

Case Study:

Promising Practices to Advance DEI Among Non-Profit Boards

October 31, 2023

Introduction and Background

The Aurora Institute works to drive the transformation of education systems and accelerate the advancement of breakthrough policies and practices to ensure high-quality learning for all. In pursuing this mission, Aurora has built the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), as well as anti-racism, into its strategic plan.

To support its DEI goals and provide structure around organizational learning, Aurora received a three-year grant from the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative (CZI). The grant included an explicit focus on engaging the Aurora Board of Directors in DEI work to advance the organization. This case study describes Aurora's Board of Directors' evolution and growth with respect to DEI, from November 2020 through July 2023.

Aurora's efforts to support its board's engagement with DEI provide insights and promising practices which may help leaders from other organizations develop strategies to build their boards' DEI capacity.

This case study was developed by Interim CEO Loretta Goodwin (formerly the COO), Development Director Jennifer Kabaker, and Kumea Shorter-Gooden, Aurora's DEI consultant. Shorter-Gooden surveyed board members in February 2021 and conducted individual interviews with them in January and February 2021, and again in June and July 2023, to elicit their perceptions of Aurora's and the board's experiences, growth, capacity, and challenges with respect to DEI. Illustrative quotes from the 2023 interviews are provided. It should be noted that the longtime CEO of the organization, Susan Patrick, resigned in May 2023, and an interim CEO was then appointed. Thus, the backdrop for the recent interviews with board members was the significant leadership transition that the board is in the process of navigating.

DEI Goals and Outcomes

Over the course of the grant, Aurora's staff and board worked toward three specific goals:

- 1 Board Diversity**—Increase the diversity of the Aurora Institute board from 2020 to 2023, as measured by the number of board members from racially diverse backgrounds.
- 2 DEI Learning**—Engage the Aurora Institute Board of Directors and Board DEI Committee to focus the board more intently on DEI issues, measured by the outputs of a DEI work plan, and increased DEI-focused meetings, readings, and other activities at the full board level.
- 3 DEI Commitment**—Generate shared growth, commitment, and understanding of DEI among Aurora Institute's Board of Directors on both personal and organizational levels, evidenced by participation and buy-in to DEI activities, creation of artifacts building capacity for DEI, and participation in DEI coaching activities.

The sections below discuss progress on each of these goals.

Board Diversity

In Spring 2020, three of the nine (33%) board members were people of color, including one Latino man, one Latina woman, and one Black woman. Three of the nine members were women (33%). Over the course of the grant, Aurora engaged in targeted board recruitment, with the goal of increasing the number of people of color and the number of women on the board. By May 2023, three of the six members (50%) were people of color, including two Latino men (one in the position of board chair) and one Black woman. Three of the six members (50%) were women. The board is currently down three members due to two members cycling off and one member resigning.

In interviews, board members who had served for many years commented on this shift over time and the increased emphasis on recruiting diverse members of the board. One board member said, ***“In the past few months, some difficult issues around race have come up, and we’ve been able to talk about them far better than in the past, when we had fewer people of color.”*** Another board member remarked, ***“Since being on the board, there’s definitely a much more intentional focus in ensuring a racially diverse board. When I first got on several years ago, there may have only been one board member of color. There are board seats available now—to be filled after the current leadership transition. There is explicit attention to having a racially diverse board. I don’t think that was the conversation before—[it] was simply finding someone in the network.”***

Board members also remarked on the value of racial diversity on the board and of having a person of color as board chair, as well as the need to continue to recruit more diverse board members. One board member said, ***“I still have that hope that we can bring a board that...can encourage breakthrough thinking. We need more nontraditional education backgrounds in new board members to support DEI.”***

Board Culture and Inclusion

In general, board members believed that a healthy culture of inclusion was evolving and developing within the Aurora board. Several board members noted that the DEI learning sessions, discussed below, and particularly the opportunity to connect with and learn about their colleagues' personal histories and the impact of DEI on childhood, educational experiences, and career choices, were pivotal in fostering a sense of community and shared purpose. One board member, who identifies as a person of color, said, ***“As a new person, I felt I had the opportunity to express concerns that I had. It was clear that folks really wanted to hear from me. It felt very inclusive. My fresher eyes seemed to be valued. Folks reached out to solicit my feedback.”***

