Advancing Equity and Inclusion at Independent Schools: How the CIS Accreditation Process Can Support Schools in Adopting and Applying Effective Practices in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

June 2019

INTRODUCTION

The Commission on Independent Schools (CIS) of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) sponsored a climate study at a sample of CIS-accredited independent schools during the 2017/18 academic year. Enquiry Evaluation, a consultancy providing strategic DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion) solutions to K-12 schools, conducted the study, called the Institutional Climate and Inclusion Assessment or ICIA. The purpose of the study was to identify the most prevalent equity gaps at regional independent schools, learn how these schools approach institutional equity, and subsequently use this knowledge to inform a future updating of the CIS Standards for Accreditation. The ICIA – a youth perception survey geared for students in middle and high school – was conducted in the winter and spring of 2018 at five regionally accredited independent schools that voluntarily participated in the study. This paper shares key findings from the ICIA study and offers recommendations to CIS based on the results.

Overall, ICIA study findings speak to four overarching trends: (1) Equity gaps exist at independent schools and three groups – gender nonbinary students, Historically Underrepresented students[1], and students with disabilities – experience the most exclusion, (2) Schools vary in their application of DEI programming and, ostensibly, in their interpretations of "diversity" and "inclusion," (3) Students are not always clear about school policies pertaining to bullying and harassment, and (4) School experiences, feelings of inclusion, and engagement levels – particularly for nondominant groups such as racial minorities, historically marginalized groups, gender nonbinary or nonconforming students, religious minorities, socioeconomically disadvantaged students, and students with disabilities – are significantly influenced by institutional policies and practices.[2]

Given the study's findings, this paper advocates for CIS to define, clarify, and expound on the definitions of "diversity," and "inclusion" in CIS accreditation materials, including self-study guides, team visit manuals, and even the Standards for Accreditation. This paper also calls on the Commission to provide equity indicators along with other practical guidance to schools for implementing effective, evidence-backed DEI practices and for assessing institutional equity on

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[1] Due to small sample sizes (n<10) of African American or Black students, Hispanic or Latinx students, and American Indian or Alaskan Native students at some of the schools that participated in the study, these racial/ethnic groups were combined into one group – termed "Historically Underrepresented students" – to allow for a meaningful analyses that only a larger sample would yield. As these racial/ethnic groups represent historically oppressed communities in American society, the three groups were combined into one aggregate identity group for study purposes only.

[2] The study did not ask students to describe their sexual orientation as this questions was deemed too personal and premature for the age of the responding youth. Yet, LGBTQ+ students remain a significantly excluded group at schools throughout the nation. Readers are asked to note this limitation to the study's findings.

an ongoing basis. For instance, the Commission can encourage schools to develop the cultural competence of teachers so that every faculty members is highly prepared to teach a diverse classroom. Additionally, CIS can include school-based DEI experts on accreditation teams to encourage the diffusion of effective DEI practices across schools.

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE ICIA STUDY

The major trends identified from the ICIA study are as follows:

Trend 1:   Equity gaps exist at independent schools and three groups – gender nonbinary students, Historically Underrepresented students, and students with disabilities – experience the most exclusion;

Trend 2:   Schools vary in their application of DEI programming and, ostensibly, in their interpretations of "diversity" and "inclusion;"

Trend 3:   Students are not always clear about school policies pertaining to bullying and harassment; and

Trend 4:   School experiences, feelings of inclusion, and engagement levels – particularly for nondominant groups such as racial minorities, historically marginalized groups, gender nonbinary or nonconforming students, religious minorities, socioeconomically disadvantaged students, and students with disabilities – are significantly influenced by institutional policies and practices.

Each trend is explained below.

Trend 1: Equity gaps exist at independent schools and three groups – gender nonbinary students, Historically Underrepresented students, and students with disabilities – experience the most exclusion.

The ICIA study examined the experiences of nondominant (typically minority or historically marginalized) identity groups compared with dominant (typically majority or societally privileged) identity groups. In line with national trends, nondominant groups are found to perceive their schools as being less inclusive than dominant groups. Select findings are shared below to convey broader themes uncovered through the study.

