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Loudoun County Public Schools, Equity Committee Meeting, Thursday, April 3, 2025

Date Thursday, April 3, 2025
Place LCPS Administration Building / School Board Room, Ashburn, Virginia
Length 1h 12m (video)

- Official meeting video (Vimeo / LCPS-TV): <https://player.vimeo.com/video/1072342128?rel=0>

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[00:00:02] Good afternoon. It is 530, and we will call the meeting of the Equity Committee for April 3rd to order. As you came into the room, you were given an index card and a pencil.

[00:00:22] So as you come up with some thoughts or questions, feel free to write them on those index cards, and we will collect them and bring them up to the front to be addressed. But first, we have public comment. There's not a sheet, but is there anyone who would like to give public comment?

[00:00:54] Okay, and again, for our minutes, we have minutes from the February 6th meeting. However, when I am the only school board member present, we don't vote on those minutes.

[00:01:11] So those minutes will be voted on at our May meeting. And may I share with you that in our May meeting, we will ask for anyone who can give me some support in planning an event for Jewish Heritage Month.

[00:01:31] So I would need your help, members of the committee. So you did receive the minutes by way of email, but we will not vote on them because of the absence of the other two school board members.

[00:01:46] So I welcome you to the April meeting of the Equity Committee. What I'd like to do before we go to our panel is to ask you to take a look at the sheet that was given to you as you came in.

[00:02:07] That is Subcommittee Results 2025. Remember, we had two subcommittees. One was to address policies and one was to address the charter. What I have passed out to you are the results of those two subcommittees.

[00:02:33] And while, again, we can't vote tonight because we don't have another school board member present, we will at some point ask you to vote on supporting or denying those two subcommittee reports.

[00:02:50] And I think that we probably would do that electronically before our next meeting, so our next meeting will know which direction to take. One of the things that the Subcommittee on Policies has done is the policies that Helen Randolph passes out or sends out to you every month, they have been consistent in going through those policies and giving feedback.

[00:03:24] And that feedback goes to the school board committee from whom that policy originated. So the SBAC committee and all of those committees have said to me, oh, Linda, thanks. We got another eye on the policies.

[00:03:40] Because we always get feedback from SEAC, and we always get feedback from a couple of people in the general public. But having feedback from the equity committee makes those committees feel more confident in moving forward with the policy as they have rewritten it or as they have added or deleted from it.

[00:04:04] So policy committee, please keep doing that until we get around to creating the new charter. Please continue to do that. And the subcommittee on the charter, if you see here, this subcommittee has indicated that because now we have a full DEIA department, that maybe the equity committee is not needed.

[00:04:28] however neither can a subcommittee or a committee suspend a school board committee or dissolve a school board committee that has been created by the school board so until we can vote on this and take it to the full board we will continue to have equity committee meetings and if you'll put it on your calendar the first thursday of each month the first thursday of may and the first thursday of June and then we have a recess in July and we start back again in August and then new members

[00:05:07] of course will be nominated and approved for the new calendar year beginning in January according to the the way the policy is written. If you have any additional motions that you would like to add to the sheet that I've given you please feel free to send that information to Helen or to me. Helen will send it to me, and I will send it to Helen. So if you have any other thoughts, and I have had

[00:05:42] some thoughts with you here today before the meeting, please send those thoughts so that we can entertain those thoughts at the same time that we take a vote on the results.

[00:06:00] Having any questions or thoughts? Yes, ma'am. There are plenty of these sheets, if you feel free to write it at the bottom of this sheet.

[00:06:27] Oh, if there are any thoughts, yes, we can receive them today.

[00:07:15] Because we're recording, I'm sorry, can you repeat it? I'm so sorry. Sorry about that. No, I'll shorten it. So I was essentially saying that one of the rationales of the charter subcommittee to dissolve this equity committee is because there is a DEI board or department for Loudoun County Public Schools.

[00:07:35] And so my question was, how is that different from there being a special education department and still having a SEAC committee of stakeholders or a gifted department and still having a gifted

committee of stakeholders, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. The second question is, it sounds as if the policy committee has been busy.

[00:07:53] And so one other third potential motion would be for this committee to take on the role of what the policy subcommittee is doing. That could be the purpose of us meeting, going through the policies, and there may not be a need for a separate subcommittee to do that.

[00:08:09] We're convening we can go through those policies together and put forth an equity committee recommendation for those policies, which I think several of us was assuming that was going to be our role anyways. Once we get a quorum so that we can vote yes to the subcommittee's recommendation, yes.

[00:08:30] it would be an entire committee's responsibility. For an example, you'll have to help me. In SEAC, they take the policies and they bring them to the full committee. Right. Okay. Yes, it would work the same way. And because we have not done that heretofore, we will have to vote and then get to that point of bringing it to the whole committee. Yeah. So as Dr. Deans just mentioned, so what are the reasons sometimes that we do that in subcommittee and then bring it to the full committee

[00:09:10] to have additional discussion about the policy recommendations is that a lot of times we're going into like the law and the the legal references and gathering all that stuff which takes outside research to do and so forth and then we bring it to the full committee and the full committee has a full discussion about the policy so it's not sort of presented as this is the recommendation it's just hey we've done all the research as a subcommittee here's all the information we discuss it as a full committee and then the full committee is what actually submits the recommendations to the school board so it would always sort of pass through that filter and the only reason to have that subcommittee would be to be able to do that

