

Making the Hidden Visible:

The Lived Experience of the Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice (DEIJ) Practitioner at Independent Schools

This study, based on interviews with over 25 Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice (DEIJ) practitioners in independent schools, explores the individual experiences and collective themes of those who live this role day in and day out. Implications for schools, including suggestions for school leadership, are also shared. The hope is that the findings from this study, and the powerful voices of the practitioners, will provide insights that can support not only individual practitioners but DEIJ work more broadly in independent schools.

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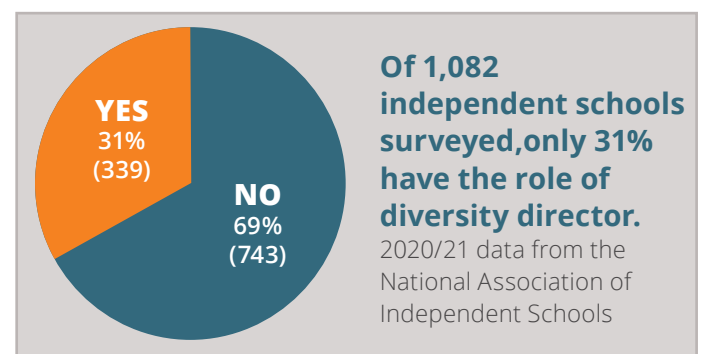
The history of racial diversification at independent schools in the United States warrants an individual and honest examination at every school across the country.

Wide-scale racial integration of independent schools is rooted in the 1960s when the percentage of schools with non-White students went from 33% (1960) to 84% by the end of the decade (1969).¹ By 1990, 21% of independent school seniors reported themselves as non-White.² According to Arthur Powell, author of *Lessons from Privilege, the American Prep School Tradition*, until the 1990s (at the earliest), the idea of integration for most schools did not equate to much more than non-White students attending schools with White students. In his book, he writes that “the main goal was to avoid racial conflict and the best way to do that was to praise and even canonize diversity as a community ideal.”³

Across many independent schools, the idea that the ongoing goal in diversity, equity, and inclusion work is simply increased representation and having more “students of colors in seats” no longer rings true. This has been years in the making, and the fervor was either renewed or ignited for many schools following the murders of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor in

early 2020, the ensuing Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, and the many Black@ Instagram and Facebook posts from students and alumni of independent schools around the country.

The role of the Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice (DEIJ) practitioner at independent schools (recognizing that the title is different across schools), has been a critical one since its first inception. Practitioners have been working to manage and embed DEIJ efforts in their schools for years. Yet the number of DEIJ practitioners is still small: data from the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) indicates that in 2020-2021, of the 1,082 schools that answered the question of whether an employee filled the role of diversity director at their school, only 31% (n=339) stated “yes.”⁴



¹ Powell, A. G. (1996). *Lessons from Privilege: The American Prep School Tradition*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press. Pp 98.

² Ibid. Pp 98.

³ Ibid. Pp. 101.

⁴ Shared with EXPLO Elevate by the NAIS Research Team.

About The Researcher: Sudipti Kumar

Sudipti Kumar is a researcher with over 15 years of experience in education. She taught both high school mathematics and fifth grade math and science in public schools located in Brooklyn, NY and in Boston, MA. Her research background includes in-depth studies on human capital policies affecting teachers in large urban school districts, promising practices in teacher preparation including research on teacher residency models, and data-informed practices in education. Sudipti has experience in both quantitative and qualitative research methods, with a specific interest in qualitative semi-structured studies that focus on understanding the human experience as it relates to the area of interest.

This percentage is low, but it is growing. According to recent NAIS career center data, the number of job postings for a diversity practitioner has increased by over 100% from early 2020 to early 2021.⁵ The percentage of students of color at independent schools is also rising, albeit slowly - 31% of students in the 20-21 school year identified as students of color, up at least 10% from 20 years ago.⁶

Conversations at many independent schools have also shifted from discussions solely about representation

(which remains important) to what it means to be a school that prioritizes ideas like belonging, equity, and justice.

Given this backdrop, EXPLO Elevate set out to better understand the work of DEIJ practitioners at independent schools. To put it simply, the goal was to hear individual experiences and uncover themes that can support individual DEIJ practitioners and the overall work. Ta-Nehisi Coates, in his book *Between the World and Me*, writes, "You are growing into consciousness, and my wish for you is that you feel no need to constrict yourself to make other people comfortable." Moving into the first person (for a moment), as I interviewed practitioners and sat down to write this piece, I grew into consciousness myself on my own personal and ongoing journey in DEIJ work. I hope this research and the perspectives shared by the practitioners shed light on their experiences, benefiting them and all of us. We can be uncomfortable and live in that space together as we become more aware.

NOTE: While this study touches on the experiences of DEIJ practitioners across the different groups they support, it focuses heavily on the work practitioners are doing to lift up schools in creating more diverse, equitable, inclusive, and just spaces as it pertains to issues around race and ethnicity.

⁵ Shared via NAIS Career Center data.

⁶ NAIS Independent School Facts at a Glance 2020-21. Accessed April 9, 2021. <https://www.nais.org/statistics/pages/nais-independent-school-facts-at-a-glance/>. Note that there is some disagreement on the number of students of color were in independent schools in the early 90s. Data used is based on Powell's book, which dives deep on this distinction.

Research Approach and Primary Research Questions

This study is a phenomenological approach to understanding the perspective of how practitioners interpret and attribute meaning to their role as practitioner.⁷

Themes are aggregated using qualitative data coding methods, and individual perspectives via personal quotes that deepen understanding of one person's experience and have implications across the field are also shared.

Through research, we sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the opportunities and challenges DEIJ practitioners at independent schools face? How do these opportunities and challenges manifest, and in what ways do school leaders and the broader community support or impede addressing these challenges?
2. How do schools support the DEIJ practitioner at the school? In what ways does this support translate to moving equitable practice forward in all facets of the school?

Research Overview

- 25 DEIJ practitioners interviewed over a three month period
- Schools represented are largely from the Northeast, West Coast, and South
- Characteristics include Day, Boarding, All-girls, All-boys, Traditional, and Progressive
- Practitioners range from the first in the school to hold the position, to schools where this role has existed for many years
- Six heads of school, teachers, or other administrators were also interviewed, who are not diversity practitioners but deeply interested in the work

We would like to personally thank each person who took the time to speak with us and share their honest thoughts and experiences. Each conversation was poignant, insightful, and powerful. Because of the nature and content of these conversations, quotes and experiences are shared anonymously.

The Decision to Become a DEIJ Practitioner

There are many reasons practitioners articulated that answered the question: "why do this work at independent schools?" Virtually all interviewees talked about their own experiences as part of a marginalized group and how that led to an interrogation of their identities as well as a realization early on as to how much race or other factors impacted how they moved through the world. They recognized that while the job can feel thankless, is exhausting, and also never-ending, it is an opportunity to support students and independent schools in ways that they desperately need.