GENDER GAPS

While male-female gaps exist, by far, the most pronounced gender disparity is between nonbinary students (i.e. students who identify as transgender, intersex, gender-fluid, or any other gender besides solely female or male) and their female and male peers. For instance:

- Nonbinary students are nearly twice as likely as their female and male peers to have thought about dropping out of school (22% of nonbinary students versus 12% of female students and 12% of male students).

- Nonbinary students are more than twice as likely as their female and male peers to believe that some teachers think they are not as smart as they are because of their gender (37% of nonbinary students versus 9% of female students and 14% of male students).
- More than one-quarter of nonbinary students (29%) say they have not joined an extracurricular activity that they wanted to join, such as a club or sports team, specifically on account of their gender (compared with 8% of females and 10% of males).
- Nonbinary students are more than 20% less likely as their female and male peers to think that teachers treat students of their sexual orientation fairly (62% of nonbinary students versus 87% of female students and 87% of male students).
- Nonbinary students are significantly less likely than their female and male peers to believe that their school community is caring (65% of nonbinary students versus 81% of female students and 78% of male students).
- Nonbinary students are more than 25% less likely than their female and male peers to report teachers at their school care about the students (59% of nonbinary students versus 89% of female students and 86% of male students).

RACIAL, ETHNIC, AND CULTURAL GAPS

ICIA findings show that equity gaps are prevalent along the lines of race/ethnicity, religious spiritual affiliation, national origin, and native/primary language. Among all racial, ethnic, and cultural groups, Historically Underrepresented students experience the most exclusion at school, though Asian students, international students, and religious minorities are also marginalized, and in some cases, quite significantly. For example:

- Racial/ethnic minorities – particularly Historically Underrepresented students – do not have sufficient access to teachers who share their racial/ethnic identity; only 48% of Historically Underrepresented students, 50% of Multiracial students, and 57% of Asian students report that they have had even one teacher, while attending their school, with whom they share a racial/ethnic identity.
- Asian students (28%) are the most likely racial/ethnic group to feel negatively judged at school at times because of their racial/ethnic background, followed by Multiracial students (21%), Historically Underrepresented students (19%), and then White students (8%).
- Of all racial/ethnic groups, Historically Underrepresented students (70%) least frequently believe that diversity is valued by teachers at their school, followed by Multiracial students (74%), Asian students (76%), and then White students (83%).
- Less than half of racial/ethnic minorities (including 39% of Historically Underrepresented students, 46% of Multiracial students, and 47% of Asian students) think that the lessons taught in their classes adequately reflect their racial/ethnic background, heritage, or identity.

- Of all racial/ethnic groups, Historically Underrepresented students (62%) least frequently agree that students at their school are accepting of their peers who are from different racial/ethnic backgrounds from them, followed by Multiracial students (67%), Asian students (75%), and then White students (86%).
- Racial/ethnic minorities (including 58% of Historically Underrepresented students, 48% of Multiracial students, and 61% of Asian students) are significantly more likely than White students (37%) to indicate that they would like to see more anti-bias activities at their school.
- Religious minorities are nearly twice as likely as students in the religious majority to agree with the statement, "I have to change who I am to have friends at this school" (20% of religious minorities versus 11% of students in the religious majority).
- Religious minorities are significantly less likely than their peers who represent the religious majority to agree that they feel comfortable "being me" at school (67% of religious minorities versus 83% of students in the religious majority).
- Less than three-quarters of international students (74%) feel that teachers at their school treat students of their first or primary language fairly.
- More than one-quarter of international students (29%) say that there are times when they feel negatively judged at their school because of their national origin or citizenship.

ABILITY STATUS GAPS

Significant equity gaps are observed between students with disabilities and students without disabilities.[3] According to the ICIA study:
- Students with disabilities are 21% more likely than students without disabilities to agree that they "frequently feel stressed at school" (74% of students with disabilities versus 53% of students without disabilities).
- Students with disabilities are 22% more likely than students without disabilities to say that they feel out of place at school sometimes (53% of students with disabilities versus 31% of students without disabilities).
- Students with disabilities are 15% less likely than students without disabilities to think their school community is caring (68% of students with disabilities versus 83% of students without disabilities).
- Students with disabilities are 15% less likely than students without disabilities to report that students at their school treat each other respectfully (54% of students with disabilities versus 69% of students without disabilities).

SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS GAPS

The ICIA study reveals some disparities in school experience along the lines of socioeconomic status. Note that the ICIA uses parent/guardian education level as a proxy measure for

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[3] Note that ability status information from students is self-reported and not validated by school medical or other records.

socioeconomic status or economic class. As part of the study, two identity groups were created to categorize students by socioeconomic status: the first group, representing socioeconomically privileged (SP) students, includes students who have at least one parent/guardian with a college (bachelor's) degree while the second group, socioeconomically disadvantaged (SD) students, represents those students who do not have a parent/guardian with a completed college degree. Based on the study findings:

- SD students are 14% less likely than SP students to be involved in extracurricular activities, (74% of SD students versus 88% of SP students).
- SD students are more than twice as likely as SP students to report that they have not joined a particular extracurricular activity, such as a club or sports team that they wanted to join, because their family cannot financially afford it (16% of SD students versus 7% of SP students).
- SD students are more likely than SP students to say they sometimes feel invisible in their classes (24% of SD students versus 15% of SP students).

Trend 2: School vary in their application of DEI programming and, ostensibly, in their interpretations of "diversity" and "inclusion."

Schools differ, sometimes dramatically, in their DEI programming and in the degree to which nondominant groups are included at school. Given that schools have mission statements, websites, student handbooks, and other materials that reference "diversity" and "inclusion," and based on the study's outcomes which suggest variation in school DEI practices, the presumption is that institutions do not interpret or attend to "diversity" and "inclusion" in similar ways. The points below highlight only some of the institutional variations observed.

- As a whole, 75% of students agree that their school "has diversity and inclusion programs that encourage understanding of differences;" however, at one school, only 33% of students report that their school has diversity and inclusion programs that promote understanding of differences while at another school, 82% of students say that their school has diversity and inclusion programs — *a difference of 49% in response patterns* between the two schools.
- Overall, 57% of students surveyed indicate that their school "has rules and policies for cyber/online harassment or bullying;" however, at one school, 79% of students report that their school has policies and rules for cyberbullying whereas at another school, only 49% of students have similar reports, *a 30% difference in response patterns* between the two schools.
- Altogether, 46% of Historically Underrepresented students agree with the statement, "The curriculum/lessons taught in my classes adequately reflect my racial/ethnic background, heritage, or identity;" however, at one school, only 17% of Historically Underrepresented students agree with the statement and at another school, 50% of Historically Underrepresented students feel similarly, *a difference of 33% in response patterns* between the two schools.

- Whereas 79% of students with disabilities as a whole agree with the statement, "Classes at my school are safe and comfortable environments for me," at one school, only 69% of students with disabilities agree with the statement while at another school, 93% of students with disabilities feel similarly, *a difference of 24% in response patterns* between the two schools.
- Whereas 57% of Asian students overall agree with the statement, "During my time at this school, I have had one teacher with whom I share a racial/ethnic identity;" at one school, only 45% of Asian students agree with the statement and at another school, 74% of Asian students agree with the statement, *a difference of 31% in response patterns* between the two schools.
- All in all, 79% of Historically Underrepresented students agree with the statement, "My school values multiculturalism;" however, at one school, only 63% of Historically Underrepresented students agree with the statement and at another school, 86% of Historically Underrepresented students express similar sentiments, *a difference of 22% in response patterns* between the two schools.
- Generally speaking, 60% of Historically Underrepresented students agree with the statement, "Diversity (racial, ethnic religious, gender, etc.) is valued by students at my school;" however, at one school, only 44% of Historically Underrepresented students agree with the statement while at another school, 67% of Historically Underrepresented students express similar sentiments, *a difference of 23% in response patterns* between the two schools.
- In general, 14% of Asian students agree with the statement, "I have not joined a particular extracurricular activity, such as a club or athletic team that I wanted to join," because of my primary or first language;" however, at one school, 32% of Asian students agree with the statement while at another school , just 9% of Asian students responded similarly, *a difference of 23% in response patterns* between the two schools.

