

## **English Department Lunch and Learn: Discussion Notes**

**December 16, 2015**

### **1) Issues of books- representation**

- Many of the books about race and oppression we read are set in the past- the 1950's and the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Where are the books about me, about my current issues? More contemporary curricula, please.
- Complex issue: How do we balance what the world wants students to know with our desire for what is contemporary and urgent, for what speaks to students? (People outside of BHS expect students to have some experience with the cultural currency of "English" and students want to be prepared for that as well.)
- Review core books more often. What purpose does a core book serve? Who has input on what gets to be a core book?
- Talk about race is usually black and white, not, for example, Dominican. When we think about "diversity"- it often means add African-American material into the curriculum. Where are non- American Blacks or other groups?
- Process of change in booklists has been slow. How do we speed it up?

### **2) Staff representation**

- Hire more black teachers. Hire more teachers of color.
- A student said "it is hard to be the only black male in a room (white classmates, white teacher)- hard to ask for help, because issues of representation get in the way. We would feel like we belong more if there were more teachers, more mentors, too, who were like me. I can imagine doing this because I see an adult like me doing this. I will try to find someone who looks like me if I want to ask for help."
- It becomes the teacher's job to make sense of the non-diverse class. Easier for the homogenous class to have discussions about race/equity when the teacher is a minority/has experiences of racism/prejudice.

### **3) Diversity of classroom and how it relates to the experience of students in the room**

- There are not enough students of color in the school to make all classrooms seem diverse
- One student: I have to be doubly smart just to be seen as smart- especially as the only student of color in a class"- too much pressure. It is challenging to be the only student of your race in a class. Another student described reading HUCK FINN in a class where there were no students of color. It didn't feel right to talk about race in an all white looking class.
- The consensus seemed to be that creating clusters of African-American students has worked well for the learning experience of those students

#### **4) What are teachers doing in the classroom aside from books?**

- Books are a starting point, but there is also an issue that conversations about race sometimes fall flat. What happens when the class is not diverse as needed (including the teacher) to be to bring experiences to the table.?
- For classes to address race and equity, discussion-based classes help more than teacher-centered classes (the teacher talking at the class). Students want more opportunities for discussion.
- Some conversations about race make people uncomfortable. We SHOULD be reading books that make people uncomfortable. There is a need to feel discomfort- it is meant to be an uncomfortable topic. If you're comfortable, you're not doing it right.

#### **5) Leveling**

- No consensus on whether a change in leveling system would enhance equity. Some said that equity was more important than challenge.
- One student said that it would be hard to de-level when students have been leveled for years before high school.
- Another student said that getting rid of levels seems like a way of saying that black students just can't handle the higher levels. Feels insulting.