[00:09:47] outside research and gather all the supporting information and documentation and those kind of things um and dr deans i i know that you said we can submit motions um to you and to helen which i certainly plan to do but one of those motions would be is i would like a vote count from that subcommittee on that particular issue that they raised. Okay, thank you. Another discussion point,

[00:10:23] I'm pretty, I'm very concerned about the quorum that's going to be needed to vote. It's been difficult over the last, I'm a charter member of this equity committee, and it's been difficult, I think, over the last two years to establish a quorum. Why? It's because we became so large. We almost doubled in size and I don't know if there was anything in the charter or the rules that said you had to attend or you're gone or something like that but as you see there are many members of the equity committee that haven't attended

[00:10:58] one meeting since their appointment so I'm before we go to vote I think we need to review the current list of equity committee members and if they have not been in attendance that they should not count against the quorum. Jury, you would have that attendance information right for me? Okay. And in response to your question, there were three subcommittee members who met two different times to make that decision or make that recommendation.

[00:11:37] On the charter, there were only three people who came in to meet. Any other? Not adding anything substantial just to make a note i've been here since the ad hoc committee was prepared i think we have a rule where a member misses two meetings then he's not in the committee again so there's been

a policy i don't know if it's been affected and i think uh majority of the both the planning and as for the other committee they met but those notes were not exchanged with other people so they

[00:12:13] don't know what was going on until today so there's a little bit of vacuum in the communication i i believe any other feedback i just had to walk closer to hear what he was saying any other

[00:12:45] feedback thoughts job and you're doing a great job thank you yes does that deserve do i deserve a sneaker bar that's my husband right there tell him to buy me a sneaker bar i just have an open question so i heard on the news today that every school district in the country had 10 days to

[00:13:18] sign something that says they have eliminated DEI efforts DEIA efforts I'm wondering because we do have a member of our diversity and equity committee here is the commitment to still stand strong in that in Loudoun County Public Schools commitment to DEIA and if federal funds are pulled is the Loudoun County's government willing to step in to fill that that lack of funding I'm hearing that they are but are we not signing that letter and are we still committed to

[00:13:56] our diversity equity and inclusion efforts so miss Burke thank you for the question I think in real time as we're getting information on a consistent basis about certain aspects of what the federal government will do in in light of of school divisions or school systems that still have DEIA programs, the one thing that we do always have to remember is that we need to define what they mean by DEI programs

[00:14:31] and related or correlated to what our current school division deems as DEIA programs. That's the first thing. And then secondly, we are very fortunate to have a superintendent that's committed to maintaining a DEIA department division and the work that takes place from the entire school division.

[00:14:59] It's not just this one department or division. I want to make sure everybody understands that, that it's not just this one division that's doing this work. It is a concerted effort. And we have foundational documents that really speak to our commitment to equity as a school division for all students, right?

[00:15:19] And so I think that that's another thing to keep in mind. As these things roll out, there could be a response. And so I would say just stay tuned to what our communications department may do. I know Dr. Bergen and the cabinet and the superintendent are always speaking about these things.

[00:15:37] So just stay tuned. But as of today, reading that same information in real time, that would be the response that I would be able to share with you right now. And if I can repeat something that the superintendent said, he said that we get such a small percentage directly from the federal government that we should be okay if it comes to that.

[00:16:02] Okay, any other input that we can put in the minutes? Okay, tonight we have a panel that is going to give you some information on Arab Heritage Appreciation Month.

[00:16:28] And then you may have some questions from their presentation. And if so, then we would be happy to pass the mic and get additional questions. You do have index cards you can write your questions on, but if you would like to do it by way of the microphone, we can do that as well.

[00:16:56] - Thank you, Dr. Deans. Thank you, Dr. Bergen. Thank you, Loudoun County School Board and administration. Thank you, Dr. Shahid Muhammad, for everything that you all do. We really appreciate it. We also want to thank you all for recognizing Arab American Heritage Month, and advocating for that as well.

[00:17:17] Arab Americans have played a vital role in contributing to the American culture and way of life. For example, this iPhone that I'm holding, I'm kind of reading some of my notes from. This is created by Apple, and the founder, one of the co-founders of Apple, Steve Jobs, his father was from Syria, I should say, so that makes him an Arab American.

[00:17:38] Another, for example, Henry Ford, who built Ford Motor Company, the employees that he used, they were from Yemen and also from Lebanon as well. So when you look at the early Ford cars, they were built by immigrants from Yemen and Lebanon.

[00:17:58] So these are just examples of the fabric that Arab Americans were able to woven themselves into something called Americana for the most part. Arab Americans have been in the United States, they say since the early or late 19th century.

[00:18:16] They came in, or initially they came in as laborers and farmers. They mainly settled in the Midwest and in the Northeast. The oldest mosque in the United States happens to be in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. And there's a huge amount of Arab American community in Durham, Michigan today that stretches four or five generations now.

[00:18:41] The reason why they came here, like any other immigrant, they came here to seek new opportunities from wherever they were. This is a land of opportunities, so we're a melting pot of immigrants from different parts of the world.

[00:18:59] Like most immigrants, I mean, there were successful stories. There were also things that were not so nice as well. I mean, when they came here, like all other immigrants, they experienced xenophobia, they experienced discrimination and suppression due to their ethnic background or language barrier.