In spite of following the same set of accreditation standards and indicators and despite referencing "diversity" and "inclusion" on school websites and other communications, institutions vary – sometimes drastically – in their equity statistics and, seemingly, in their definitions of "inclusion."

Trend 3: Students are not always clear about school policies pertaining to bullying and harassment.

Ideally, every student at a school should know what to do or who to go to should a bullying, harassment, or discrimination incident occur. According to the study's findings, three-quarters of students (75%) report that their school has "widely understood rules and policies for bullying, harassment, and discrimination" and 79% of students indicate that their school has policies for *reporting* bullying, harassment, or discrimination. Still, only 70% of students say they know what to do if they see another students experience bullying, harassment, or discrimination and 74% of students agree that their school head takes harassment and bullying

very seriously. Moreover, only 57% of students indicate that their school has policies for cyberbullying and 58% of students know how to report an incident involving sexual harassment.

In addition, although three-quarters of students report that their school has widely understood rules and policies for bullying, harassment, and discrimination, many students are bullied at school. ICIA results show that 16% of students say that bullying is a problem at their school and one-third of students (33%) say that students at their school have been cyberbullied. Altogether, 25% of students have seen hateful artwork, graffiti, or messages at school or online about school peers and 20% of students have witnessed at least one physical fight at school during the year. Regarding bias-based bullying, more than one-fifth of students (22%) reported having experienced impoliteness or disrespect on the basis of their appearance, 12% of students said they have experienced disrespect on the basis of their race/ethnicity, 9% of students said they have experienced impoliteness on account of their gender identity or expression, 8% of students indicated they have experienced rudeness because of socioeconomic status, and 7% of students reported that they have experienced impoliteness on account of their sexual orientation.

These findings suggest that schools need clearly, widely, and persistently communicated rules, policies, and procedures to address bullying and harassment. Moreover, schools ought to be assessing their campus climates to know the degree to which bullying takes place. This involves collecting information about bullying incidents and understanding students' perceptions of safety – both physical and psychological safety. A number of studies have found that bullied students can be negatively affected for life, developing depression, low feelings of self-worth, disengagement from school and social activities, and in some instances, showing aggression or violence toward others.

Trend 4: School experiences, feelings of inclusion, and engagement levels – particularly for nondominant groups – are significantly influenced by institutional policies and practices.

As part of the ICIA study, a statistical analysis was conducted to identify key levers of inclusion and engagement for students at independent schools. The results of this analysis show that institutional policies and practices significantly affect feelings of belonging, engagement levels, and overall experiences of students at school, particularly for nondominant groups, (including racial minorities, historically marginalized groups, gender nonbinary or nonconforming students, religious minorities, socioeconomically disadvantaged students, and students with disabilities).

According to the study's findings:

- The most significant factor associated with students' perception that diversity (racial, ethnic, religious, gender, etc.) is valued by students at their school is the belief that *teachers* value diversity at school followed by the belief that the *school administration (including the leadership)* values diversity at school (italics added). Moreover,

agreement with the following statements: "My school values multiculturalism;" "My school had diversity and inclusion activities and programs that encourage understanding of differences;" and "I am satisfied with my school's efforts to support diversity and inclusion" is closely linked with a greater likelihood that students' will believe that their peers value diversity.

- The most significant factors tied to students' agreement with the statement, "I have become more open-minded and accepting of diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural groups as a student at my school" is, simply, having learned about intercultural and global competence at school as well as having learned about ethnocentrism, cultural bias, and cultural relativism.
- Exposure to physical violence, prevalence of substance abuse on campus (illegal drugs, alcohol), lower feelings of safety, "lookism" (negative judgment based on one's appearance), and crowded classrooms and hallways are statistically associated with students' perceptions that bullying is a problem at their school.

The ICIA study disaggregated data for nondominant groups to identify drivers of inclusion and engagement for students belonging to these groups. Select findings are below.