*As one practitioner named:
"Students of color exist in all our independent schools, and our kids need to see us in the classroom, in the boardroom, on the fields, in the band rooms. They need to see us all over and so do my Caucasian brothers and sisters."*

⁷ Phenomenological research explores what people experienced and focuses on their experience of a phenomena, in this case the practitioners experience in their role at independent schools.

Overall Findings

Ten key findings arose based on interviews. These are aggregated into three overarching categories:

Leadership & Support:

What are the ways the board and head of school support the role, and how is the practitioner primed for success as part of the senior leadership team?

Environment & Culture:

How do practitioners and the community experience and make sense of the past, present, and future of the school they are part of?

Strategies & Tactics:

What are the key ways practitioners think about their work and drive it forward?

In this report, we share the ten findings, or themes, aligned to these three categories. One theme, the importance of self-care, cuts across all three.

This report provides significant details on each of the themes and what they look like in practice, with the important caveat that each practitioner's story, approach, and context is different.⁸ We also share numerous quotations that relate to the theme, as they provide powerful insights into the lived experiences of the practitioners who shared so openly and honestly.

Leadership & Support	Environment & Culture	Strategies & Tactics
1. Both explicit and implicit support from the board and head of school are critical	4. To do DEIJ work effectively is to be a disruptor in a space that is ready for disruption (e.g., a school ready for institution-wide change)	7. Practitioners have a clearly defined skill-set, and they are also learners on this journey
2. A team-based structure and embedding DEIJ initiatives across the school support long-term sustainability and impact	5. Practitioners, the majority of whom are people of color, experience personal and professional challenges trying to change the system in predominantly White institutions	8. The work is multifaceted, complex, and sometimes hidden to the rest of the school community
3. The title of the position carries significant meaning, both for the practitioner and for others	6. Independent schools must own their histories and pasts, as a collective and as individuals within that school	9. Students can help lead the charge when empowered to do so and provided with key skills
10. Practitioner burnout is real, and schools can provide supports that promote self-care and are energy restoring		

⁸This is important to note. Practitioner themes are based on what came up most often in conversations, but that does not mean that each practitioner interviewed would agree with each theme.

Leadership and Support

FINDING 1:

Both explicit and implicit support from the board and head of school are critical.

All of the practitioners interviewed named how vital it is for their role to be deeply supported by the board and the head of school. Interviewees noted that this support takes two forms - what we will refer to as “explicit” and “implicit” support.

Explicit support includes having:

- DEIJ central to, or fully aligned with, the mission and vision of the school and also incorporated into the strategic plan.
- The practitioner in a senior leadership role that reports to the head of school.
- Sub-committees at the board level focused on DEIJ.
- A direct line between the practitioner and the board, including attending board meetings and open communication regarding resources and support as needed.

A few of the interviewee quotations that reflect this level of explicit support:

“I think it’s really, really important for schools to take the time to say why are we doing this and why is it important for us, and how is it connected to our mission. Equity is at the center of the work we do; it’s firmly in our mission statement. And if we believe that our academic program should offer equitable access and opportunity for each student, then let’s make that a part of the work we do.”

“Change is hard for everybody, so you’re going to have people who aren’t going to want to go through that change. But I think this comes from the top, that this [work is] important and that this is a priority. It comes from both the board, and it comes from the president who I directly report to.”

“You know, [my head of school] is not a top-down kind of leader; he’s a lead-from-behind leader - he will just empower me to implement what I think is the way to go. Strategically, broadly, initiatives-wise, he takes my cue, and he empowers me and trusts me, basically, which is huge.”

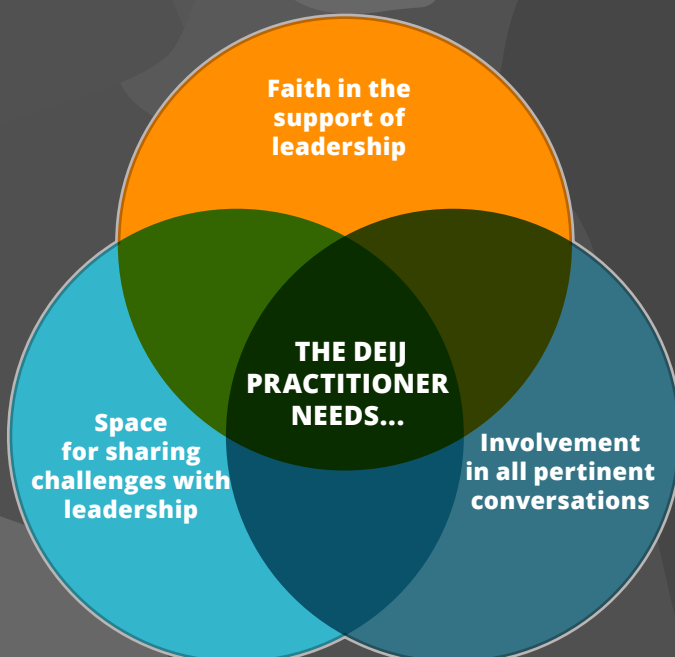
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Implicit Support

Implicit support is also critical, and based on interviewee's responses, this can be an area where even when outward support is expressed, implicit support may not be present:

Implicit support includes having:

1. Faith that leadership will support the practitioner, should there be resistance or pushback from parents, alumni, or other constituent groups. This faith extends to trusting that the practitioner will not be not "scapegoated" if an incident takes place at the school
2. Leadership holding space for the practitioner to share challenges they are facing openly and honestly.
3. The practitioner as a key participant in all conversations pertinent to their scope of work



Quotations that reflect implicit support, or the lack of it:

"As a Black DEI practitioner, I feel like I'm always at risk. And I also feel like I'm always compared to my White male counterpart [on the leadership team]. And then if I am going to leave [after an incident] and go somewhere else, what's your recommendation of me going to be?"

"I am lucky in that my direct supervisor is a man of color, and my head of school is a man of color. And I feel safety in their presence. So I know that I can go in and I can say, here's what [this person] said to me, and it was hurtful. If they need to step in to support me, they do. But, at the least, they are holding space for me, and I appreciate that."

"The best-attended parent meeting was a meeting to confront me. The head of school didn't know what to do when everything went south. I was taken before the board. I thought I was on trial at one point because the vice-chair of the board treated me like I was on the witness stand."