[00:19:17] Nonetheless, they left an everlasting mark to this day. So with me, I've got two presenters here who are going to speak for about 15 minutes. Ms. Ben-Anne Malkawi, she's an Arab American educator, researcher in the field of Middle East and Islamic studies.

[00:19:35] She currently teaches and instructs for the US government. She's a proud parent and a student at LCPS. She's a MSAC delegate and chair of the Loudoun chapter of the Arab American Anti-Discrimination Committee. And also with her cohort is Samantha Zaboli.

[00:19:54] She's an Arab American executive director of a local nonprofit that advocates for immigrants and labor justice. She's a former LCPS student and a now a proud mom. And I'll give it to Banan. Oh, Samantha will go first? Okay. Hello, everybody.

[00:20:12] Do you want me to stand up? Is that better? Whatever's easy. I can stand. Hello, everyone. Thank you for the introduction, Farhan.

[00:20:29] Thank you all for having us here. My name is Samantha Zaboli. As you just heard, I am a Palestinian-Iranian-American. And my heritage, although they are distinct, Palestinian and Iranian, have a lot of overlaps in the experience.

[00:20:47] But today I'm here as an Arab-American, and my Arab lineage started here. The Arab-American lineage of my family started here in the 1920s. In the 1920s, my great-grandfather and grandmother came, and my great-grandfather served in the army here.

[00:21:06] Unfortunately, at the time, medical advancements were not that great, so he died at an early age due to pneumonia, and is buried in Arlington Cemetery. At the time, my grandmother was pregnant,

and she had two toddlers. So due to her traditional upbringing in the Christian faith, she decided to go back home.

[00:21:30] So she took her four-year-old, her two-year-old, and her soon-to-be-born child back home, where they were raised until my grandfather turned 16. And he decided to come back. He was an American citizen, after all. And he came back with his brother, who was 14, the two of them alone, and went after the American dream.

[00:21:52] They started washing rugs in Mount Vernon Avenue in Alexandria, and established a business that is still around today. And my grandmother came in the 1960s. She came as a young adult, soon married my grandfather, and had three children, one of which is my mother.

[00:22:13] My mother was born, my grandmother had only been here for 18 months, so she did not speak English. my mother's first language was Arabic. When she went to school, she was so surprised because she did not speak English.

[00:22:31] And at the time, in the 70s, early 70s, it was not a very friendly environment for someone who didn't speak English. So because she's typically a shy person, she did not speak at school until third grade.

[00:22:48] And that stayed with her and that caused a block for her with the language of Arabic. So she lost her Arabic, she never taught us Arabic, and it's something that I really, it hurts me. Like, I know it hurts her, but it hurts me, right?

[00:23:04] Because it never got to us. But having said that, I don't want to say that heritage is only a language, right? Because my Arab heritage is much more than knowing Arabic. I consider myself an Arab American because the food that I eat tells a story of where I'm from.

[00:23:26] The songs that I sing and the stories that I read to my children are all stories that came from my family. And each one of us kind of have that story, right? What we're exposed to as children then influences who we are in our lives.

[00:23:42] And even now that I'm trying to plant a garden, I'm failing, but the plants that I choose come from the heritage of the food that we make. So I just wanted to highlight that and talk a little bit more about what that was like for me as an LCPS student.

[00:24:02] I never volunteered the information of who I was, right? I just went to school. If someone asked, like, "Hey, you speak Spanish?" No. And then if it ever did come up who I was, they'd say, "Oh, terrorist."

[00:24:21] And so I didn't really offer that information. One time, I remember I said it, and they said, oh, really? You don't look like a sand N-word. It was a lot for me to grow up in the schools with this identity and with this heritage.

[00:24:43] And for me, it really shaped who I am today and also the path that I chose. I then went on to study. I graduated from Virginia Tech, and I studied international politics and policies global development. I learned a lot about the world and about myself and about the cultures that I came from and other cultures around the world and that continued to influence who I am. But going a little bit further back I just want to say also I forgot to send it to Farhan so I'm sorry but I am an MSAC

[00:25:19] delegate as well. I also serve on the Arab American yeah committee and I do a lot of things I serve on my son's PTA and all of this involvement in the community is what I learned through my family

because my family I was always committed to service into their community as you heard my great grandfather served this country in the in the army my grandfather did as well and in addition to that my grandfather is actually a living legend in Alexandria

[00:25:53] and Alexandria Living Legend, for helping to set up the emergency responses at the time, and he dedicated his life to the Lions Club, helping with vision and hearing screening for children because my family also has a lineage of deafness, hard of hearing. So he believed that each child should have the opportunity to be identified with these things and given the support that they need and most of all I'd like to highlight that my family was very religious

[00:26:29] my family comes from one of the first Christians from the original Christian Christians and my family is Melkite Melkite is kind of the a church in between the Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church it's actually in union with Rome but the mass itself is more like the Orthodox mass and And we have a Malachite church here in Virginia.

[00:26:56] It's actually in Tyson's in McLean, right by Tyson's Corner. And my grandfather actually founded that church. So that's a little bit about me and my heritage. And so with that, I am going to pass it over to Banan to talk a little bit more about hers.

[00:27:27] Thank you, Samantha. Thank you, Farhan. Thank you to the equity committee for inviting us. It is a true honor, especially on Arab American Heritage Month. As you know, April has been declared Arab American Heritage Month for at least three, four years in Virginia, and by the federal government, the State Department, and the White House declaring, celebrating Arab American Heritage Month every year in April.