- For nonbinary students, teacher-and classroom-related factors are closely linked with the degree to which nonbinary students show engagement in school. For instance, nonbinary students who have thought about dropping out of school are less likely to say they feel safe in their school's classrooms and more likely to believe that some teachers think they are not as smart as they are because of their gender. Nonbinary students who believe that teachers at their school care about students more frequently say: that they like their teachers; that their teachers want them to do well in school; that at least one teacher or staff member knows them pretty well; that their teachers believe in their potential to succeed; and that teachers treat students of their sexual orientation fairly.
- A mix of teacher-related, leadership-related, peer-related, and general campus environment factors are found to influence the degree of inclusion and engagement for racial/ethnic minorities, including Historically Underrepresented students. Racial/ethnic minorities who report that students at their school are accepting of their peers who are racially/ethnically different from them are more likely to find that their classes are safe and comfortable environments for them; to say they are treated fairly by teachers; and to feel that diversity is valued by teachers. Additionally, racial/ethnic minorities who want to see more anti-bias activities at school are less likely to agree that their school has diversity and inclusion activities and programs that encourage understanding of differences and less likely to say that at least one teacher or adult staff member at school knows them "pretty well."
- For students with disabilities, peer interactions and perceptions of safety are intricately tied to inclusion and engagement. Students with disabilities who agree that they are comfortable "being me" at their school are more likely to agree that: they have close friendships at school; classes are safe and comfortable environments for them; their peers are respectful at school social events; and students treat each other respectfully.

Ultimately, institutional factors, school culture, leadership practices, teacher-student relationships, feelings of physical and emotional safety, and students' learning to develop intercultural competence, are all significantly tied to inclusion and equity for diverse groups of students, including the three nondominant groups found to experience the greatest degree of exclusion at school. These results also suggest that equity and inclusion initiatives should be interlaced with all school programs and initiatives rather than treated as stand-alone efforts. In other words, equity and inclusion practices ought to overlap with leadership practices, instructional practices, extracurricular programming, athletics, health and wellness initiatives, and so on.

LEVERAGING THE ACCREDITATION PROCESS TO ENCOURAGE AND SHARE EFFECTIVE DEI PRACTICES AT INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

The Commission on Independent Schools accredits hundreds of institutions and is viewed both regionally and nationally as a driver of standards for independent schools. In conjunction with the self-study, team visit, and interim evaluations, the CIS Standards for Accreditation are widely regarded to represent the latest theory and practice at independent PK-12 schools. As such, CIS stands to generate serious momentum in promoting equity and inclusion across independent schools region-wide.

The recommendations that follow are rooted in evidence from the ICIA study and effective (or 'best') practices from the DEI field. CIS can leverage the accreditation process—from self-study to team visit—to encourage and disseminate the most impactful DEI practices. The recommendations are as follows:

Recommendation 1:	Define, clarify, and expound on the definitions of "diversity" and "inclusion" in accreditation materials.
Recommendation 2:	Support institutions with preparing teachers to be culturally competent.
Recommendation 3:	Include school-based DEI experts on accreditation visiting teams.
Recommendation 4:	Provide schools with guidance about ways to address and reduce bullying and harassment.
Recommendation 5:	Provide schools and visiting teams with equity indicators or guiding questions to inform their DEI programming.

Recommendation 1: Define, clarify, and expound on the definitions of "diversity" and "inclusion" in accreditation materials (e.g. as a supplement to the Standards, in self-study guides, team visit manuals, etc.).

The CIS Standards and Indicators direct institutions to engage in self-evaluation around matters of diversity and inclusion. While the Standards serve as an important mechanism for addressing the needs of institutions vis-à-vis diversity, equity, and inclusion, the language of the Standards

ought to be better understood by those applying those standards and advocating for their application. For example, the following indicators reference words like "diversity," "inclusive," and "multicultural," yet there is likely variation in the interpretation of these words. Meaning, although a school might recognize multiple forms of diversity, it might focus its programmatic efforts on a limited scope of that diversity.