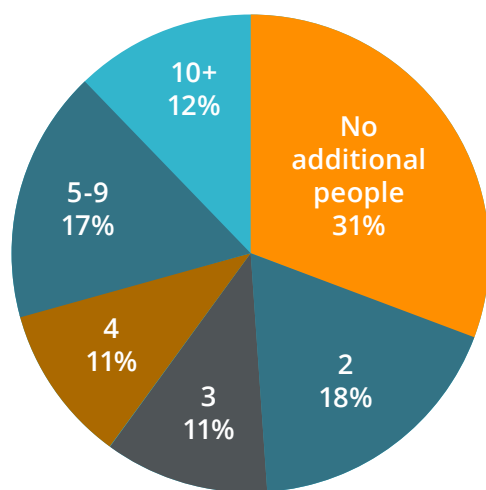
"Even though I was a part of the admin team, there were conversations that were kept from me again because of 'protection,' either for me or for the parents. I would sometimes go into meetings with my head of school or with some of the division heads, and I would hear about meetings that they had had with parents or with board members, and they're updating me about them. It's like, 'yeah we took care of this.' But in my head, I'm thinking that it would have actually been helpful for me to be present as a team, and we could have worked together. By not bringing me into the conversation, the message that you're sending to some people is one that either I can't do it or I don't want to do it."

FINDING 2:

A team-based structure and embedding DEIJ initiatives across the school support long-term sustainability and impact.

Of the schools who responded to the NAIS 2019 State of the Diversity Practitioner Survey and who do have a diversity practitioner on staff, 31% noted that they were the only person in their school in this role.

Including yourself, how many people at your school are directly responsible for implementing diversity policies and practices?



(n=277) Source: 2019 NAIS Diversity Practitioner Survey.⁹

In fact, even having one full-time person overseeing the DEIJ office is not common, as indicated by the data point (shared in the introduction) that less than one-third of independent schools have a dedicated person in the diversity practitioner role in any capacity.

In some independent schools, the DEIJ initiatives may be an add-on to an already full-time load of teaching and leadership responsibilities. One interviewee noted that she leads DEIJ initiatives in addition to her full-time duties

with other faculty across the school as a “shared labor of love,” working over 60-70 hours a week. She also named that there are limits to what can be done when it is an add-on, and there is nobody directly managing the work: “We need a dedicated team or at least a dedicated person to help keep DEI the focus, because DEI is everything and everywhere. Right now, we’re only able to scrape the surface, and we really need some dedicated resources, time, and talent to do what we need to do.”

The team-based model

Most practitioners highlighted the challenge of leading DEIJ work without a staff or team. Having a team serves multiple purposes: distribution of tasks and limiting the level of isolation the practitioner may be feeling as the sole person managing all components of a very multifaceted job. Heads of schools interviewed, as well as practitioners, identified that often, one or two DEIJ practitioners are expected to do an inordinate amount of work: write curriculum, be instructional coaches, advise affinity groups for students, faculty, and parents, and review policies and procedures for everything from HR to admissions to discipline. They are also expected to put together community outreach and parent programs.

Some practitioners articulated that having one administrative assistant who can help manage scheduling and logistics would be enough support. Given the sheer number of events and constituents the practitioner is meeting with, an assistant would free up valuable time.

Other practitioners named that they either have, or would like to have, entire teams. Interestingly, a few also shared that DEIJ work does not fit into a “scalability” model, per se. For example, a small school and a large school could have equally sized teams because the work can grow and blossom if the investment is available and given.

“The role is the loneliest role there is. And I see folks leave because nobody wants to be lonely. There’s a difference between being alone and being lonely.”

⁹ <https://www.nais.org/articles/pages/research/2019-nais-diversity-practitioner-survey/excerpt-diversity-implementation-at-independent-schools/>

One model for an overarching DEIJ team:

Leadership: 1-2 full-time Directors and Assistant Directors leading/directing the work across the school. As an example, one person could be leading the student-facing work while the other could be leading adult-facing work. Both of these roles would of course intersect, but this separation would allow for clearer focus and delineation of who is doing what across the school.

Divisional Coordinators: Part-time staff, including a middle school, lower school, and upper school coordinator who are paid a stipend and help set the direction and tone for the type of initiatives happening in each division. For example, a lower school student of color affinity group will look and feel different from an upper school affinity group, yet both are important.

Grade level Team Coordinators: These people may be go-to liaisons between the grade and the divisional coordinators and the DEIJ leadership when a faculty member has a question around incorporating specific texts or culturally responsive resources, as one example.

Quotations that support the team-based approach to the DEIJ work:

“The director of DEI at our school oversees an office of anywhere between four and six adults, some of whom are half-time in their role. They help with programming, and they help with different initiatives around community and equity at the school. I would like to see more schools go to this model—to have one person doing this work in isolation is not a recipe for success. They don’t feel supported that this office has a really good, sustainable budget.”

“When I started, it was just me, and I wasn’t even set up with an administrative assistant who I desperately needed in the best way. I then had to create a team. My head of school supported the growth in the work so that we could be more accessible and more effective than one person could. So I have a full-time assistant director. We also have a specialist in each division: elementary, middle, high school, as an additional resource to teachers. When we created the assistant director position in each division, it was intentional to be a liaison for my office, and they meet with me as well. As a team of 10, we are so much better than a team of one.”

Even when there is a team in place (and especially when there isn’t), the DEIJ team or person must be in community and in partnership with every office and department of the school - it doesn’t reside with the “diversity person” or “diversity team.” If it is one person that is running the entire DEIJ department, then it must be recognized that they can’t be everything to everyone, and prioritization of areas to focus on and types of initiatives will be critical.

One interviewee who is solely responsible for managing the DEIJ work at her school stated: “I am a one-woman shop, and that doesn’t bother me because I operate very much as a consultant, so I will partner with, for example, the Director of Admissions. I make any initiative we are leading come through whatever area it’s supposed to come through. So if we’re looking at curriculum, that has to come out of the academic dean’s office, and I will partner with the academic dean because it has to be part of the academic dean’s infrastructure, and I will partner with our marketing and and communications department because the infrastructure has to be part of their area.”