[00:27:52] To kind of juxtapose with Samantha's story, I have a very different experience as an Arab American. a first generation Arab American. I am Muslim. I grew up in Jordan. My family is still back home in Jordan. We came here in the good days of the late 90s. And as soon, I went into high school right down the street in Herndon. And as soon as I began adjusting, 9-11 happens. And the repercussions of 9-11 to the Arab American and Muslim American community put me up front and

[00:28:31] center with how I identify, how my family identifies, how we understand our immigrant story in America. The stereotypical experience of what an Arab American would look like, laborers or farmers or 7-Eleven owners or cab drivers, and I didn't understand it because my father was a scholar. My father was a university professor who taught scholars from all over the world. I grew up in a very academic household. My mom's a linguist. My mom wore the hijab

[00:29:08] and she was an older lady. So when I would walk around with her, people would just assume she wouldn't understand English. But she was a linguist and she knew better English than most Americans at the time. And so it was hard for me as a young adult or even a young high school student to understand how people perceived me and how people perceived my parents as well. And now here I am with a student in elementary school and I'm raising a second generation Arab American in LCPS schools who will be having a very different experience than mine.

[00:29:45] And so to kind of show just the different diversity of what we understand when we say Arab Americans, Arab as an identity are people who trace their heritage and their lineage to one of 22 Arabic-speaking countries, including countries like Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Oman, Morocco, and North Africa, the Levant, and the Gulf, including the Horn of Africa, Somalia, Djibouti, Sudan, and Egypt.

[00:30:16] We differentiate that from what Middle Eastern is, because that includes Middle East, North Africa, the Arab world, including other countries such as Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, and sometimes Pakistan, which really expands the concept of ethnicities that are within this kind of fabric of identities that we look at when we talk about Arab and we talk about Middle Eastern.

[00:30:42] When it comes to religion, the number of Arab Americans is hard to determine and I'll give an example of exactly why. But the estimates say they exceed about 4 million, with over 85% of them being U.S. citizens.

[00:30:58] And a lot of the newer immigrants are still in the process of legal migration, must I denote. When it comes to religion, a fun fact is that the overwhelming majority of Arab-Americans are actually Christian, exhibit A. They're around 65% of them are Christians from different denominations, and really only about 25% of them are Muslims.

[00:31:22] So when you meet an Arab and you just assume you're going to say Eid Mubarak last week, there is about two to three times chance that they do not celebrate Eid last week, but they're probably going through Lent as we speak right now. And so these demographics are likely to change, especially with the changing demographics of immigration patterns.

[00:31:44] In the last 10 to 15 years, immigration patterns tend to follow conditions on the ground in the world scene, the patterns of origins, what countries they come from, and the purposes of migration, and the reasons for population movements.

[00:32:02] So while early migrants came in search of economic stability or opportunities in the early 20th century, newer migrants, a lot of them immigrants, tended to come as a result of running away from wars or are facing persecution in their homelands or as direct result of US intervention in the region as well.

[00:32:27] But then we talk about American Heritage Month and we say what are the contributions of Arab Americans or Arabs to the world? I'm gonna share a little irony here, is that we very commonly talk about the iPhone and we talk about Arab contribution to world civilization, mathematics and arithmetics and algebra and everything that starts with Al, right?

[00:32:49] Algebra, alcohol, all of these started with, which is the definition, right? Alchemy and all of that. Numbers, the Arabic numerals, the R of our students study in school, the invention of the zero.

[00:33:05] and then the contributions to medicine, that while Europe was drowning in plagues and diseases, the Arabs introduced hygiene, introduced the circulatory system and advancements to medicine, and astronomy and chemistry, and all the beautiful things that we can all Google.

[00:33:23] The father of sociology, Ibn Khaldun, the father of philosophy, Ibn Rushd, and medicine with Ibn Sina, all of these were Arab contributions to world civilizations. But the irony today is that when we talk about contributions in mathematics, what is missing is when it comes to Arab Americans and Arab American heritage, there is an absence or an exclusion or an erasure of Arab American numbers in the American fabric. We do not know how many Arab Americans are in America because we are erased from the census. We are erased from data, we are erased from statistics. How? When we ask how many

[00:34:02] Arab Americans served in Congress, for example, through the last 100 years, you You cannot find that data because every Arab American that has served in Congress had to identify as white under the U.S. census categorization, racial categorization.

[00:34:17] So even when last year I emailed Mr. Shahid back there and I said how many Arab American students are in LCPS? The answer is we don't know because they identify as white. So racial category is one of the first means of, you can call it exclusion, you can call absence but it's really at the end of the day it is an erasure of a whole community and a heritage of a whole community that is a very strong community within within America. So notable members of communities such as James Abourez who's the first Arab American senator in the US Congress is not there

[00:34:54] but even today Rashida Tlaib when you think about or Ilhan Omar who's Somali American Rashida Tlaib who's Palestinian American who are serving currently in Congress are actually identified as white. But when we look at them as strong women of color, we do not look at them as white American congresswomen. So when it comes to who are the Arab Americans, we can talk about individual contributions to arts and technology and all of that. But we unfortunately cannot really put a number or an estimate or a measure to the

[00:35:33] contributions of Arab American scientists, of Arab American physicians and politicians, the poets and the authors, the comedians, the artists, the athletes, the Arab American educators, the the NASA scientists. We don't have that that statistic readily available because even in LCPS surveys every at the end of the year. We just filled out the survey for how's our schools doing. At the end of the survey asks us,

[00:36:05] how do you identify? So the choices, American Indian, Alaskan Native, Asian, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, Native Hawaiian Pacific Islander, white, two or more races, races, or prefer not to say. I prefer to say, but I don't have a place to say it. I prefer for my daughter to identify herself as Arab American, as Middle Eastern American, but she doesn't have a button to click.