Another board member remarked, ***“There were tough conversations. That continues to be part of our evolution. The healthy part is that we voiced that, we shared those concerns. We don’t have it completely figured out, because we have emotions. We’re able to show those emotions right now: ‘You know, what you just said doesn’t feel right to me.’”***

However, almost all board members remarked that there is more work to do in this arena—that the conversations at times have been complicated and difficult, and they caused harm. One board member noted, ***“I question whether we had established the appropriate protocols for having difficult conversations.”***

Some expressed concern about the challenge of sustaining a diverse board. All expressed a desire to continue to lean into this messy work and figure out how to engage more effectively and inclusively. One white board member said, ***“The board should figure out ways to continue learning together about DEI issues. This will be important for the next leader of the organization. At my organization, race, equity, etc. are part of every board meeting, not a special agenda item. Because of this, we’ve been able to do better work, and we were poised to act, for example, after George Floyd was murdered. This happened because the board was much further along on their DEI journey. This will be important in the board’s role in assisting the new CEO.”*** Another said, ***“I’ve always felt included and heard, but don’t know if others would say the same.”***

DEI Learning Sessions

The board participated in a series of DEI learning sessions, committing several hours of each board meeting to learning together, deepening their knowledge, and considering implications for their leadership of Aurora. The sessions were similar to those that staff were engaging in, to help align the staff’s and the board’s DEI learning journeys. These sessions were planned by Board Chair Virgel Hammonds, COO Loretta Goodwin, and DEI Consultant Kumea Shorter-Gooden, and led by Shorter-Gooden, often with co-leadership and facilitation from staff and board members.

Before beginning the sessions, board members took a DEI survey and participated in interviews with Shorter-Gooden. Before each session, participants completed pre-work, such as readings, to scaffold and support the learning process. The section below describes the four learning sessions board members participated in.

March 2021

During the initial 3.75-hour March 2021 session, Shorter-Gooden shared results from the DEI survey the board had taken and discussed feedback from interviews she conducted with board members about their experience with DEI. The discussion also focused on personal awareness of identities, power, and privilege, and definitions of diversity, equity, and inclusion, as well as anti-racism. Shorter-Gooden also led a training to help board members develop their skills around discussing DEI issues openly and non-defensively.

September 2021

In September 2021, the board engaged in a four-hour virtual learning session on racism and white supremacy in education. This was an extended version of the training staff had experienced previously. During this session, Policy Director Fred Jones presented on different ways racism features in or has driven education policy in the United States, from the creation of free schools in the Reconstruction era of the Southern United States to the unintended consequences of *Brown v. Board of Education*, resulting in the exclusion of teachers of color. He and Shorter-Gooden then facilitated a conversation about these issues and the role Aurora plays in advancing racial equity in the United States.

May 2022

Board members participated in a four-hour virtual session on identity, privilege, and power. They selected this subject to provide a lens through which to engage in deep conversations about identity and how that affects how they show up as board members to support staff working towards Aurora's mission. The power of this personal, emotionally evocative session stemmed from board members engaging in "radically human introductions," led by Board Chair Virgel Hammonds.

December 2022

In this three-hour, in-person session (the first in-person convening since the COVID-19 pandemic), board members shared about their own organizations' DEI and anti-racism journey to help inform Aurora's DEI and anti-racism work. They also discussed efforts to counter anti-DEI movements at Aurora and other organizations. All Aurora staff participated, helping to forge closer connections between board and staff.