2a (Governance):	"The governance of the school is clearly defined, understood by all constituents, and provides for…a model of inclusive behavior and integrity for the whole school community."
4f (Program):	"The program offers a variety of cultural experiences to reflect (a) the diversity of students enrolled and (b) the multicultural nature of the region, country, and world."
5l (Experience of the Students):	"The school community promotes an equitable, just, and inclusive community that inspires students to respect and value diversity and to be active and responsible citizens, and has ways to insure that this objective is met."

The Commission is to be commended for its direct encouragement to schools to insure inclusion and equity. That said, individuals – including educators – have varied understandings of what is implied by "diversity" and "inclusion." Whereas some people understand "diversity" to mean "racial difference," others interpret "diversity" to include a wider set of identity markers – say gender, race, and sexual orientation – and still others might have an even broader understanding of "diversity" to include race, culture, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, ability status, socioeconomic status, and age. Similarly, while some people define "inclusion" as having access to the same opportunities as others, regardless of any core identity marker, others view "inclusion" in more expansive terms to mean equal access to opportunities as well as psychological inclusion, such as *feeling* like one belongs and *knowing* one is valued in their community, school, and workplace.

These nuanced interpretations matter because they guide planning, programming, and the assigning of human and financial resources to DEI initiatives. A school that has a narrow interpretation of "diversity" might only concentrate its efforts on gender inclusion, or racial/ethnic group inclusion and might very well ignore the needs of students with disabilities or socioeconomically disadvantaged students. A school with a limited definition of "inclusion" might, say, implement programming and financial resources to ensure all students have equal opportunities for participation in extracurriculars, but it might not consider the impact of a Eurocentric curriculum on racial minorities or the lack of a gender-neutral bathroom for a transgender or transitioning student.

By providing schools with conceptual guidance and complete definitions of "diversity" and "inclusion," either in the Standards directly, as a supplement to the Standards, and/or in other accreditation materials, there is far greater likelihood that schools will approach diversity, equity, and inclusion in ways that (a) reflect the latest notions of what these words mean, (b) cover the comprehensive array of identity markers that actually reflect a diverse campus

population, and (c) align their own institutional definitions of these words with that of the accreditation materials.

The ICIA study reveals significant equity gaps across a *range* of identity categories – gender identity, race/ethnicity, national origin, ability status, and socioeconomic status—so it is crucial for institutions to look beyond historical notions of "diversity" to encompass the array of identity markers that impact students' experiences. The study shows that, even among a small sample of schools, inclusion and equity statistics can be dramatically different and, seemingly, reflect varied interpretations and prioritizations of "diversity" and "inclusion." More explicit and expansive language will help schools truly attend to all students' needs.

As a final point, the language of Standard 5a ought to be reinforced in self-study guides, team visit manuals, at accreditation workshops, and perhaps in other sections of the Standards and Indicators. Indicator 5a states: "The school recognizes differences within the student body such as gender, learning style or ability, race, age, ethnicity, family background, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, and religious practice, and actively responds to students' and adults' positive or negative experiences." Indicator 5a expressly directs schools to consider many forms of diversity and to *react* to information about students' experiences. This is essential guidance for schools, especially for institutions that are initiating DEI programming.

> **Recommendation 2: Support institutions with preparing teachers to be culturally competent.**

Findings from the ICIA study indicate that school administrators, faculty, and staff should receive more cultural competence training. School leaders need to support teachers to acquire cross-cultural interpersonal skills and to develop culturally responsive curricula so that faculty members are highly prepared to engage a diverse and multicultural classroom. Teachers need backing from school administrators to undertake the challenging and time-consuming work of curriculum review and updating. School leaders, likewise, need to develop their own cultural competence so that they can lead by example, understand the needs of teachers, and stay updated on the latest instructional techniques for teaching a diverse classroom.

At present, two indicators from the Standards touch on instruction for a multicultural classroom. Standard 4f states: "The program offers a variety of cultural experiences to reflect (a) the diversity of students enrolled and (b) the multicultural nature of the region, country, and world." Standard 9c states: "Academic personnel are regularly trained in the areas of skills, content, and the context of a multicultural society." The language here might be too vague for a school that really needs more culturally responsive teachers and lessons.