[00:36:38] So even today in LCPS, even though in 2024 the U.S. Census updated with the Office of Management and Budget that the U.S. government will start introducing the new category, the MENA category, Middle East and North African category, we're still yet to see school systems and, of course, hopefully what remains the Department of Education to introduce the new category in their data.

[00:37:05] So we can disaggregate some of that information, at least begin from 2025, to have at least some kind of archives of how many Arab students do we have in Loudoun County, which makes, again, the last point that I will make real quick, is that which makes it really hard to even understand the experience of Arab American students at LCPS, for example, or any of our school districts. Because when we look at the equity report at the end of the year, and they say, you know, there are racial incidents that are happening. There's increased rates of discrimination against students, but if we disaggregate the data by racial category, we cannot

[00:37:41] define whether Arab students are facing discrimination or not. Is there an increased rate? Is there a decrease? Which would be great if there's a decrease in racial incident or incidents of discrimination, bias, exclusion, xenophobia against Muslim students versus Arab students and defining some of these intersectionalities that a lot of our students identify as.

[00:38:07] And so, for example, and I asked Shaheed the same thing last year. Can we, do we have numbers of how many Arab Americans? Is there an increase or decrease? We can't really define that. But a lot of other school districts, and I think this probably applies to LCPS, is that when you see a spike in racial incidents against white students, how do you interpret that?

[00:38:31] Are white students being discriminated against or are a good chunk of those students actually Arab American students who are being called terrorists or are being identified and defined based on the political climate that is happening today, and especially in the educational system, in college campuses, in school campuses, and the discrimination that our students are facing as a result of the climate that we are in.

[00:38:57] So freedom of speech, freedom of expression that our students are constitutionally mandated to have also would be great for their sense of belonging, for them to find their space in their numbers, in their records, in their archives of their own county and schools.

[00:39:17] Thank you. - Thank you, Vinan, for that. And I think that's one of the reasons why we have the equity committee, as we can task these things to help facilitate the DIA as well, perhaps, in the future, as long as we get the quorum for that.

[00:39:33] We'd like to move on to the next part of our discussion. It's actually more of a panel discussion. We have with us is our third speaker. He is an Arab-American student. His name is Khaled Araki, a Palestinian-American high school senior at Dominion. He is an MSAC student delegate, and he is on the track team.

[00:39:53] and he's looking to go to NOVA and hopefully will become a scientist in the near future. So with that, what we'd like to do is we'd like to focus on a little bit more of a Q&A, Q&A coming from me regarding inclusion, supportive, and affirmative situations.

[00:40:15] You're a high school senior, and how do you feel being an Arab American at Dominion? Do you feel that you've been welcome? Do you feel that your friends know that you're Arab-American? Or are you just, hey, I'm just Khaled or DJ?

[00:40:34] Yeah, so I absolutely feel very welcomed at Dominion. I'm not shy about who I am in the least. Everyone who knows me knows I'm either Middle Eastern American, I'm Palestinian, or I'm Arab-American.

[00:40:51] Specifically, Dominion has done an amazing job of welcoming and being more inclusive. I haven't run into many problems. I can't say the same about other schools because I have heard a lot of stories. I have a lot of friends that have gone through issues with staff, with other students, with administration.

[00:41:15] But at Dominion, where I am, I feel very welcomed. So let me ask you this. What does being an Arab American mean to you? So I actually wrote a poem about this not long ago. Do you mind if I read it? Yeah, sure. Go ahead. Where my forever lies. Forever lies in my blood, which belongs to land that's been stolen from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea, a land that is sodden with the tears of children's pleas.

[00:41:51] I'm from this land my eyes have never seen, a land I will return to, even if it's the last thing I ever see. Forever also lies in my heart, which is from a small peninsula named Qatar where my family could live in peace and me and my countless cousins ran around demolishing said peace.

[00:42:08] This was my life. This was my childhood. Then a new life emerged, a little girl, my little sister, and forever she will be. My brain is from right here, on the land I stand on. I learned to think like an

American, to act like an American, and most importantly, to be proud like an American, which I will forever be.

[00:42:28] but beneath everything there is my soul my soul is not from one single place but it is a cultivation of everywhere i have ever been whether it's from the river tea or from sea to shining sea um so that poem i kind of just i wrote it to highlight that uh being arab american is is such a various a wide term um even though i am uh palestinian um i grew up in qatar i came over here and I grew up here. But beneath it all, I am still Arab American because of all of those

[00:43:08] individual parts. Not just because of where my family is from or because of where I grew up, but because of everything combined together. Awesome. How does that, how does it allow you to shape your friends? I mean, are the, when you, when you were saying that, you know, I'm proud American and this is who I am, a lot of the people around you, I'm assuming, are they similar faith, similar background, or are we talking about a diverse array of ethnic

[00:43:48] friends? Well, actually, my friends at school are very varying faiths, wherever they're from. I do, I'm obviously, obviously, I'm very, I'm Muslim, so I'm very connected with the Muslims at Dominion, but also in every class, I mean, every single class I'm in, I know every single person in my class, every single person in my class knows me.

