Objectives: The Scarsdale Schools launched an intensive “learning and listening year” to study areas for potential improvement in Diversity, Equity & Inclusion and new New York State Culturally Responsive Sustaining Education Framework initiatives. The overall objectives were two-fold: one, to improve the culture of equity and inclusion in the learning community, and two, to educate the public about the efforts ongoing in the school community, and how they might differ from popular narratives of such programs.

Research: The District has maintained Compact Committees on the building and District level, to help ensure work is ongoing towards achieving the District’s mission: to sponsor each student’s full development, enabling them to be effective and independent contributors in a democratic society and an interdependent world. The building teams feature teachers, administrators, support staff and students and parents. The District committee is composed of representatives from the various building teams, along with District administrators and parents. At the behest of the school board, the building committees were charged with researching and developing DEI/CRS goals for the 2021–2022 school year, which the District committee implemented into their year-long learning plan as well as the Strategic Plan for 2022–2025. The State’s Culturally Responsive Sustaining Education Framework was used as the critical lens through which the District examined practices, resources and scope to inform its inclusivity and enrichment. Each building conducted faculty surveys, constituent focus groups, and roundtables. This work included student voices in the middle and high school level. After nearly a year of this work, building committees presented their goals to the District committee by level to inform the plan for 2021–2022.

Extensive research was also conducted for building-level and District-level consultants, and who might best understand and work to improve an inclusive educational culture.
Plan: With this background in mind, a plan was developed for a year of intensive self-examination and parallel growth. The Scarsdale Teachers Institute, which offers a full range of beginning to advanced professional development courses, was tasked with implementing DEI-related courses to improve faculty knowledge, awareness and understanding. At the building level, faculty were also tasked with creating courses, activities and opportunities for improvement. Funds were made available to the STI and Center for Innovation for faculty grants to help ensure successful implementation of these goals.

Implementation: On the elementary level, there was a strong focus on libraries, with a significant increase of books focusing on multiple perspectives and cultures both in school libraries and in classroom libraries to ensure ‘fingertip access’ to all students. This was achieved in partnership with Columbia University’s Teachers College to help enrich the diversity of text resources. Many of these books had a strong focus on various individual identities, to tie into the age-appropriate personal identity curriculum. A number of “One Book, One School” events took place, with themes of acceptance and belonging, along with regular special recognition events to provide information and context around significant cultural events throughout the year. Several schools read Dictionary for a Better World together, with the entire school community pondering the book’s daily quotes and lessons. Following completion of the book, virtual visits with the book’s authors took place, allowing students to ask questions and develop deeper understandings of the book’s message. The renewed focus on diversity and acceptance also led to lessons about individual cultural celebrations, holidays and traditions, often led by students themselves or their parents as special virtual and in-person guests.

Nearly every classroom implemented curricula focussed on celebrating identity, allowing students to learn more about each other as they learned about themselves, and how identities shape individuals.
On the Middle School level, a school-wide character-building curriculum was deployed, using the structure of CORE to support team building and belonging. A daily keystone program was developed, complemented by the daily school news broadcast, to help rebuild a close sense of community and shared focus on growth and inclusion. As with the elementary level, there was a significant focus and funding behind the expansion of available texts with multiple perspectives. A collaboration with Level Up Village enabled students to partner on academic projects with students in countries around the world. A partnership with Prospector Theater celebrated the abilities of differently-abled employees and students. A school-wide Human Rights Day exposed students to a variety of cultures and perspectives they may not have otherwise experienced, allowing them to learn about issues and challenges in communities other than their own. A partnership between a classroom English teacher and school librarian led to the creation of an afterschool Social Justice Book Club, with dozens of students choosing to participate. Faculty and building administrators also formed several book circles to read and share relevant titles.

At the High School Level, a school-wide Global Citizenship Day event enabled students to learn about and from people around the world, and understand social justice and environmental issues through over 40 different special sessions and speakers. Faculty implemented intensive text analysis and ELA pilots to find areas of improvement and expansion. Students were regularly surveyed and asked to participate in various committees to ensure work was on track and relevant to student needs and interests.

A founding partnership with The Global Learning Alliance has enabled students across grades and subject areas to study with students from other countries and demographics, as well as with universities overseas.
At the center of the GLA work was a student research project. After choosing and sharing texts on the theme of belonging from their native countries, students from founding districts worked in small internationally diverse teams to research and present on currently marginalized groups of people. Five presentations were given to the GLA participants and students were asked questions about their process and their findings. The yearlong project culminated in a three-day virtual summit. On the first day, the educators talked through the three stories chosen by our students, connected by the theme of Belonging and Identity and considered key quotes and passages. The second day was dedicated to the project described. On the final day the GLA Board took time to connect about their experiences in education across five different countries. They identified four areas to focus on: Planning a Student Project for the following year; Research Study on the 2021 Student Project; Newsletter with ongoing collaborations and updates; and Planning a Global Education Online Course.

On the District level, consultants were retained to work with faculty and administrators on subjects such as implicit bias and blindness, and to frankly evaluate curriculum and culture for areas of improvement. Over the summer, administrators, the school board and building leadership read The Person You Mean to Be by Dolly Chugh to help challenge and improve mindset for the coming year.

A comprehensive website was constructed to transparently share this work with the community, from sharing relevant Board policies in an easy-to-read format, to sharing adopted texts and those under consideration. A number of relevant classroom activities were also highlighted and shared to the page as they occurred.
Evaluate: The listening and learning year has enjoyed an enormous level of buy-in and support. Over 400 new titles have been added to libraries District-wide, and librarians have built lessons around and made a point of recommending their new books, which are in popular circulation among students. The Scarsdale Teachers Institute developed nearly 30 courses on related topics, which faculty attended on evenings, weekends and during the summer. Work is already underway to expand The Human Rights Day and Global Citizenship Day events at the middle and high school levels into multi-day events, and the high school has added Non-Sibi day, as a student-lead environmental and human rights initiative. Schoolwide culture surveys conducted at the middle and high school levels show significant increases in student-reported feelings of comfort, acceptance and a welcoming atmosphere. Students also report feeling greater autonomy and voice in creating the culture in their schools.

The initiative has also enjoyed significant buy-in from school Parent Teacher Associations, which have independently sponsored their own book clubs, webinars and private gatherings to learn and explore related topics with each other. They have also used their individual weekly newsletters as vehicles to educate parents about celebrations and holidays throughout the year, beyond that which the District is doing.

Most importantly, the success of the initiative can be measured in how deeply ingrained in the culture inclusivity and equity have become. Teachers’ lessons are no longer labeled as DEI-focused: the inclusion of multiple perspectives, identities and experiences now occurs as a matter of course, rather than the result of a specific event. Faculty report an increased sense of community within their own schools and across the District. The initiative has enjoyed such success, the District Compact Committee recently voted to continue it through the 2022-2023 school year and beyond.