Practitioners noted the following responsibilities as part of their day-to-day scope of work:

- A 24x7 (24 hours a day, 7 days a week) resource for faculty (ideas for curriculum, readings to incorporate) and students
- Student-facing support (one on one meetings supporting students who are experiencing any type of challenge)
- Crisis response and management
- Teaching at least one section of a course
- Leading or coordinating professional development for faculty
- Running parent groups (reading groups, affinity spaces)
- Coordinating student groups (affinity spaces, student-led clubs on DEIJ)
- Systems-wide institution of new structures, policies, and programs
- Meeting with members of the senior leadership team daily
- Bringing in speakers and presenters for the school community

FINDING 3:

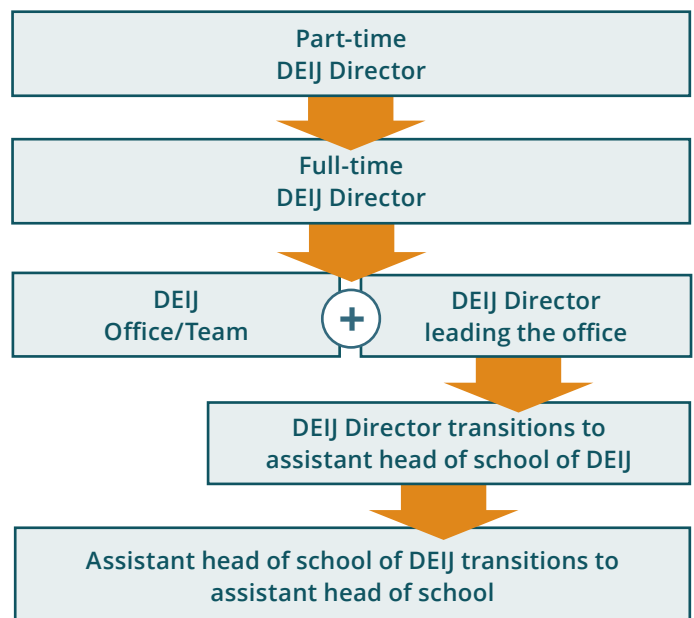
The title of the position carries significant meaning, both for the practitioner themselves as well as for others.

Practitioners as Assistant Heads

Many of the practitioners interviewed noted the DEIJ practitioner is often operating as an assistant head of school (or should be) and often without the title.

- In some schools, the practitioner is the Assistant Head of School. They are in charge of everything typical assistant heads are running and are also viewing it with the lens of DEIJ at the core of everything the school does.
- In other schools, the practitioner's title is Assistant Head of Multicultural Affairs or Assistant Head of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. This can serve as a signaling mechanism on the importance of the role and the power that the person has to manage and move initiatives across the school.
- For some schools, the title is Dean of Curriculum and Equity or Director of Instruction and Inclusion. This title may not be at the level of an assistant head but shows that this person has responsibilities in leading curriculum design from an equity lens and helps to ensure that faculty are evaluated with equity goals in mind.

An interesting evolution of the role in many independent schools over time, particularly for those schools who have invested significantly in this work:



If a school were to move towards the DEIJ Director as the Assistant Head of School, interviewees stated that this shift would:

1. Offer the authority that is critical to recognize this work is vital and runs across every aspect of the school.
2. Allow the practitioner to do goal setting and growth with faculty, specifically focusing on DEIJ-related goals.
3. Provide a clear onramp to headship, and diversity practitioners are often cited as a key pipeline to having more heads of color leading independent schools.¹⁰

¹⁰ <https://www.nais.org/articles/pages/research/2019-nais-diversity-practitioner-survey/excerpt-diversity-implementation-at-independent-schools/>

Environment and Culture

FINDING 4

To do DEI work effectively is to be a disruptor in a space that is ready for disruption (a school ready for institution-wide change).

Being Disruptors

A significant percentage of practitioners named that their role is to be a disruptor in their schools. In practice, this means that they feel empowered to speak up, challenge the current systems and structures, and are appreciated and recognized for holding that role in the school.

Interviewees Shared:

"If everybody likes what we're doing, then we're only doing the stuff that we should have been doing in the first place. When we have the conversations, when we have people who are asking and questioning, that's when we're pushing people."

"At my school, they're having the conversations, and they're willing to get a little bit messy, and it's a place where we're gonna at least give it a try and be in that mud a little bit. I'm in a community that is willing to kind of fight through it together, as opposed to being in a community that's more traditional. And that's what I like about it; we're willing to embrace that weirdness and be comfortable being uncomfortable."

"If you're doing your work well as a director of diversity, then you're upsetting people, you're changing the status quo, you're in the meeting raising your hand. You're causing some good trouble there, and is the school and school leadership going to be ready for that?"

"The other thing about independent schools is that sometimes there's this niceness factor. And when you have to be direct, they don't know how to respond. And this work, at its core, has to be direct. We have to find the spaces to talk about the uncomfortable, to talk about all that stuff we've had hiding in the closet, that we don't pull out. You can do window dressing work and have food and festivals and fun stuff. But if you are really doing the work, you are making people uncomfortable."

Places Ready For Disruption and Institutional Change

Practitioners also shared that since May of 2020, the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent protests, virtually all schools responded with a shift in their DEI approach. Many experienced significant moments of awareness as alumni brought up their own painful experiences in "Black@" Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter pages that sprouted up in independent schools across the country. Some practitioners voiced how they appreciated heads of schools who used the moment wisely as an opportunity to push forward critical work with the board that the school was poised and ready for.

Others discussed how schools may have said they were ready to develop and act on antiracism plans, but the environment was still not ready for change in the ways that it needed to be - which usually meant there was still resistance at the institutional level. A comment from an interviewee that exemplifies this:

“For institutional growth, we’re talking about systems and getting to the why. An institution [needs] to examine things and to say we may need to change this or change that. I think sometimes people want the position to be there to do this piece around [professional development] and give something for the students to do, and maintain that kind of status quo. So you have this person there, but you don’t put them on your senior leadership team, or they report to someone other than the head of school, so they’re not in those conversations where decisions are really made. They say things like, ‘well your role is more programmatic,’ and that oftentimes maintains the status quo because you’re not getting to the root causes. You will end up having faculty members of color with shorter [overall] retention than those who are [White], and your DEI coordinator will change every two to three years. And there is no understanding how all of those things are part of the same problem.”

At its core, and what this quotation exemplifies, is the frustration interviewees felt with the tension between needing to do the work at the institutional level to drive real change but leaders wanting them to spend more time on the programmatic or individual student-facing level.

This graphic highlights some of the significant aspects of a DEI practitioner’s job:

Individual Supports	Crisis Response
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student and faculty one-on-one assistance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incidents within the school • National incidents Impacting the school community
Programmatic Changes	Institutional/System Level Changes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student-led clubs • Awareness-building events • Affinity spaces • Trainings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curriculum review • Admissions process revamp • Parent engagement strategy

Across all of these responsibilities, institutional change undergirds the rest of the work and ensures a lasting impact. Ultimately, for institutions to change, system-wide disruption needs to happen.

Adoption Without Understanding

A sentiment also widely shared was adopting words like “antiracism” and “justice” without understanding what those words mean when incorporated into all systems and structures of the school. Even words that have been used for years, such as “equity,” may require a re-examination to make sure people are aligned on what that word means in practice.

Interviewees Shared:

“Many schools’ knee jerk reaction to the violence of the summer of 2020 and the Black@ movements, is to say we need this office or we need this position, and that almost exacerbates the problem, because then when it inevitably doesn’t work, they’re in a place that was one step forward and now it’s two steps back. And so, whereas doing work with the trustees and the adults and the students first, and then building it up, people have moved a little bit too hastily. And I think [it is important to] slow down a little bit and really be introspective first before you can do work at an institutional level. You can’t skip those steps.”