[00:44:18] I have no problem talking to people of other faiths or people who aren't Arab-American. I've never ran into any issues like that. And it's really interesting having friends from so many different places because it helps to broaden perspectives and kind of see that there's a lot of different viewpoints in this world.

[00:44:46] Samantha you mentioned growing up I think Banan as well post 9-11 going to public school how you felt that you were sheltered at what point did you break out of your shell and saying you know what I am proud of my heritage I'm proud of being an Arab American and how did that resonate with the sphere circle around you?

[00:45:13] I think before 9-11. So I was in middle school at the time. And I think before 9-11, if I said I was Arab or if I said I was Palestinian, people didn't really know what that meant.

[00:45:33] They were just like, oh, okay. But then it was a very big change after that. Anytime it ever came up that I was Palestinian or I was Arab or Middle Eastern, that was when those things were said.

[00:45:48] And so it was a very big change. And I can't begin to imagine what it was like for my Arab brothers and sisters who wear hijab.

[00:46:05] Because I felt it as a Christian. And at that time, I actually was in Catholic school. And I think, to answer the second part of your question, it wasn't until high school, so where I kind of broke a little bit more out of my shell and was more comfortable with myself in middle school I I think most of us are just kind of figuring out what we're who we are and what we're doing so that was not a great time for me to be uh proud and to stand up to to all of

[00:46:39] these things but it definitely shaped the way that I thought about myself and the way that I continued to be confused about who I was in this world. And so in high school, I started to understand it more. In high school, I was in Catholic school again, and there wasn't a large Arab population. There

wasn't actually a large, any minority population, to be honest. And so that was when I was like hey yeah actually I don't fit in I had a a boyfriend at the time

[00:47:16] and I went to his his home for dinner once and they were all eating in separate rooms of the house like I everyone went grabbed their dinner and then just like the dad went to watch tv the mom went to the dining room the and then the kids went to their own rooms and I was like in shock

[00:47:36] In my life, I'd never seen that before, and so I think it just, like, I just started to realize that there was something very different about my upbringing and who I was, and so that's why it led me later to study international politics and policies in college, and now I dedicate my life to immigrant justice.

[00:47:59] I did not have any chance to try to assimilate or to try to pass for anything but Arab Muslim at the time of 9-11. My name does not allow me to even hide, even if I wanted to.

[00:48:20] There was no effort of trying to hide my identity, even if I wanted to. and so being asked and being i being i define myself but also how others define me when they walk up to me when they talk to me when i say my name banan until today the first question is always what kind of name is that how do you pronounce it where is it from where so that is my name my own identity my personal identity is the is how people look at me so i cannot escape that um samantha

[00:48:56] you might be able to hide behind that name but I can't and so 9-11 was it was a very difficult time for our community in Herndon in Sterling as a Muslim community but also as an Arab American community we faced a lot of backlash we faced a lot of institutional not just discrimination but there was a lot of violations of constitutional rights for the community as a whole and so

[00:49:27] that affected us as young people in understanding our conceptualization of being american because being american is first and foremost the idea of a land of law and everything is based so if something violates the law it's not going to happen in america so if you have freedom of speech if you have freedom of expression if you have freedom of religion then that's enshrined and And that is not going to be violated.

[00:49:56] But 9/11 was an environment, and that's the environment we're seeing again today. That's an environment in which it shook our understanding of what we learned in school. So for me to come to America and go straight into AP history when coming from Jordan, from a country in which doesn't share a lot of the democratic ideals that we have in America.

[00:50:17] So to come in and go straight into AP history and learn about the history of the United States and learn about the makeup of democracy. And then in my senior year, I took political science and I interned in the Congress. And again, my English was still Rasha Khaled's mom. She remembers me. I was a fob, right? I was just very, very new to the country.

[00:50:37] But I was interning in the Congress in the year 2000 at a time in which I was just so excited to be American, to be part of what this democracy is, to go to Congress and actually see our congress member like raising your hands and speaking and and then 9 11 hit and all of that just kind of crumbled before my eyes because of our own personal experience our community experiences and the national experience as a whole and you know we cannot help but juxtapose that and see how what is happening today mirrors what happened during that era and unfortunately it's it's

[00:51:14] potentially looking like it's even worse than the 9 11 days for our community so you guys hit up a really sensitive topic, right? It's the institutionalization of others or othering of a category of people. Unfortunately, that's a dark history in America where we otherized the enslaved, we've otherized Native Americans, we've otherized Irish, the Italians, the Poles, Jewish Americans, and so now it seems to be more prevalent with Arab Americans.

[00:51:56] As parents now, right, for you, Banan and then I guess Samantha, is how does one educate the public when you hear that, you know, statements of, you know, for example, you know, Islam hates us, or Arabs hate us, right?

[00:52:19] Us meaning, obviously, the United States. Like, how would you go about re-educating or kind of transforming or maybe turning that conversation around to where, you know, it's not that we, the othering of us, hate, you know, America, it's actually we are part of us and we don't hate ourselves, right?

