Dear Fellow Town Meeting Members,

I've listened to arguments for and against Warrant Article #7, to hire a director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion within our Burlington School district. I unequivocally support passing the article, and offer my thoughts:

The School Committee and Administration have expressed support for the idea of hiring a DEI Director. Many have argued against the mechanism of the Warrant Article. I'm sympathetic to the value of process and procedure, but I contend that an important premise of this whole effort is that process and procedure are part of the problem. I appreciate the need for the School Committee to be fiscally responsible, and I hope they have the opportunity to enjoy the political cover we can provide by pushing this hire by way of the Town Meeting, more broadly and more immediately representative of Burlington residents. Finally, I acknowledge the contention that waiting for the FY21-22 budget process would only make a small delay and allow us to optimize the effort. I just don't believe it.

I reject the contention that this is too rushed. The position has been discussed for several years, and the School Committee and Administration will have over 6 months to formulate a job description and carefully vet candidates. If they are incapable of that, we have even greater problems. As School Committee Member Carl Foss pointed out at a public meeting, other school districts are likely to hire such a position and attract the best candidates in the near term. We compete with them for expediency. As many have pointed out, the current public health crisis strains our efforts to ensure access to curriculum and opportunity. As is the unanimous conclusion of many well-controlled scientific studies, minority groups and low-income groups disproportionately suffer from any challenges to access. Our simple lassitude in not specifically addressing these challenges has only survived notice in comparison to the more strenuous historical neglect perpetrated by our ancestors. It is a large part of the crisis of the current pandemic. There has never been a better time than now.

I reject the contention that we can be assured the position will be better addressed in FY 21-22. We had an opportunity to address it for FY 20-21 and FY 19-20. We did not. I have no faith that it would happen. If it were budgeted and approved in May of 2021, would we have a Director of DEI, or any equivalent function up and running immediately? Certainly not. If we approve September Warrant Article #7, we'd have a chance at hiring somebody by next year. What if a Director level position isn't optimal? These positions are not permanent. If a better way is identified, the effort could be reorganized, and the director's contract would not need to be extended. If there is any legitimate fear that simple momentum will perpetuate a mediocre solution, that's an indictment of current leadership: all the more reason to bolster it. And what would be the potential savings? The "couple of counselors" suggested would cost as much, if not more.

The needs are real, immediate, and require system-level strategic solutions driven by a Director-level administrator. Simply devising bandaid solutions to individual racist aggressions is not appropriate. There's no counseling session that fixes a lack of access to the education we owe each student. We need a top-down effort to help all staff equitably support all students. I've followed only a subset of the discussion within the equity committee and the remote learning committee. Systemic issues that should be addressed by a DEI director were readily apparent:

1. In August, parents were surveyed about their preferences for remote vs. in-person learning. Within a few days of the response deadline one Middle School staff member
thought to look at demographics. 70% had responded: 35% of black families, 73% of others. The surveys, to that point, were only done via email, and only in English. Families of identified English Language Learners was lower. The census shows that over 25% of Burlington families speak languages other than English at home. How well does this lack of engagement serve the students of those parents that couldn't respond? How many resources (our tax dollars) were wasted or ineffective because we could not plan the school opening with full knowledge of who would show up? How well does this uncertainty serve any of the children? The school schedule was devised without sufficient engagement from those least likely to speak up, and most likely to have need: those with limited internet access, non-English speakers, essential workers, those with multiple jobs, multigenerational families with medically vulnerable members.

2. During a discussion of internet access, it was revealed that some high school students during the spring term were loitering in apartment hallways and retail parking lots at night to find internet access to study for their exams. An administrator said "I wish I had known. We have cellular hotspots available that were unused in my office." That's our tax dollars, spent on undeployed equipment. We should know about these problems, and we should be deploying solutions.

3. Students mentioned this summer that a student was disciplined after reporting that they were called the n-word by a fellow student. I recently spoke with Fox Hill parents that discussed racially discriminatory language by elementary school students, and asked about disparities in discipline. The principal could offer no assurance that there was any policy for equitable disciplinary actions. There is no tracking. Some find comfort in not knowing if there really are disparities. I do not.

4. The Massachusetts Partnership for Diversity in Education exists to help districts hire more diverse school staff. Many of our nearby peer school districts have joined. We, with 96% white staff, have not. Somebody needs to work on that. Simply broadening our hiring efforts would address many of our needs with broader perspectives, without expanding funding.

I find no fault with individual leadership of our schools with regards to diversity, equity, and inclusion. I do find that they need immediate support in this area. Someone needs to drive system-wide vigilance to find gaps and solutions, so students don't fall in them. This is necessary in order to optimize the use of our tax dollars. Someone needs to ensure the promises we keep for the average student are promises we keep for all students. We have a duty to ensure that as soon as possible by passing Warrant Article #7. We should continue to volunteer our help and press the School Committee and Administration to hire the most appropriate candidate. In years to come, if the position or effort isn't quite right, we need to work to optimize it. This is our job now, and our job in years to come.

I fully support beginning this effort immediately. Vote YES on Warrant Article #7.

Sincerely,
Edward Parsons
TMM, Pct. 6