“Antiracist is a big term right now, and in the work that I’ve been doing, we go from diversity, multiculturalism, equity, antiracist, to abolitionist teaching. But at the end of the day, I’m still going to be doing my work. And whether someone likes it or not, that doesn’t make it harder or easier. It’s hard work.”

“We decided to develop this standardized definition of equity even though it had already been present in our mission statement. It’s a pretty homogenous group of people who understand the value of equality more than the value of equity. Equality makes sense [to them] because everyone’s getting what they need. So, for a lot of those reasons, we thought it was important to come up with a very clear definition of what equity means.”

"Probably everyone in the school uses that language [antiracism] except me. When I am approached by members of our community that say that 'we need to be an antiracist school,' my question is, what does that mean to you, what does antiracist mean to you? In my experience, I have not yet had a member of our community be able to explain what they mean by that. And I think I have not adopted it because what I have experienced in my school is that we latch onto new language. First, it was this thing, and now it's this thing, and now it's this thing. Now let's work on being an antiracist school. It's almost like we think this is the thing that we should be working towards, and we'll do better without really investigating."

"Curated Diversity" and Other Challenges

Some practitioners voiced a challenge around the types of change schools were willing to take. While the school named wanting more diversity, there was implicit messaging that it still meant a certain type of student who could be accepted into the school community.

"The curation continues when it comes to what kind of minority you got to present in a certain kind of way. We can't have this family that uses African American English or Ebonics. Or if they [only] speak Spanish or they're not dressed a certain way. We can maybe have a couple of them or a few of them. It's coded stuff that we layer in when we get to a place where the diversity is too much. You know, I just cut through all that crap because that's what it is; you know we only want so much diversity. Enough to make us feel like we're about equity and inclusion."

Other practitioners talked about programs specifically for students on financial assistance at the school to help them acclimate. When pushed by the practitioner to reconsider having such a program (instead of embedding supports in the advisory program) because students themselves felt like they were being "singled out" for being different, faculty were resistant.

"I asked the teachers, what are the benefits of this program, what makes it so great? Each teacher talked about the relationships they had built with the students. And after they shared, I said, 'I don't know if you all noticed, but you each talked about what it meant for you. Not one of you talked about what it meant for the student.'"

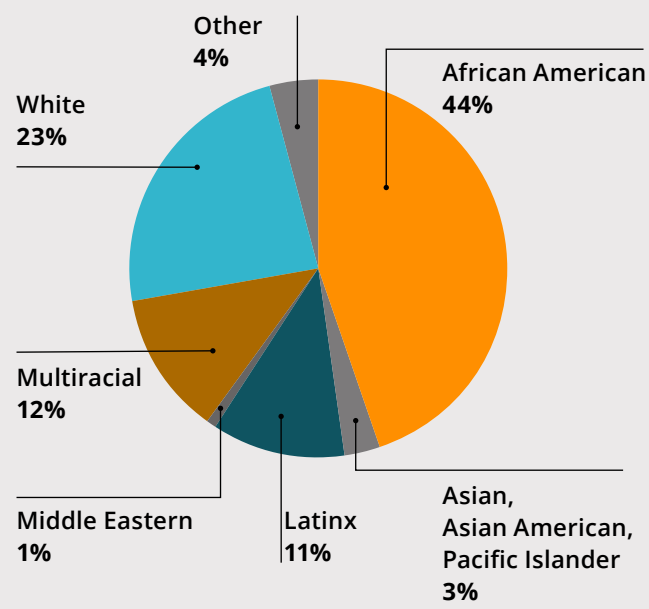
FINDING 5

Practitioners, the majority of whom are people of color, experience personal and professional challenges trying to change the system in predominantly White institutions.

An Interviewee Shared:

"And then you talk to us on the ground level, and we're like, you just had an awakening [after the murder of George Floyd]. We didn't have an awakening; there was no reckoning for me. I was born into this world, with the world responding to me in a certain way that you never had to experience. So this is not a wake-up call for me in the same way that it is for so many heads of schools."

According to the 2019 Diversity Practitioner Survey, over 70% of diversity practitioners identify as people of color. However, most of their institutions they serve are predominantly White in terms of leadership, faculty representation, and student body.



Totals do not equal 100 due to rounding

Source: Davis Taske, "2019 State of Diversity Practice" NAIS

“There are a lot of elements of White supremacist culture that are kind of operating in the background at all times [at my school]. It’s kind of like your operating system; it just runs.”

For practitioners, this environment can present a specific set of challenges. Interviewees named experiencing microaggressions and working in environments where White-dominant norms preside even as the school names that it is committed to antiracist work. Practitioners noted that they had to witness the school’s shock at hearing about students’ experiences at the school during the Black@ movement and the recent rise in Anti-Asian sentiment in the United States, even as they knew these issues always existed because they lived them. Practitioners also shared that they could not always bring their whole selves to work in the ways that their White colleagues could.

Interviewees Directly Shared:

“I’ve been on the leadership team calls with my White male counterparts. Over the past year, where they openly say, I’m angry, or I’m pissed off. Can you imagine if I ever showed up and was talking about my anger or disgust or frustration? How would they react to me, a Black man?”

“After the Atlanta murders in March of 2021, people at the school said that this was ‘Un-American.’ I disagree with that language because what does it mean to be ‘Un-American?’ But I know that that makes people very comfortable to say things like, ‘Oh, this was Un-American.’”

“There are a lot of elements of White supremacist culture that are kind of operating in the background at all times [at my school]. It’s kind of like your operating system; it just runs. Because I’ve had really good training and a lot of support, I’m able to have an experience and then name this thing that happens is part of White supremacist culture, and that’s why we’re having a problem.”

“We’re not judging White students. We are, however, acknowledging that to be White, to be cisgender male, to be wealthy, that is a positionality that you take in doing this work and the same way that I’ve always assumed my own positionality as a Black male in this work. You expect me to constantly be a Black male at a predominantly White institution, and I’ve always carried that positionality with me because it’s expected of me to do that. We’re asking you to do the same.”

“There’s a shift from other folks, people who didn’t realize until May 25th last year that there was racism. And yet, my work is my work. I’m like, wow, now you’re coming along for the ride. I’ve been driving this thing for years, and now you want to go with me. There are a lot of White folks who are shocked. There’s a lot of White folks who are shocked by the experiences of alumni from our school. There’s just nothing that was shocking to me, and it was painful to hear because I love kids so much because they deserve better. And that is painful. But I’m not shocked.”

“We have to find the spaces to talk about the uncomfortable, to talk about all that stuff we’ve had hiding in the closet, that we don’t pull out. You can do window dressing work and have food and festivals and fun stuff. But if you are really doing the work, you are making people uncomfortable.”