[00:52:44] How would you go about doing or changing that? It's a very difficult question. It's a very difficult situation we are in because it's a narrative that is so ingrained in the American psyche for generations that from the 50s and the 60s in the 1967 war and then the Iranian revolution and most Americans not knowing the difference between an Arab and an Iranian and then the Lebanon War and then the Intifada in Palestine

[00:53:21] and then go from there, the peace process that never was and then all of these, Gulf War followed by the invasion of Iraq and 9-11 and all of those, it's so successive that on the political landscape, it doesn't even allow room for the community to figure out how to navigate its own narrative and how to even try to establish.

[00:53:42] It's ingrained in our educational curriculum in schools, the way it is presented, the way Arabs are presented, the way even when they are not presented directly, the erasure of the Arab narrative in our public libraries, in our school libraries, and how much we have to actually actively go out to the school districts and say, Can we talk to the curriculum department?

[00:54:11] Can we talk to the equity committee and the MSAC committees? So it is becoming a burden on us in a way. I don't want to say a burden, but a responsibility on us to shoulder actively going out to change this narrative that is so strong and so vicious and so venomous against us.

[00:54:34] We're talking about our own politicians. We're talking about our own leaders from the local to the state to the national level to the White House that is using our own identity as a racial slur. So when you call somebody else a Palestinian as a racial slur, what are you doing to a young Palestinian nine-year-old in Loudoun County Public School when she hears that on the news?

[00:54:59] When you are constantly calling Muslims enemies of America when they are America, they are America. What is America? Who is us when we say Islam hates us, Arabs hates us? When you have high school students that are walking out calling for a ceasefire, calling for an end of war, of saying we don't want schools to be bombed, we don't want children to die, and then you come across and then you call them names, anti-Semitic, Hamas babies, all of these.

[00:55:32] These are words that were called by our own educators. These are words that are used by our own politicians, our own local government people that we vote for. So this is the environment our children are navigating, and I am so happy that you are having a positive experience because I would love to say that this is the uniform experience for a lot of high school students, but it's actually not.

[00:55:58] So I would applaud Dominion High School because that's not the general experience for a lot of students. My daughter's in elementary school, and she has not had a very positive experience. We've had people in this own room that discriminated against students in LCPS in incidents that were very dangerous for our own children.

[00:56:20] So it is an environment in which we have to stand up. We have to be strong. We have to speak our own narrative because nobody else is going to speak it for us. so if we're not here tonight um you know we are and that's why we're honored to be here we're honored to be able to speak to a microphone to speak to a community who's willing to listen and wanting to learn about our experiences wanting to learn who their neighbors are we are your neighbors our children go into the same soccer leagues and track and fields as your own children

[00:56:57] uh do we go to the same movie theaters we shop at the same supermarkets um and we share the same holidays as you and so um there is a need to and it's it's really hard because a few years ago we thought we've made it we thought we've come we've come a long way and every single time you hear about deia and you say okay how can we find space within the deia circle let's get in the table within DEIA and then to see that the advancements in this country for a lot of communities, not just the Arab and Muslim communities, for the African-American communities, for

[00:57:37] women, for transgenders, for all of these different communities, is that you have to keep advocating for your rights and advocating for your cause because the lesson we learned is that in this country, your rights can be taken away from you.

[00:57:52] So the Constitution isn't as enshrined as we thought it is. So we have to fight not only for our own rights. We have to fight for the Constitution. We have to protect the Constitution from people who want to violate the fabric of this country. And we are part of this fight.

[00:58:08] Yeah, I think Benin did a great job in summarizing a lot of things. But what I think about is I'm a very proud American, right? I'm third, fourth generation. My family, you know, I come from veterans.

[00:58:26] And so we are very proud Americans. but at the same time we are very proud Palestinians so it's very difficult to when you have I can't remember who said it I think it was John McCain someone asked John McCain Obama's an Arab right and he said no no no he's actually a good guy what does that mean right he's a good family guy right and so it's like what are you equating Arabs to and that's in

[00:59:04] the mainstream media right talking about our president and so when I see that I say what what does that mean for me right what does that mean for my my my family or or you know and and my children uh similar to benan's situation my my son is also in elementary school and it has not been as positive it definitely has not been um positive so i think for me it's it's almost like even more a right and an honor and a privilege to be here but also it's a privilege it's for me to

[00:59:44] be an American and to be able to speak on behalf of the identity that I have that this country is failing and as an American we have the duty to make our country better to criticize it so that it can become better because no one or nothing and especially not an institution is not above criticism and feedback and improvement and so that's why I think that that's the responsibility ability that I have, the honor that I have, and all of you actually in this room.

[01:00:20] So thank you for doing that too. Thank you. Just a reminder, we have some note cards that were distributed to everyone along with pencils. If anyone has any questions you'd like to submit, we can collect

those. We're going to move to the third aspect of our panel discussion, which is going to be

[01:00:40] Q&A.

[01:01:28] So one of the questions is... Maybe we can have Khalid take a stab at this first, since he's currently in high school, and then the other panelists can chime in. We recognize that there are numerous opportunities for LCPS in our communities to do better.

[01:01:44] What are some of the things that we're doing well, and what can we build? So I'll start with you, Khalid, because I think there's a lot of good things that Dr. Brewer had done. And then maybe you can shed on that and see what we can do to build on top of that.

[01:02:00] and then we'll let Samantha and Banan chime in. Right, so Dr. Brewer has done a great job facilitating the MSA and all of our requests, such as prayer rooms and praying times during the day. We talked to him about it.

