

*Amherst Public Schools
Pelham Elementary School
Amherst-Pelham Regional School District*

Social Justice Commitment

***Social Justice Commitment:
Overview for the Amherst-Pelham Curriculum***

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Philosophy and Rationale

The philosophy and rationale for a social justice commitment is articulated in the opening pages of “Standards of A Multicultural School System.”

Page 1 is titled “Our Vision of Multicultural Education: ABC: Achievement, Belonging and Commitment to Transformation.” Page 1 is foundational, current and comprehensive. (See attached reference) It continues to serve as the introductory context for the development of a social justice commitment for the Amherst-Pelham Schools. The contents bridge past work of the BAMSS Committee and the district’s current call for equitable instructional action “in every classroom, every day.” It is recommended that the title be amended to read ~

***Our Vision of Multicultural Education and a Social Justice Commitment:
ABC: Achievement, Belonging and Commitment to Transformation***

The “Standards of a Multicultural School System” are listed on page 2 of the same document. Institutional Practices, Curriculum, Instruction, Assessment, Affirmative Action and Professional Development are the six indicators presented. Each focus area is defined and criterion referenced. (See attached reference) Efforts to actively link social justice education across the standards have engaged the district’s educators and many community members, as well, since the BAMSS Initiative was adopted in 1993. We can and should point to markers of meaningful multicultural progress within the system and broader community since 1993. At the same time, we must assume responsibility for the collective efforts that have

“stalled out” or more directly, failed to promote opportunities and equitable change in the school lives of our students. It is our knowledge of those lost opportunities that inform and propel our next steps.

A cultural shift in our school system is indicated. The shift proposed targets the collective and visible implementation of *“a curriculum for social responsibility in which the balance shifts away from the individual and towards the social whole”* (Pitt 1998). Teaching and learning that is built on attention to both the cognitive and affective domains is essential. Transformation will require us to infuse content curriculum with uniform and practiced socially just behaviors. Students and the adults in their school days will be asked to reflect, analyze, instruct and assess equity routinely from an agreed- upon reference point. For example, questions included in ongoing dialogues will systematically include: *“Who am I? How am I connected to others and what are my responsibilities? What is my place in the world? Where am I headed? Who benefits? Who is marginalized? Whose interests are being served? How could things be done differently?”*

Pitt clarifies the difference between dominant language discussions of social justice and marginal language usage in reference to social justice. It is her contention that we need to focus more on the marginal language. *“Social cohesion, social capital, community, reciprocity, trust and cooperation,”* is conceptual language that acknowledges and respects individual autonomy while simultaneously connecting each of us to personal and collective responsibility. The emphasis is on the whole. The language in italics (termed marginal) is preferred as it moves us forward and away from historical and educationally discriminatory assumptions so well documented in public education previously.

No social justice commitment exists without social responsibility at its core. The implementation of this commitment connects “me” to the “other”, “us” to “them”, “educator” to “student & family” and integration of our expressed vision into discernable actions and outcomes. The district’s implementation of a social justice commitment for students and staff must (cited in Pitts, originated with Giddens 1994 and edited for use here):

- repair damaged solidarities and reconcile autonomy and interdependence
- recognize the importance of the discussion of ethics, “life politics”
- encourage individuals and groups to make things happen, “generative politics”
- create a participatory democracy where issues are discussed respectfully and transparently
- develop conditions that empower participants as opposed to merely dispensing
- confront the role violence plays at all levels of human interactions

Larger blocks of time for professional development on all levels (Elementary, Middle and High School) are needed in order for staff to acquire an understanding of the Social Justice Commitment and to make changes in the expectations for students and associated questioning techniques for analytical inquiry. This is an ongoing process and should be part of the curriculum/instruction plans across the district for the foreseeable future.

In conclusion, the Gallup Organization Education Mission Statement, brought to the district’s attention by the Superintendent in 2002, speaks succinctly to the desired outcomes of our social justice commitment. It states, “Our greatest contribution is to be sure there is a teacher in every classroom who cares that every student, every day, learns and grows and feels like a real human being.” The significance of teaching to and learning from the cognitive and affective domains continues to increase our hopefulness for change that respects and benefits all learners.

The priority has been articulated broadly as we conclude the 2005-2006 school year. Will it be more talk as we move into the new school year? Will we continue to look at full student access to curriculum and instruction, maintaining a privileged distance or will we act together making our social justice commitment routinely visible and broadly impacting?

Suggested Addendum

We would suggest this addition to the “II. Curriculum: A Rigorous Multicultural Curriculum” section from the Standards of a Multicultural School System. It’s from an excerpt by Dr. James Banks and found in the Amherst-Pelham Social Studies Curriculum under “Citizen Action” (*Social Education*, 43, April 1979).

G. The curriculum encourages students of all ages to engage in activities within the community. The involvement may take the form of observation or information-seeking, attending meetings or interviews. It may take the form of political campaigning, community service or improvement. The school should not only provide channels for such activities but build them into the K-12 design.