

Diversity, inclusivity and purchasing policies: Are your spending decisions aligned?

By Kendra McQuilton

In light of the George Floyd protests, your school board may be re-examining district efforts involving diversity and inclusion. Have you considered your district's dealings with businesses?

The average school district spends 11% of its budget on purchased services, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. There is an opportunity to ensure that minority and women-owned business enterprises (M/WBE) are competitive when bidding for that work.

Several districts in New York State award points in the request for proposals (RFP) process and take other steps to welcome M/WBEs. For example, the Rochester City School District pursues equity goals through its Office of Minority and Women-Owned Business Enterprise Development. The district's M/WBE purchasing policy includes the coordination and development of minority business training programs and the offer of mentoring and internship opportunities for students.

It's a socially conscious choice that district leaders have made to put their diversity and inclusivity values into real practice. It is consistent with efforts to help

all students – especially young women – cultivate the confidence required to aspire to the highest levels of leadership.

Owners of M/WBEs often are eager to meet with student groups to share the story of their journey and lessons learned along the way. Students can benefit from interactions with successful business leaders with whom they can identify.

The Westbury Union Free School District on Long Island achieved more than 45% M/WBE participation in its most recent capital project. In the request for proposals (RFP) for an energy performance contract, it specified that bidders would score up to 10 points based on their commitment to M/WBE participation. (My firm is managing the energy performance contract, which includes an overall minimum M/WBE subcontractor participation goal of 30%.)

"Having a board of education that is committed to diversity and inclusivity sets us on a unique path of changing the lives of future generations," said Superintendent Eudes Budhai. He serves on the New York State Council of Superintendents' Commission on Diversity and Inclusivity and is an active member of the New York State Association of Latino Administrators and Superintendents.

"Designing equitable opportunities starts with a strategic intent and explicit desire to change the course of action," Budhai

said. By using a process that values equity, the district "contributes to access, attainable dreams and economic prosperity."

Also important is "the modeling and mentoring for our students to have authentic experiences of entrepreneurship in all aspects of business from M/WBE's through our Student Industry Advisory Board," he said.

Another strong advocate for adopting goals for M/WBE participation is Constance Evelyn, superintendent of Valley Stream 13 UFSD. She serves on the board of the New York State Association for Women in Administration and was on the steering committee of the New York State Council of School Superintendents' Women's Initiative. Both associations actively encourage women to seek leadership positions and assist and mentor women once they are in leadership roles.

Evelyn sees supporting the M/WBE community as a form of social justice. M/WBEs can "promote equity for people who have been marginalized by institutional barriers like racism and sexism," she said. They also can "encourage a culture of collaboration and shared decision making in how an organization is run."

In addition to mentoring students, leaders of M/WBEs can mentor women/minority administrators coming up through the ranks and help them reach their goals, she added.

As the owner of a certified woman-owned business enterprise, I can attest to the challenges that confront the M/WBE community. I have also experienced, however, the gratification and pride that comes from being asked to speak to student groups to show them that they can become leaders at the highest levels, regardless of their race or gender.

Establishing M/WBE participation goals at your district is optional, not a requirement. It is a clear opportunity, however, to advocate for the advancement of the disadvantaged, a value that many districts hold dear. By adjusting the scoring criteria in your RFP process to reward M/WBE involvement, your school board has the ability to align your spending with your values and your goal of having all students succeed. That will make a huge difference for both your students and your community.

Kendra McQuilton is Chief Executive Officer of The ECG Group, a certified women's business enterprise in Suffolk County that manages and leads energy performance contracts for school districts. She and Dr. Budhai are preparing a webinar on how Westbury UFSD successfully implemented M/WBE purchasing policies; contact McQuilton at Kendra@theecgroup.com for more information.

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