Responses to the Learning Sessions

Survey results after the March and September 2021 sessions indicated that 100% of board members somewhat or strongly agreed that the goals of the sessions were met, that there were high levels of engagement, and that Shorter-Gooden effectively co-led the sessions. In interviews, all board members spoke highly of the learning sessions and their value in deepening board members' connections with each other, creating a shared framework for addressing DEI, and centering DEI in conversations about strategic priorities and goals. One board member said:

"There is something powerful about going through DEI training, especially if people have different experiences. We must get uncomfortable at times. By having those conversations, I got to know my fellow board members. I hadn't known folks except for one or two when I joined, and meetings were initially virtual....The DEI training was really helpful for getting to know each other, given it's a national board and we only see each other every few months. These sessions helped with DEI learning and knowing each other as people, period."

The board is particularly interested in continuing conversations about how Aurora can use its privilege and power to effect change, shift mindsets, and advance the field toward connecting more directly with local communities in policy work. One board member commented that Aurora’s access to policymakers gives the organization power and privilege, but that Aurora needs to use that power to present new ideas in a way that is principled and apolitical. At the same time, Aurora must use its platform to bring awareness to the damage that traditional one-size-fits-all education policies have on Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) learners. Because Aurora has access to schools and systems that are working differently to provide the education their students deserve, Aurora should showcase those examples through a positive, asset-based, racial equity lens.

The board is also focused on ensuring that Aurora’s work honors local context, including potentially using funds to prototype and pilot efforts to engage communities and elevate youth voices. The board believes that engaging with the individuals most proximate to the problems Aurora is trying to address will be an important strategy moving forward.

Organizational DEI Commitment

To build and deepen the organizational commitment to DEI, the board ensured that DEI and anti-racism became a core part of the organization’s 2022-2025 Strategic Plan. In past strategic plans, DEI and anti-racism have featured in a separate section of the document. However, this year, the board pushed to incorporate DEI and anti-racism into each pillar of work and identify how the organization will explicitly advance DEI in its work. As a result, the strategic plan details specific activities Aurora will engage in to advance DEI and anti-racism under the pillars of vision setting, policy, research, and convenings. In response to this process, one board member said, ***“The board is in a good place re: DEI—talking about race, equity, and how it relates to decisions we make. It’s naturally part of decisions that we make. As a result, the strategic plan is stronger because of the particular focus on race and equity. It’s all happening in a very natural way, very integrated.”***

However, the board also recognizes that there is still work to be done in incorporating DEI and anti-racism into Aurora’s work, particularly in the organization’s approach to supporting transformation for Black and brown learners. One board member said, ***“The big thing that we are honing in on is how our strategy impacts Black and brown children. How do we make sure that that’s happening? That continues to be part of our evolution. We can become more intentional there. We’re very focused on personalized, competency-based education. How do we ensure as we’re creating policy, amplifying voices from the field, that we’re amplifying those practices that support Black and brown children?”***

Board members also provided feedback on Aurora’s DEI definitions, which the staff had developed and iterated on. They provided feedback on the definitions’ overall intent and structure, pushing Aurora leadership to strengthen the language and make it as active as possible. The definitions are included in the strategic plan. Finally, the board developed a statement on its mission, goals, and board commitments and responsibilities related to DEI. That statement is included below:

Our school systems have wrestled with how to ensure effective learning environments and successful outcomes for students regardless of their race, ethnicity, or background. However, as currently designed, K-12 education systems are perfectly designed to get the results they get. Equitable outcomes cannot be achieved when the current structures and systems are designed to disadvantage students of different identities, especially students of color, and particularly Black and brown students. It is not enough to allow access to our public schools; we must question whether the opportunities, supports, and resources provided to students are what they need and set them up for success.

The culture and mindsets of the district and school also shape how practices and policies are conceived and implemented. Without a strong culture of learning, inclusivity, and empowerment, dynamics of institutional inequity that have been built into education systems are likely to persist, perpetuating inequitable outcomes. Today we need to ask ourselves how we are creating diverse, equitable, and inclusive learning environments where every student can succeed no matter how they identify by race, ethnicity, gender identity and expression, national origin, sexual orientation, family status, socioeconomic status, religion, ability status, or geography. As an “equity driven and collaborative” (strategic plan, pg. 7) Aurora Institute and Board, we believe we must mirror the same diversity, equity, and inclusivity (DEI) commitments we inspire through policy and practice with our state and local partners. We recognize and appreciate the importance of creating an environment in which all of our team, membership, stakeholders, and board feel valued, included, and empowered to do their best work and bring great ideas to the table in service of our mission of creating just and equitable school and social systems.

