On December 10th 2014, the Human Rights Commission hosted a community conversation to bring citizens together to discuss what they have in common, listen to community concerns, and identify the misunderstandings among the diverse cultures in our community. Attendees were asked in advance to provide major concerns in their community that they would like to address in open discussions. The conversations were formatted on the top three topics: Education, LGBT, and Living in the Shadows.

Citizens provided great insight and ideas. A recap of this conversation was provided to all attendees immediately after this meeting. A second meeting was scheduled for February 25th 2015, but due to inclement weather, it was canceled. The purpose of the second meeting was to have further conversations on the topics discussed in December and develop action steps to address some of these community issues and concerns. The HRC met on May 13th 2015 at the Renaissance Academy with citizens, professors from TCC, special interest groups, and representatives from Virginia Beach City Public Schools.

Participants decided which topic they wished to further discuss and were placed in the designated classroom for discussion which was facilitated by HRC members.
Group Discussions on LGBT & Education

The LGBT & Education topics had many common themes from the previous conversation so the participants of this second part addressed the following common areas of concern:

1) How might we increase the Gay Straight Alliance Support Groups (GSAs) in Virginia Beach City Public Schools?

2) Forty percent of suspensions in Virginia Beach are African Americans (prison to school pipeline). How might we address this concern?

Present: John Mueller, Tracy Jackson, Father Jim Parke, Carolyn Caywood, Vivian Blaize, Debra Grant, Teresa Stanley, Cliff Rice.

First issue: VBCPS Gay Straight Alliance Support Groups (GSAs)

Bonnie Beni provided the group a list of clubs offered by VBCPS with an inclusion focus. Six of eleven high schools have a Gay Straight Alliance and one middle school of thirteen has a Diversity Club/GSA. Vivian inquired about students wearing makeup and gender non-conforming dress and Tracy explained the legal issue.

A school club needs both student interest and a faculty sponsor. Administration cannot force students to be interested. However, being a sponsor is volunteer work for the teacher, no compensation, no relief from teaching load which has increased in recent years. A sponsor could be a coach, a police officer, a guidance counselor, or a media specialist.

John suggested that teachers might be asked at the beginning of the school year if they would be willing to be a sponsor. If administration asks, that would reduce stigma for both sponsor and students. It would demonstrate that administration saw value in this club. There are rules for forming a club, i.e. adopting a constitution, getting recognized by the inter-club council. If there has been a GSA in the past at a school, there is already a constitution. GLSEN offers a starter kit for GSAs.

Site-based management means that each school has some uniqueness which may tie back to there being variation in rules between schools – identified in the common themes.

Tracy explained that all guidance counselors were trained this year on LGBT issues. For example, Virginia Beach has the second highest number of students with same-sex parents in the US.* So this is another population to consider.

Teresa said the HRC should offer an affirmation on the training of guidance counselors. Also, the HRC should continue to push through City Council's legislative agenda for the General Assembly to pass legislation protecting LGBT people from being fired for being LGB or T.
While LGBT teachers in the VBCPS probably are not in fear of losing their jobs, it is a fact that they are not protected against discrimination.

Tracy will seek to work with the student activities coordinators at each middle and high school to recruit a potential GSA sponsor at the beginning of the school year. There was discussion about how the students would become aware that this step had been taken but we did not yet resolve that issue.


Human Rights Campaign (HRC) [http://www.hrc.org/](http://www.hrc.org/)

PFLAG  [https://community.pflag.org/](https://community.pflag.org/)


* [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/05/22/gay-parents-salt-lake-city-_n_3314969.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/05/22/gay-parents-salt-lake-city-_n_3314969.html)

**Second issue:** Disparity in discipline between African American students and other students.

The disparity in frequency and severity of discipline between African American students and others students is sometimes known as the “school to prison pipeline.” Vivian described how to focus on the positive aspects of a student's character when he/she was misbehaving, affirm those positives to the student, and enlist his agreement on behavior. She also talked about teachers who were too ready to resort to disciplinary measures as a result of their bias towards students of color. Two resources mentioned were Jonathan Zur of Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities, and The Advancement Project.

Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities [http://www.inclusiveva.org](http://www.inclusiveva.org)

The Advancement Project [http://www.advancementproject.org](http://www.advancementproject.org)

Ending the Schoolhouse to Jailhouse Track [http://safequalityschools.org](http://safequalityschools.org)

The group agreed and is committed to forming a task force to address both issues.
Group Discussions on Living in the Shadows

This group reviewed the previous conversation recap and determined to lift the following concerns:

1) Felons and Reintegration of Teens
2) Documented vs undocumented workers and school registration process
3) Homelessness

Present: Beatriz Amberman, