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Barrington SD220's first ever diversity chief to seek 'authentic conversations about the impact of race and racism on student achievement'

By: Bob Goldsborough



Barrington School District 220 hired longtime school administrator Nathaniel Rouse as the district's first-ever director of equity, race and cultural diversity initiatives. The school board approved his hire at its Aug. 11, 2020 meeting and he started in the role Aug. 17. - Original Credit: Barrington School District 220 (Barrington School District / HANDOUT)

Barrington School District 220 has hired a longtime school administrator to be the district's first-ever director of equity, race and cultural diversity initiatives.

The SD220 board voted last month to hire Nathaniel L. Rouse to the post. Rouse, 48, had spent the 2019-2020 school year as dean of students at **Bartlett High School in School District U-46.**

Prior to that, he had served as the first African American principal at Oak Park and River Forest High School from 2008 until 2019. From 2004 until 2008, Rouse had been the assistant principal at Highland Park High School, and before that he had been dean of students at his alma mater, Elgin High School, and he had taught English at West Leyden High School in Northlake.

Rouse told Pioneer Press that the SD220 job appealed to him because he believes that "there are significant disparities in our educational systems across the country that marginalize Black and Brown students."

"As the director of equity, race and cultural diversity initiatives in Barrington 220, I want to listen to our students and school community to better understand our multiple perspectives and develop protocols and procedures that support equitable outcomes for all students, but in particular, those that have been marginalized through school policies, programs and practices that negatively impact low-performing student populations," he said.

The SD220 board approved his hiring at its Aug. 11 meeting. His first day on the job was Aug. 17.

The district has long had a goal of creating the position, even prior to the nationwide increased awareness of systemic racism and ongoing peaceful public opposition to discrimination and injustice, officials previously said.

"We are very excited to have Nate join our administrative team here in 220. He comes to us with a vast amount of experience as a teacher, as a building leader and obviously as a person with a background and experience that we need support in right now, as far as equity, race and cultural

diversity goes, so it's a pretty significant background," Superintendent Brian Harris told Pioneer Press. "We feel very, very fortunate to get a person of his talent and ability level to help us improve in those areas in our district."

Rouse enters a SD220 that has over 8,600 students enrolled across 12 schools, from pre-K to 12th grade. The student body is 61% white, 18% Hispanic, 15% Asian and 1% Black, according to Illinois State Board of Education data as of the 2019 school year. Additionally, 18% of students have an individualized education plan and 8% are English learners.

Of the approximately 600 full-time teachers, 88% are white, 8% Hispanic and 3% are Asian, according to the ISBE data. Three fourths of the district's teachers are women.

Rouse will develop and oversee diversity-related programs and services, as well as provide support for students, staff and faculty, officials explained. Amid some recent management attrition, district officials concluded that they could create the new position without increasing total administrative staff.

"I want to support our staff in their efforts to develop the knowledge and requisite skills for engaging, sustaining, and deepening authentic conversations about the impact of race and racism on student achievement. This work will rely heavily on individuals leaning into the discomfort of talking about how race has impacted their lives to construct personal action plans for deepening our individual understandings of racism — which includes engaging other members of our school community in dialogue about systemic racism," Rouse told Pioneer Press.

While at OPRF, Rouse was thrust into the national spotlight when the high school was the subject of the 2018 documentary TV series "America to Me." Rouse and the school's superintendent did not support the filming and chose not to be interviewed during filming. Once it aired, he told the Chicago Tribune that he had mixed feelings about the series because it provided only a snapshot of the experiences of a dozen students at OPRF and not the 3,400 students attending the school. He added that the school long had worked to be a national model for racial equity.

At Bartlett High School, Rouse's work included creating alternate pathways to graduation for students relative to traditional settings, said Bartlett High School Principal Mike Demovsky, who said he has known Rouse for two decades.

"He's a genuine individual who absolutely puts kids' interests first, and really thinks outside the box," Demovsky told Pioneer Press. "He cares about kids. And at the end of the day, you wouldn't want anyone else working with students. He's effective, kind, compassionate and a good communicator."