



Juneteenth--"Now Work for All of Us"

by Robert Rader, Executive Director, CABE

Juneteenth is a celebration of the day, on June 19th, 1865, when United States General Gordon Granger announced, in Galveston, Texas, that all people held as slaves in Texas were liberated. African Americans have long celebrated Juneteenth celebration, a day to note their culture and achievements. Interestingly, the celebration varies from state to state and even towns and cities within each state. States closer to Texas may have celebrations that are more like the original ones. In the Hartford area, there is usually a formal gala and this year it will be a virtual gala.

Last night, the night before Juneteenth, I had the opportunity to watch a Zoom presentation, one of five, presented by the State Education Resource Center (SERC) and facilitated by Executive Director Ingrid M. Canady. This was the third of the workshops I have attended and while the first two were good, the third, this time on Distance Learning and Family Engagement: The Perspective of Communities of Color, was particularly insightful. I left the workshop having collected valuable information that Middletown Superintendent Dr. Michael Conner, discussed.

I realized as I started working on this short article that one of the best ways to celebrate Juneteenth was to focus on what I heard last night, especially from Superintendent Conner.

Juneteenth is a day to celebrate successes and at a time of focus on justice, equality and equity, what Middletown is doing seemed a perfect way to provide some best practices of board members and superintendents.

Let me summarize what Dr. Conner said:

- When the COVID crisis closed down schools, Middletown, under his direction moved first to ensure students and their families, had food and other resources, including Chromebooks, they needed to keep learning;
- The district made sure students had "access points" for staying in touch with all students. The district ensured that teachers had daily contact with all students and "meeting them where they are";
- The district is recognizing that racism is a health crisis for students. As a result, it has begun changing its policies and procedures. Its onboarding of new staff will include training on expectations as to how to deal with racial issues and these lessons are also provided on an ongoing basis for more experienced staff;

- The district is also looking at the effect of trauma on students and staff, including examining the perception of School Resource Officers.

According to Dr. Conner, Middletown is engaging in real, systemic change. He stated that districts must look at all policies, procedures, aiming at building a racism-free environment and that includes building students' social-emotional skills and mental health by focusing on personalization, especially with EL and others.

Middletown has equity coaches in all of its schools.

In Superintendent Conner's words, "this is necessary work--now work."

To me, I would hope Juneteenth should be a day when people of all colors, ethnicities and religions recognize when slavery was ended, racism was not--and. today, we must continue the work of ensuring all our students receive the education, support and empathy that they need to succeed.

This is "now work" for all of us!