[01:02:17] We worked through it, and now I think for the past two or three years, we've had prayer rooms, we've had designated times that we've worked out with Dr. Brewer based on the prayer times of the day because they tend to shift throughout the year. And he gives us, he says, you guys can use this room during this block.

[01:02:40] And if it works, then we let him know. If not, then we let him know that the times don't work because they don't match up with the prayer times. And then he works to accommodate. That's really the main thing. He works to accommodate.

[01:02:58] Some things that could be better, maybe, probably bias, internal biases in the websites and the assignments that the teachers use themselves.

[01:03:45] A lot of times teachers will use more biased websites, like for example, in English, we're doing this genocide project, and I was looking at the list, and even though Palestine is recognized as a genocide by multiple international and unbiased organizations, it wasn't on the list of countries that we could do. and that was because our teacher had used a list that was not from a complete it was it was an American organization and it absolutely was was not unbiased and so I had to really try my best to convince her to let me do Palestine which I did succeed in the end but after many emails back

[01:04:22] and forth and conversations in class and yeah maybe like a kind of training to help inform teachers on how to pull from more unbiased sources. How maybe Samantha you may want to chime in how can how can the equity committee help what can they do better that you that you see yeah

[01:04:56] smitha um i i think that in addition to you know the prayer rooms i think that lcps is doing pretty well with the language because they have the interpreters they have the interpreters available in the schools but as you heard from me and actually from all of us that language is not always the barrier right it's more it's a little bit more complex than that i also think that it's been pretty positive, the intention to include these families, at least in our school where we

[01:05:31] have Arabic coffee, Hispanic coffee, and English-speaking coffee, right? There's an intention to include these families, but there's not much intention to understand these groups, right? These are social events so that the families can feel comfortable coming to the school, but there is no real attempt at understanding who's in the room what kind of countries what kind of cultures and you know we just say okay Arabic speaking coffees and Farsi Dari right it's not just the Arab families

[01:06:10] it's all of the Middle Eastern families it's all looped into one right and that's okay right we want to be included and we want to have those opportunities to feel welcome in our schools but at the same time the school should take that as an opportunity to get to know the complexities of the cultures that exist in their school outside of language barriers.

[01:06:31] I also want to say that mental health is a great resource that LCPS always prioritizes, which is great. But there are other resources, and I think especially for the teachers that are lacking. Our teachers, they do so much.

[01:06:48] They're amazing. But they rely on the resources that are provided to them to understand Arab American Heritage Month or understand Ramadan or Rosh Hashanah, whatever, right? But there are not a lot of resources that are compiled for the Arab American community and to be able to train the teachers on understanding those differences.

[01:07:14] So I would say it's a lack of resources and a lack of understanding the complexity of the community that could improve. I think to be fair, in comparison to some of our neighboring districts, LCPS fares pretty well in a sense of creating a sense of, what is the word, proactive care for diversity, dare I say that these days.

[01:07:51] I think especially with Dr. Spence's very keen care for students who come from different backgrounds, Dr. Alice Williams, the DEIA team as a whole, and Dr. Dean and the equity committee, there is proactiveness that must be highlighted and thanked and appreciated.

[01:08:15] And where we can improve on that, there are issues, for example, to highlight, Also, to piggyback on what you said, curriculum is a very important issue for us. Curriculum is biased against Arabs, against Muslims, and particularly on the high school level.

[01:08:34] In the elementary and middle school levels, it's biased in the sense of erasure, where the narrative is not there. In the high school, as it starts presenting history, politics, the world to high schoolers, there is a lot of bias in the resources.

[01:08:52] There's a lot of bias as well in censorship from staff and from teachers themselves. So educating teachers as well. I know we're treading into a very difficult climate right now. So there is an understanding that we're all in this together.

[01:09:11] But I think there's a lot of room for us to invite communities and stakeholders, particularly in mental health issues, which is something that we've had several meetings that were arranged by the DEIA department with United Mental Health Services, the FACE, which is the Office for Family and Community Engagement, and as well as the Curriculum Department.

[01:09:42] But meetings are not enough if we're not taking initiative to actually follow through and actually have this feedback that our community has been submitting for the past at least a year and a half, if not two years, following through with actual actionable plans and actual changes, and definitely a lot of training for the teachers, staffs, and administrators.

[01:10:04] Thank you. If we don't have any more questions, I think we'll go ahead and we'll wrap up now, and you guys get to go home early. Dr. Teens? I am just so excited. And there are some names that I texted my staff aide and others in the room to say, why isn't he here? Why isn't she here? This is wonderful. And I will need your

[01:10:43] contact information so I can go that extra step or extra mile that you have referenced. And I do want you to know that just recently, the board voted for a new program that will have, what, Arabic and Chinese international studies project.

[01:11:06] And we just voted on it last week. And so that will be coming. So feel free also to reach out to the social studies department. Danielle is just wonderful. So she is heading that for Mr. Slevin.

[01:11:25] So that would be a perfect location as well. I was just sitting there. My mind was just going. And I'm going, okay, okay. and I promise you that we will share your sharing throughout the county and you will hear back from me personally thank you thank you if there's no new business for this committee I think that the presenters will be happy for you to

[01:11:55] come up and speak with them the meeting is now adjourned at 7:45 6:45 I'm sorry 6:45



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