“Yes, we’re trying to be a better institution now, but we also have to acknowledge that we haven’t always been here.”

FINDING 6

Independent schools must own their histories and pasts, as a collective and as individuals within that school.

What this looks like in practice includes an exploration of the history of the school—how it was founded, for what reasons, and in what ways the school might have perpetuated certain traumas over the past years. Honesty on the part of leadership on what they know and what they don’t know shows their ability to reflect, grow, and be humble about their journey.

Interviewees Shared

“When I made a decision to join this school, it was because there was a recognition that they could do better, and real honesty and being able to look at themselves, that I felt from the admissions director to the head of school, like there was some

consistency around that too, even when I was talking to a couple of board members. And so I was looking at those kinds of signals to say like, alright, this is a place where I could at least have some people—they may not look like me, but they’ll get me. I have a voice here; I can advocate for myself.”

“We have to talk about why these schools were founded to begin with, especially through the South [of the United States]. A lot of these independent schools throughout the Southeast started springing up because many school districts throughout the South were willing to shut public schools down rather than give equitable resources to Black kids. How are you going to do justice in that school community, and you can’t talk about that? Schools aren’t ready to do that. And I get passionate about it because again, I’ve lived it. I know what it’s like to be in front of parents, school administrators, trustees and to be blamed. To be blamed because they aren’t comfortable talking about some of this stuff at the root of the school’s creation. It gets in the way of real equity.”

“Yes, we’re trying to be a better institution now, but we also have to acknowledge that we haven’t always been here. And that we had, you know, been a part of that cycle of trauma for some students of color, or students who identify as LGBTQIA, or students from different socioeconomic backgrounds.”

“One of the good things that’s happening at this school, [is that] cross disciplines are doing a better job of really trying to focus on the systemic nature of the barriers, and talking about the history of how these things have developed. So in their U.S. history courses, we are discussing the current state of the police and communities of color. What the students are getting now is also that piece about how the police force developed in the first place. The origins are actually their intended purpose: they were created to catch runaway slaves. I teach an applied math class where we focus on personal finances, but when we talk about mortgages, we talked about redlining, and we talked about how it happened that we ended up with such segregated communities in the North. These problems didn’t just exist in the South, we had them in the North, but we certainly shaped them in a different way.”

Strategies and Tactics

FINDING 7

Practitioners have a clearly defined skill-set, and they are also learners on this journey.

A significant percentage of practitioners noted that DEIJ work is an expertise-based job, and therefore not anyone can just take on the role. The expertise of the practitioner should be honored.

Practitioners as Experts

"I think people have to recognize this isn't just something that because I am Black or Brown I can do. There's just this thought that, oh, you know, let's find an Asian person or the Black teacher or the LGBTQIA teacher. You wouldn't put me in a biology class to teach biology just because I have cells in my body. So, there's still a lack of appreciation for the fact that, no, this is a science. This is something where you need to go and study. This is a subject like anything else. And just because I have Black skin or I have an identity that is considered marginalized doesn't even make me qualified."

Common interviewee-noted pitfalls include:

- Assuming a person of color in the school or another historically marginalized group (e.g., a person who identifies as LGBTQIA) who is interested in the work could take on the DEIJ roles and responsibilities.
- Senior leaders responding to a DEIJ topic/crisis/issue without first checking in with the practitioner on the appropriate next steps based on their knowledge and training.
- Not asking a newly hired practitioner for their input on pre-created materials such as the school's antiracism action plan or task-force next steps.

Practitioners as Learners

The DEIJ space is research- and evidence-based and is also ever-evolving with new insights and perspectives from scholars, educators, and leaders. Practitioners spoke about the expertise they bring to the work, but that they are also on an ongoing journey of learning and reflection. Some named that they have done considerable work in some areas and less so in others, as it pertains to supporting different communities identifying as marginalized. Additionally, practitioners discussed how presenting themselves as learners can help others in the space feel more open and honest about not having "everything figured out already." One interviewee noted:

"I try to give my own examples of learning because I think people look at themselves as experts, and then they believe that they really are experts, and I don't pretend to be. I seek to be a collaborative partner; I don't name myself as an expert. People who do this work have their own challenges and biases. So I like to put that out, that we're all learning together, and people recognize, they don't have to do anything to impress me because it's really about committing to roll up our sleeves and get in practice together."

FINDING 8

The work is multifaceted, complex, and sometimes hidden to the rest of the school community.

According to NAIS survey data, over 70% of practitioners do not feel their job is well-defined.

This points to the need for the practitioner and school leadership to engage and clarify roles and responsibilities. To support that, it is important to understand three key subthemes that highlight significant aspects of the practitioner's day-to-day work.

Subtheme 1:

Practitioners are simultaneously pushing people forward while bringing other people along, with some thinking they are further along in the journey than they are.

Some faculty resistance is always present, and on the other side, there those who are ready to jump in and want to move quickly in the adoption of new ideas, concepts, and principles. Sometimes these people are truly ready to move ahead, and other times they need to spend some time examining themselves and how ready they truly are. It is not an easy balance to have to work across these different subgroups and help people look inward.

One interviewee shared:

"I think also you encounter the people who think they're further along in this journey than they really are because I think there's an internal component to this work, that sometimes working in schools, people want to be like, 'the administration needs to do this, we need to do this and this,' but what about your own internal work? What about how those students feel in your classroom? It's also [about] bringing those individual people to the level where they can just examine themselves as individuals, and what work they have in this system that we're trying to, you know, dismantle."

Practitioners are simultaneously supporting resistant faculty members, those in the middle, and those who are "ready" but still need to look inward and stay on the journey.



Subtheme 2:

There is an entire strand of critical "hidden" work, and people may not realize it takes up so much time.

There are significant levels of "hidden" work that other people don't see or recognize. For example, crafting an appropriately toned message after a national incident can fall on the job of the DEI director even if the head of school is the one who ultimately sends it out. Sometimes there is a misguided perception of how they are spending the time, whereby other staff may choose what they want to see or unconsciously notice. For example, one interviewee named how

other staff members only notice when Black students are in her office, perhaps because their unconscious bias picks that up rather than when she is working with other marginalized student groups across campus.

Examples of hidden work:

- Crafting emails and other language for the head of school to share after an incident (national or school-level).
- Advising leadership and faculty on next steps based on an incident that occurred.
- Maintaining a network of people to call upon as needed so when an incident occurs, they can immediately reach out to someone who can work with the school.
- Carrying the emotional burden of constituents, particularly students, that can result in needing time to reflect and regroup.
- Gaining input from several other practitioners when deciding how to address a pressing need or issue in the community.

