To Members of Town Meeting:

I have been asked to explain the hesitation on the part of a majority of the School Committee for Article 7. This article is sponsored by five Town Meeting members, not by the School Committee.

As a Committee we are extremely grateful for the outpouring of support for this important cause. Racism, discrimination, and inequity should have no home in Burlington. We are all committed to doing everything we can to eradicate all forms of inequity and injustice.

Far be it from a School Committee to not accept money from Town Meeting. However, members have concerns with the wording of the warrant article and the funding. The School Committee has a responsibility to do this right. Individual members want to learn what models exist and what models will likely work best in our community. We don’t want to simply imitate what a nearby community is doing without strong evidence that their model has been successful. We had planned to make this project part of the upcoming budget process.

I have heard from people who want to rush this process. While I fully understand the sense of urgency, rushing would be a mistake. Finding the right person, for the right position is the correct approach. Professionals want to work in Burlington.

Article 7 as worded, would provide a partial salary, for this year only. It does not carry forward to next year or future years. For the School Committee to be comfortable using these funds, they need to be carried forward each year, and possibly be supplemented with additional funds given our current budget insecurities.

If town meeting wants to pass Article 7 now, I would suggest amendments to allow for the funding to be added to our budget and to allow more flexibility with the title of the position. A suggested two part amendment could be as follows.

"I move that $81,000 be appropriated from (raise and appropriate) and added to the current school budget to fund the wages for a Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion position or a position under a different title that would include similar responsibilities, overseeing and promoting diversity, equity and inclusion issues; to be spent under the direction of the School Committee for FY 2021."
The way the article is written, we can only use the money this year, and after that the position is unfunded. That is a potential budget problem. Giving us flexibility in the title would enable us to choose the position we feel is the correct one.

An explanation of the article:

This warrant article was originally brought to schools as a request for School Committee to put it on the September warrant. The superintendent submitted a placeholder and quickly brought it to the School Committee for discussion. School Committee member opinions varied on the approach, the cost, and the timing, but certainly not on the importance.

Shortly after that, several Town Meeting members decided to sponsor this article on their own. We discussed the article and again found a variety of opinions. We decided not to take a vote on the article rather than send a negative vote to town meeting. To be clear, the lack of support was based on process and not substance. There is unanimous support for the substance of the article.

So what are the issues?

1. The School Committee has not yet been given the opportunity to meet with the entire Equity Committee. We have only heard from those who support this particular model to address the issues. We want to hear from all members. There has not yet been a free flowing exchange of ideas, or a discussion about various models. Do we want a director? Would we prefer a different position with someone who would work directly with children/students?

2. School Committee members were quite surprised at the high salary asked for by the sponsors. The $81,000 asked for in the warrant article is only salary for a partial year. A full year salary has been estimated at $140,000 plus benefits. (Assistant superintendent level.)

3. We are being asked at this Town Meeting to cut $350,000 from our budget due to a lack of revenue as a result of covid19. Add to that $140,000 we would need to fund this position in next year’s budget and we are at a deficit of $490,000 before we even begin budget discussions.

4. According to School Committee Counsel, the way the article is written, we would have to choose between not spending this money at all, or spending it only as dictated in the warrant article.
5. If we do decide on a Director position, the candidates will need a Director's License and may already be employed elsewhere in this capacity. In a typical scenario - Director of Special Education, Director of Early Childhood, etc - a Director would be under contract until July 1st. We hired our Director of Special Education in the spring, and she started in Burlington July 1. In other words, we could hire someone prior to July 1st, but he or she might not be able to start immediately. The Article 7 money would be raised and appropriated by the Burlington taxpayers, but not used in this fiscal year, and then not be available for the next fiscal year because of the wording of the article.

6. It has also been suggested (at Ways and Means) that this be a town wide position, with a shared salary between schools and town, similar to the Human Resources director. Should we look at this model?

This is a very unusual year. At least 20% of our students are attending school from home. We have a large number of other students home due to quarantine. Opening school this year has taken tremendous effort from many people and is causing many unforeseen expenses. Keeping schools open remains a question, as Covid positivity rates edge up. The School Committee will go forward with all the existing issues and decisions, and we will move ahead determining the best solution to deal with the discrimination and equity issues. We appreciate your support, but we request both funding and flexibility.

Our administrators and teachers work very hard to prevent inequity and take immediate steps to intervene, discipline, and teach whenever problems arise. Certainly many things happen that school leaders are not aware of. Like any community, we can do more, and we want to do more. We want our town and school community to rise above all forms of inequity, whether it be racial, religious, or relating to differences of any kind.

School Committee member concerns and hesitations on this article are purely based on finding the most effective remedy and following the correct procedures.

Sincerely,

Christine Monaco  (School Committee Chairman)

cmonaco@bpsk12.org