Studies have shown that students are more engaged in lessons when they can personally identify with the content – when the lessons provide "mirrors" (reflections of themselves) and "windows" (tangible insights into other identities and cultures which relate their own). Today, there are many consultants and firms that conduct curricular audits to review lessons for

positive depictions of diverse groups, particularly groups that are represented in the student body. Statistics from the ICIA study also make clear the need for more cultural competence training for school personnel. For instance:

- Only 39% of Historically Underrepresented students (and 29% of African American or Black students alone), 47% of Asian students, and 46% of Multiracial students agree with the statement, "The curriculum/lessons taught in my classes adequately reflect my racial/ethnic background, heritage, or identity." There is considerable variation across schools, too, with one school showing only 17% agreement with the statement among Historically Underrepresented students and another school showing 50% agreement among Historically Underrepresented students.
- Nearly one-fifth of Historically Underrepresented students (19%) believe that some teachers think they are not as smart as they because of their racial/ethnic or cultural background.
- Relative to 83% of White students, lower proportions of racial/ethnic minorities (70% of Historically Underrepresented students, 74% of Multiracial students, and 76% of Asian students) believe that teachers at their school value diversity.
- Compared to 85% of White students, lower percentages of racial/ethnic minorities (74% of Historically Underrepresented students, 76% of Multiracial students, and 76% of Asian students) think that their school administration (including the leadership) values diversity.

Schools need to spend time and focus energy examining the portrayals of racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse groups and individuals across all teaching materials. For that matter, a curricular audit should also include evaluating curricula for representations of diversity along the lines of gender and sexuality diversity and ability status. Many institutions do not recognize the importance of the curriculum review process as a critical lever of inclusion, and many teachers have not been provided the necessary training, support, or time that they need to conduct a comprehensive review.

> **Recommendation 3: Include school-based DEI experts on accreditation visiting teams.**

There has been an exponential increase in the number of DEI Directors (sometimes called Diversity Directors, Directors of Community Relations, Deans of Equity and Inclusion, among other similar titles) hired at independent schools in the last few years. Ordinarily, DEI Directors are senior-level administrators who work with various stakeholders, including students, faculty, administrators, staff, Boards, and alumni, giving them a real 'pulse' on the institution. DEI Directors lead DEI initiatives, set appropriate DEI goals, onboard constituencies to new ideas and practices from the DEI field, and are well-versed in equity and inclusion terminology.

DEI Directors have substantial training and expertise in running DEI workshops, in establishing student and faculty/staff affinity groups, and with providing colleagues with guidance on methods to engage and include students from diverse identity groups. Any accreditation team

will benefit from the specialized knowledge and experience that a DEI Director can offer during a team visit. Most crucially, having DEI Directors on visiting teams will encourage the diffusion of effective DEI practices in DEI across regional independent schools.

> **Recommendation 4: Provide schools with guidance about ways to address and reduce bullying and harassment.**

The CIS Standards and Indicators do not explicitly reference "bullying," "harassment," or "discrimination." Yet, these are serious problems at schools, as evidenced in aforementioned statistics. Although three-quarters of students (75%) indicate that their school has widely understood rules and policies for harassment, bullying, and discrimination, incidences of bullying remain too common. Additionally, many schools do not collect data on bullying so they do not know, in hard quantitative terms, if the problem is improving or worsening.

Many schools that participated in the ICIA study received a recommendation to implement an incident reporting system, similar to what many postsecondary institutions have. An incident reporting system allows students (and adults) to anonymously provide information to administrators about bias or bullying occurrences at school or cyberbullying events that affect students at school. Incident reporting systems are inexpensive, simple to implement, and offer one way to obtain information about the degree and kinds of bullying and bias incidents that take place on campus. Schools can also form incident review committees, evaluate themselves against school climate indicators, engage in anti-bullying initiatives, and emphasize their policies through Parents Nights, orientation activities, advisory meetings, and assemblies. The point is, the omission of language, guidance, or methods for schools to address and reduce bullying makes it harder for them to confront bullying in a way that prevents or decreases it.