Interviewees shared:

"People may think or say, 'why aren't they doing more?' People don't understand the crisis work and how it looks. Sometimes our role becomes more of an advisory position to say, this is what we need to do, and someone else, whether it's the division director or head of school, then becomes the person who is out there talking about it. People don't realize we're the people who gave them those words and explained it to them. And you don't really say anything because, you know, that's just, that's what you do behind the scenes."

"Sometimes, being a person of color in this role, people think that you're about only advancing what it is that you identify as. So there are people who think, oh, you know all those Black people in her office, and not noticing when other students [from different marginalized groups] are in my office. People are projecting things on you, or making assumptions, as well, because of maybe where they are, or where their comfort lies."

Subtheme 3:

Parents are a key sub-group and continue to take up more time and consideration for practitioners.

Working with parents, in order to ensure that they are aware of the DEIJ work and also because many of them are now seeking out active DEIJ efforts from their school communities, is a critical and growing piece of the work.

Some practitioners and heads of schools interviewed noted that schools who have experienced challenges with new antiracism programs and plans schools are putting in place may be having those issues, in part due to the rollout with key constituent groups such as parents.

Interviewees shared:

"I think in the next five to ten years at independent schools, those that will thrive are the ones that bolster their parent education."

"One of the things we do at our school is that when we make these big changes at the school, we bring in the parents immediately. Our kids go home at the end of the day, they're going to be talking about this stuff, the parents need to have the language too, and they need to struggle with this as much as the kids are and as much as we are, because we don't want to see [it] happen as the kids are learning this, and now they're taking it to their parents who have no frame of reference. Kids are gonna misrepresent what we do in schools because they are children. But if the parents are on board, even if they don't agree with it, at least they know that we're doing it. We're not hiding it. We're being transparent about it."

"One of the things that came out in the discovery conversations is that parents also want to be educated. There has been this push, and that was something that was a question mark for us: to what degree do parents want to also get this information and education."

FINDING 9

Students can help lead the charge when empowered to do so and provided with key skills.

Empowering Students

Interviewees named the many ways students, particularly in the past year, have become more active in the community across various issues affecting marginalized communities.

Some noted that their school prioritizes empowering student voice and action in a variety of ways:

- Building a culture of trust between students, faculty, and school leadership by listening and engaging student voices actively.
- Students leading discussions and groups on key issues occurring on a national level, and inviting other students to join in.
- Grading practices that are equitable and supportive and thereby promote student agency and build confidence; noting that grading can be one of the ways that students can feel disempowered in a school.
- Students participating in councils and other decision-making bodies that influence overall policy and change across the school.
- Having reporting systems in place (openly or anonymously) when an incident takes place at the school.

One interviewee noted the creation of a microaggression reporting system that is age-appropriate across the school so both six-year-olds and sixteen-year-olds could use it. The practitioner shared:

"Before, kids did come forward and say something happened, but it was not organized, and some of them left feeling they hadn't experienced justice or that it was handled properly or they were heard, or sometimes [the

issue] would just disappear because of the old model of confidentiality. And that's no longer the case either because we are focusing on restorative justice, so the person who's been harmed and the person who did the harming are going to face each other. The consequences of learning all of that is pretty transparent because the premise is based on one harm in the school inflicts the entire community in pain, and so the restorative approach has to be for the community."

Providing Key Skills

Interviewees shared how schools are meant to be places where students, faculty, and (more and more) parents, will learn what it means to be an antiracist, focus on equity and inclusion, and lead with compassion and belonging. As one practitioner named, "if White people [or other privileged groups] are fearful of making mistakes, will they speak up and ask the questions they need to in order to learn?"

As such, interviewees named that schools focused on helping students (and other constituent groups) communicate across differences, inquire with respect, and allow for safe and brave conversations will be those that provide them with some key skills that they can use not only in their current environments, but also beyond.

Quotations that reflect focus on key skills:

"Our students are mature enough to say, 'you don't need to fix my problems, but you need to give me the tools and the space in order to try.'"

"Sometimes for our teenagers, everything has equal weight. There is no examination of nuance or context or much interest in thinking about intention versus impact. Everything carries the same weight, which in and of itself is not problematic. That's where they are. That's where they're supposed to be developmentally. Our job as the faculty is to push back on the White students about the things they say, and also to push back on our students of color, [that] every insensitive comment is not actually a blatant act of racism."

"I want students to ask the questions that they have without fear of being branded a racist. I think that's one of our biggest barriers: students don't feel safe when they have questions that are actually just questions - they are kids, sometimes they're just curious. They don't have a safe way to inquire about those things. Because there's this fear of being labeled a racist, and we've got to be able to talk to each other."

Finding 10

Practitioner burnout is real, and schools can provide supports that promote self-care and are energy restoring.

100% of practitioners spoke about the need for both self-care and community care. The work can be very consuming, and while they aren't in it for the thank you's, the position can feel thankless.

What this looks like in practice:

- Having a community that the practitioner is tapped into, including local diversity practitioners at other schools, or someone at the school to bounce ideas off of.
- The school offering a practitioner with a mentor or coach relationship, if desired.
- Recognizing the need for practitioners, by leadership, to step away and recharge because the work can be energy depleting, particularly when it is constant crisis management.
- Leadership taking the time and space to recognize the work of the practitioner, even when that work is seemingly invisible because it is "emotional labor."

Practitioners shared:

"As a person of color, who is conscious of the impact of race and racism, I am going to be fatigued, no matter what. That's part of the context of being conferred this minority status and living in a nation that has racialized me in ways that I didn't ask for."

"I know it is a little irrational worry, but I feel that I can't take a day off. I need to be here all the time. I've had students say to me, 'you know you can't not be here.' And so that anxiety of not being here all the time and being accessible, all the time, to everyone is exhausting, and it's

overwhelming. And it worries me a lot. Even with a team [to support me]. I recently started therapy in the fall because it was just, it was too much."

"When I'm doing things for the institution, it will suck the energy out of me, like it takes everything. It is some thankless hard work. And there is no recognition. There's no trophy. There's no banner. And so, to receive the positive energy, I use my knowledge and skill set in other places. I am regularly consulting with other organizations, schools, institutions. I speak at schools as a keynote. I work with other professional development organizations. I'm on a couple of boards and have a voice there. So, that gives me an opportunity to step away from all things at my school, and step into a space where I am seen, heard, valued for who I am and what I have to offer in a very different way."

"You have to be the voice in a room who has to pull the group discussion from the comfortable to the uncomfortable. And it can be draining. And I also think if you're someone who needs to hear, 'you're doing a great job' - that never happens. You are the problem-solving person, and no one comes to tell you, 'oh my gosh, thank you for helping us to make that great decision' - that doesn't happen. So I think self-care is very important to make sure that in the midst of doing all of these things, you have a sense of just who you are and what you need."

