someone looking to start a DEI effort in their organization?

Aaron:

Personally commit to learning.
As a white male in a leadership role, the most important thing I could do was to learn as much as I could about people and experiences different from mine.

Make sure your leadership team is bought into learning.
A full commitment to learning is essential by all members of leadership.

Don't get caught up in perfection.
When we began, we researched more than 50 ways to form a DEI committee. Of course, there was value in that, but the most important thing was just to commit to one – to learning, to finding ways to learn from each other.

Do get caught up in progress.
Go for the small wins. Celebrate them and the people who achieved them. It will always feel like you aren't doing enough, so keep the focus on the learning. Keep asking, "What have we learned?"

Create a culture of belonging.
Build a culture of joy and belonging. Make this a priority from the beginning. There will be plenty of time for creating processes and policies.

It's fragile, hold it with soft hands.
Once you understand how systems work, you realize how fragile DEI work is. In systems, influence and power are everything. Things can change quickly when the people with the influence and power change. It's especially fragile for the kids we serve and the barriers they face, through no fault of their own. Every decision is critical. In this work, you can never say, "We made it." Tonee and I have tried to remember just how fragile this is and hold it with soft hands.

Tonee: I absolutely agree with the things Aaron mentioned. I'd add a couple.

Identify the gaps.
Find the gaps, then create opportunities for inclusion and building trust – and use them to fill those gaps. Creating small spaces of trust allows you to do the big work.

Have a budget.
It doesn't have to be a large amount, but put dollars into the hands of the people. Let them invest the budget how they see fit.

Q: Imagine it's ten years from now, and CIS of The Heart of Texas has thrived and built an organization that represents excellence in DEI. Now, imagine it's just an ordinary day at CIS. You're at work, doing your job. You see an example of that excellence in DEI happening in front of you. For you personally, what would be most satisfying to see?

Aaron: I would hope to see staff in the halls who are our students today, to see that we're an organization that serves students well and provides them opportunities to achieve in life. I'd hope to see faces of our students out in the community, serving in leadership roles and participating in community meetings.

How much we pay people is a sign of how much we value the work they do. Today, I wish I could pay people more, so I hope we'd have staff that are well taken care of. I'd like to see that CIS is the choice employer in town, the organization others want to model. If there are a handful of the same people still here, I hope they're still dedicated to learning and haven't lost sight of the ongoing process. That would be beautiful to see.

Tonee: I'd echo Aaron's thoughts. Everything starts at the top, with an organization's leadership. I hope we still have a leader who is just as committed to creating a sense of belonging, a place where DEI is built into the culture. If we do, CIS will have attracted more people with more commitment and will only be stronger.

DEI work is a moving target. There are always new, underrepresented groups emerging and new issues to address. So, I hope we still understand there is never a finish line.

LOOKING AHEAD

A Continuing Evolution: Schools, Systems, DEI, and Social Justice.

CIS has always believed – and our data supports – that when students have access to the resources they need, they will develop the ability to overcome obstacles, and they will succeed. That's why the core work of CIS has always focused on working directly in schools to ensure all students have access to the resources they need. But it is a persistent fact that Black, Brown, and Indigenous students, and students living in poverty face more obstacles with fewer resources.

As we look ahead, this chronic inequity makes two things clear: 1) the problem goes beyond individual schools to the system level; 2) and working directly in individual schools is essential, but not sufficient.

On our road ahead, direct work with students in schools will remain our central focus. There is no more urgent or important work than supporting students. In addition, we will continue to take a more deliberate approach to our DEI efforts – working to make CIS a more equitable network and sharing what we learn on our journey. And we will strengthen our efforts to address systemic issues and empower stakeholders to action.

CIS National is committed to using our position and voice to advocate for and build build coalitions that advance a social justice agenda focused on educational inequity and the root causes of systemic issues that create barriers to educational success for young people.

School Level

Respond to basic student needs.

Create equitable access and conditions for student learning.

Community Level

Offer resources to support network engagement and action in local communities and alumni advocacy engagement.

Systemic Level

Address root causes of systemic issues that have resulted in educational inequity by working to change policies, practices, and resource flow.

CommunitiesInSchools.org

#AllinforKids

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