The opportunity to honor diversity, equity, and inclusivity is a gap pervasive in our school systems and learning communities. Actions must be taken to counteract the current status quo. As we support the transformation of school systems to be student-centered and equity driven, the Aurora Institute will work to fulfill its leadership role by demonstrating that it understands the value of diversity and inclusivity, how this promotes learning, increases strength and capacity both within our organization and throughout the learning communities we serve. The Board of Directors will focus on Aurora’s efforts to maximize DEI in all activities.

The Aurora Institute Board of Directors will collaborate with the Aurora CEO, COO, and team to establish strategies and resources to define, support, and advance Aurora’s DEI goals in service of its mission and vision. The Board is also charged with supporting the mechanisms that will help create a supportive, positive, and inclusive work environment for staff within the Aurora Institute.

Lessons Learned

Based on the past three years of guiding the board through DEI learning in parallel with staff, Aurora has identified the following lessons learned.

Alignment Between Board and Staff DEI Learning

The board DEI learning sessions were specifically selected to be parallel to the staff's learning processes. Board and staff members also had selected opportunities to join together for DEI sharing and discussions. This was particularly valuable in developing the strategic plan, which involved board and staff. It also helped the board gain a better understanding of the work staff do and of the organizational operations and culture. One board member said, ***"It was perfect timing to have DEI learning and emphasis while re-working the strategic planning."***

Strategic Planning as the Locus of the Board's DEI Work

The board found it helpful that the DEI learning sessions occurred concurrently with the new strategic plan's development. The process of planning and setting priorities provided an immediate locus to apply learning, and it ensured that the current strategic plan embodied Aurora's new understanding of and commitment to DEI.

Importance of Sharing Personal Stories and Building Relationships

Board members valued the structured opportunities during the DEI learning sessions to hear each other's personal histories related to race, ethnicity, class, and other social identities, and to connect and form relationships. They believe that this helped to deepen and strengthen their conversations about DEI in board discussions and deliberations and to forge a healthy sense of community. One board member said: ***"What I appreciate here is the opportunity to better understand board and staff personal journeys. It is important to understand the human beings and thus the core values that shape folks. It brought us closer as a board, and it helped the staff to better understand the board and diffuse the power dynamics. It opened up the door. And now that we're thinking about a new leader for Aurora, we're more comfortable in having the conversation about the future and the search."***

Intentionality of the DEI Work

Aurora specifically designed its DEI work to be intentional and proactive. This included providing the necessary resources, including time, money, and a dedicated consultant. Also, it was built in as a dedicated part of every board meeting agenda. One board member remarked, ***"There was inclusivity of voices. There was some intentionality in making that happen. Our DEI work strengthened us going into a challenging period of transition and will be essential in finding a new CEO. The board didn't just become diverse. We honored DEI in the hard work of the board."***

Importance of and Messiness of Building an Inclusive Culture

The board learned the critical importance of attending to psychological safety and inclusion and building a culture that works for all board members, particularly minoritized members. A related lesson learned is that this is difficult work and fumbles and stumbles typically happen along the way, which highlights the

importance of ongoing intentional work. DEI is not just about what the board discusses and decides; it's also about how the board does its work and engages all voices. Another way to frame this idea is that it's imperative to attend to both the external DEI issues and the internal DEI issues. One board member said, ***“We need additional emphasis on the ‘I’ in DEI.”***

Board DEI Committee or Not?