"Weekends are for my Brown people. Everybody at this school knows that. I need that time to recharge with the people who understand me the most."

"You have to be the voice in a room who has to pull the group discussion from the comfortable to the uncomfortable. And it can be draining. And I also think if you're someone who needs to hear, 'you're doing a great job' - that never happens."

Implications

Below are some suggested practices for schools, ranging from structural to philosophical to practical, organized by the overall three categories.

Category 1: Leadership and Support

An interviewee shared:

"We have all these DEI jobs open now, [but] the same job is gonna open up again in two or three years, and I'm deeply concerned about that."

Preparation

Prepare as a school before hiring a practitioner for the first time or take some time to revisit the role if the school has had significant turnover. There is a real danger in "doing harm" to a person who comes into a position when a school is unprepared. Turnover is another significant challenge when a school hasn't invested properly before hiring externally for the role.

Interviewees shared many ways schools can prepare, including:

- Working with a consultant before hiring a full-time DEIJ practitioner: This person can help with school-wide accountability and building out infrastructure that supports the institutional level of the work, including ensuring that DEIJ is baked into the mission/vision of the school and that reporting structures have been well thought out. This may also entice a practitioner to join the school because they have already named the work they have done to prepare themselves.
- Learning from other schools: Spend some time in communion with schools who are already further along in their DEIJ journey - learn from them, ask questions, and meet with their DEIJ team.
- Getting ready in areas both big and small: Small items may seem insignificant, but they matter. For example, an overlooked item may be the location of the DEIJ practitioner's office. Is it in a place that is accessible to leadership, students, and faculty? Does it have space to accommodate chairs and confidential meetings?
- Clarifying goals and understanding the reality: Recognize that a portion of the practitioner's time will be spent in student care, but that can't be the entire role, particularly if only one person is leading the work and the school wants system-wide change to take place.
- Identifying the budget: Resources are critical for the practitioner to have in order to buy what is needed for the school (e.g., texts), support their individual professional development, and offer training for faculty and students.
- Recognizing the importance of the practitioner's title: Will they have enough latitude to do the work necessary across the school? Assistant heads of school titles allow for the role to be diffused across all departments and areas and tie faculty growth to DEI-related goals. DEIJ directors who formally oversee curriculum can also be another way to provide oversight into key areas across the school.

“A lot of these independent schools throughout the Southeast started springing up because many school districts throughout the South were willing to shut public schools down rather than give equitable resources to Black kids.”

Category 2: Environment and Culture

The recommendations listed below could be done in conjunction with a consultant before hiring a DEIJ director, or done when the director is on board. In the latter case, sharing that this will be part of the practitioner's initial responsibilities will support successful onboarding.

1. Conducting an audit of the organization's readiness to sit in discomfort and be pushed or challenged: Where are the organization's current DEIJ efforts sitting? Mostly in programmatic change? Have there been efforts to move to institutional change? If not, in what ways would a practitioner be poised to lead that work?
2. Clearly defining terms that are being used, even if they have been part of the school for a long time (e.g. equity, community) or if it is newer language (justice, antiracism): Recognize that it will take time for constituents to understand what it means to take on antiracism work not only in name, but in actual function across every aspect of the institution.
3. Spending time learning the school's history: Consider how the school can not only explore its own history, but share that openly and honestly with its school community.
4. Clarifying roles and responsibilities: Understand the different ways the practitioner both leads and supports the community and communicate these strands of work to constituents.
5. Focusing on parent education: Rolling out new initiatives without strategic and thoughtful communications with parents can quickly become a pitfall.

Category 3: Strategies and Tactics

Below are strategic and tactical recommendations to support the day-to-day work of the practitioner.

- Honoring the practitioner's expertise: Don't ask a person of color or someone who identifies as LGBTQIA to lead the work without considering if they can say no. If they do want to take on the role, ensure that sufficient budget is available to provide training and professional development to further their skill set.
- Recognizing the visible and the hidden work of the DEIJ practitioner: There is quite a bit of it, and assumptions may be made on why the DEIJ practitioner isn't doing more if it isn't clear what their scope of responsibilities entails.
- Empowering students: Recognizing that student voice is critical and developing a culture that empowers them to lead DEIJ related efforts and give them the skills to lead effectively.

“When I made a decision to join this school, it was because there was a recognition that they could do better, and real honesty and being able to look at themselves that I felt from the admissions director to the head of school.”

Self Care

Below are recommendations to ensure the self-care of DEIJ practitioners:

- Recognizing the work of the DEIJ practitioner: Especially after the emotional toll of a hard meeting or a crisis. A simple acknowledgement can go a long way. Offering a thank you by providing a practitioner a “comp” day or a small gift card waiting at their desk when they arrive at school are some examples.
- Offering the practitioner opportunities to recharge: This can include a mentor or a coach if they would value it.
- Building connections: Supporting new practitioners in the community by connecting them to schools nearby who also have DEIJ teams and ensuring they can attend events like the People of Color Conference (POCC), held by NAIS, which can help them build out a network.
- Ensuring the practitioner has opportunities to disconnect: Set norms around emailing in the evenings, weekends, etc. If the practitioner is voicing overwhelm, listen and understand the challenges before rushing to a solution.

[Another helpful resource](#) that provides valuable suggestions on how to support the practitioner role was written by Judy Osborne, a DEI practitioner at Westminster Schools.

In Conclusion

The work of the DEIJ practitioner at independent schools is vital.

Practitioners take on this responsibility because of their deep investment in building diverse, equitable, inclusive, and just spaces for students, families, parents, and the overall school community. Each practitioner’s story is different, as is their approach to the work and their individual school contexts. There are, however, some common ways that schools can support the role and the work overall based on shared experiences across this key group of leaders at independent schools. ■



Specific Resources Named by Practitioners

Below are some resources explicitly named by practitioners. This is not an exhaustive list, but some of what they were currently reading or using as part of their work across the school.

Texts:

- *Grading for Equity: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How It Can Transform Schools and Classrooms*, by Joe Feldman
 - *The Racial Healing Handbook: Practical Activities to Help You Challenge Privilege, Confront Systemic Racism, and Engage in Collective Healing*, by Anneliese A. Singh
 - *The Body is Not an Apology: The Act of Radical Self-Love*, by Sonya Renee Taylor
 - *Coaching for Equity: Conversations that Change Practice*, by Elena Aguilar
 - *Seeing Race Again: Countering Colorblindness Across the Disciplines*, by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw
 - *Educating Citizens in a Multicultural Society*, by James A. Banks
 - *The Deepest Well: Healing the Long-Term Effects of Childhood Adversity*, by Nadine Burke Harris
 - *Trauma Stewardship: An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self While Caring for Others*, by Laura Van Dernoot Lipsky with Connie Burk
 - *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy*, by Gholdy Muhammad
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