> **Recommendation 5: Provide schools and visiting teams with equity indicators or guiding questions to inform their DEI programming.**

While schools differ in mission, culture, and demographics, they generally all share a desire to strengthen equity and inclusion at their institutions. The issue, however, is that assessing the present state of equity and inclusion, setting goals, and then measuring progress toward those goals is difficult without indicators of equity and inclusion. Simply put, institutions should collect information on campus equity and inclusion and they will benefit tremendously from having progress indicators to guide them. A sample of guiding questions is on page 15.

A set of indicators or guiding questions will help institutions meet indicators 5d, 5e, 5k, and 5l in Standard 5 (Experience of the Students). The indicators state:

5d:	"There is a procedure in place to assess and report on how individual students are meeting the goals of program with regard to both personal and academic growth."

5e:	"There is a procedure in place to see how the school's program needs to change to reflect the diversity of cultural experiences and to identify adults and/or students who will need additional support to function in a pluralistic environment."
5k	"Information is systematically gathered regarding students' experience at the school and is used to inform program planning."
5l:	The school promotes an equitable, just, and inclusive community that inspires students to respect and value diversity and to be active and responsible citizens, and has ways to ensure that this objective is met."

The onus is on individual institutions to work toward accomplishing their missions. Still, the role of the Commission in driving equity and inclusion through the accreditation process ought not be underestimated. The accreditation process works, and a big reason for this is the continuous exchange of effective practices across institutions and among educators. There is an opportunity here to stimulate social progress through our educational institutions and to move vigorously toward an equitable society where diversity, in its many manifestations, is valued and where individuals are honored and respected regardless of their identity markers.

The CIS Standards for Accreditation are, arguably, the most influential set of guidelines for New England independent schools. Many independent schools are at a critical inflection point – a moment when school leaders are thinking seriously about actions and plans needed to foster campus inclusion and a time when broader demographic and social changes are forcing attention to matters of equity and social justice. The Commission is uniquely positioned to meaningfully support schools in their efforts to promote equity and to accelerate the diffusion of effective DEI practices across independent schools in the region.

Sample Guiding Questions for Schools

1. How is the school assessing and monitoring equity and inclusion?
2. Does the school have a documented DEI plan, such as a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Strategic Plan?
3. Does the school's website communicate its stance on diversity, equity, and inclusion?
4. Do the school's administrative leaders receive training on equitable leadership practices, equitable hiring practices, and inclusive team leadership?
5. Does the school have affinity groups for students? For faculty/staff? For parents?
6. Is there a curriculum review or audit process? What does that process look like?
7. Does the curriculum review process include evaluating content for cultural relevance for students of diverse backgrounds and life experiences?
8. How is the school assessing the experience of international students? Are there quantitative measures in place?
9. How is the school assessing the experience of students with disabilities?
10. Does the school have gender-neutral bathrooms available for transgender or transitioning students?
11. Are parents aware of the school's bullying policies? Are these policies communicated in writing? How often are the communicated?
12. How does the school address bullying, teasing, and harassment? Are there protocols and procedures in place and are students well aware of these protocols?
13. Does the school have an incident or bias incident reporting or data collection system?
14. Are diverse identity groups represented in extracurricular activities? Are any identity groups showing noticeably lower rates of extracurricular participation?
15. Are expenses associated with extracurricular participation or sports teams prohibitively high for some students? Are there participation user fees?
16. Are school communications (notices, etc.) available in parents' primary languages?
17. What kinds of resources are available for LGBTQ+ youth?
18. Does the school have DEI leadership (a Director of DEI, a DEI committee, etc.)?
19. Does the school systematically collect information that allows decision makers to know if they are meeting or moving toward their equity goals?
20. Does the school conduct exit interviews with faculty who resign from their positions?
21. Do students have exposure to other cultures that are different from their own (e.g. through trips, visitors, guest speakers, exchange students, service projects, etc.)?
22. What percentage of teachers and staff receive cultural competence training? How often is this training? Is training accessed through a self-selection process or is it mandatory?
23. Does the school have an advisory system?
24. What kind of social-emotional counseling is available to students?
25. Do students learn about global competence, intercultural awareness, and/or cultural bias at any point while attending their school?