In 2020, the board launched a Board DEI Committee, but after the unexpected death of the DEI committee chair, the board decided to make the DEI focus and agenda the responsibility of the entire board, rather than that of a specific committee. This shift was made in part because of concerns about bandwidth on such a small board. It seems to have been successful, as the board as a whole has owned this work and advanced it. One board member said: ***“The Executive Committee holds the Diversity Committee function. All Executive Committee meetings are announced and open to all. This enhances equity. I think it was about capacity—we didn’t have the bandwidth to have a separate diversity committee.”*** Another board member said: ***“I championed NOT having a separate committee. It feels more valuable to have the whole board own it.”***

Future Challenges and Opportunities

As board members look into the future of Aurora's DEI work, they have identified some potential challenges and opportunities.

Continuing and Deepening the DEI Learning Journey

The board specifically identified the importance of continuing the DEI work with focus and intentionality. They also want to broaden their DEI learning. For example, this could include building the board's capacity with respect to LGBTQ learners, migrant families, second-language learners, neurodiverse learners, and systems change. One board member said, ***“How can the organization address historically marginalized and resilient youth—not only Black and brown youth, e.g., LGBTQ learners and families, migrant families, families who are second language learners or neurodiverse learners? This will be important as we think about inclusion to consider all of these learners.”*** Another said, ***“It is harder to do this as a board that meets three times a year. We need some expectations. It is not clear whether this is just evolutionary or whether there’s an end goal in time. It might be helpful to have a plan or goal for our work, even if it’s just for one year.”***

Onboarding New Board Members to DEI and Addressing Board Members' Different DEI Learning Needs

Because several board members are cycling off, Aurora needs to add several new board members. Board members want to ensure that new members are onboarded to the board's DEI understandings and commitments and are able to engage fluently around DEI with existing board members. This will require addressing the different DEI learning needs of a more diverse board. One board member said, ***“We need to add quite a few more board members. We’re small, we need to be bigger, and some members will be segueing off. What will that look like if 50% of the board is new in a year or two? How do we onboard new board members regarding DEI? How do we sustain the engagement and learning?”*** Another said,

“We have people who are on different paths on their DEI journey, different exposures. Calling it a challenge is too strong. But reality is that there are some of us who have spoken in this way—or lived non-white, non-male lives. We haven’t come to a head around any of these issues, but it could.”

Building DEI into Programmatic Work

Board members identified the opportunity to more consciously build DEI and anti-racism into Aurora’s programmatic work and organizational strategy. This could include identifying specific policy levers that strengthen state and federal efforts. One board member said, **“We’re still learning about systems. We’re an organization that’s focused on policy. We need to learn about how policies can be racist. We need to continue to be on the same page regarding organizational strategy. There may be policy opportunities (state and federal) that we can foster and support that advance anti-racism.”** Along similar lines, another board member said, **“Given the overall education ecosystem and the threats and attacks (anti-CRT and book bans), being stronger and having common language helps us to better understand those arguments. It makes the board better equipped. We’re not in that fight in this work, but our field—education—is in that fight. For staff, it may be particularly relevant, as staff work on policy and engage with policymakers.”**

Leadership Transition

Aurora is in the middle of a leadership transition. The organization can take advantage of the opportunity to revisit and re-emphasize the importance of DEI for Aurora, and to ensure that DEI is centered in the selection and onboarding of the new Aurora CEO. One board member said, **“The board has a really important job in identifying the next leader and centering DEI as a core set of competencies of the new leader.”** Another said, **“This transition in leadership provides an opportunity for Aurora to revisit the importance of DEI and social justice and its connection to personalized, competency-based education.”**

Conclusion

The Aurora Institute Board and staff look forward to continuing this DEI journey in the coming years. The learning described in this case study has put the organization on an important path toward changing approaches to its external work, as well as internal policies and practices. Further deepening organizational understanding of, responsiveness to, and engagement around DEI and anti-racism is important for both more effectively accomplishing Aurora’s mission and supporting its staff. While Aurora has made great progress, much work remains to be done around board and staff diversity, ensuring an inclusive culture, and more. The organization is grateful to its board for their engagement with this important work and hopes that other organizations will similarly commit to engaging their boards in organizational DEI initiatives.

Designed by

BREVITY  WIT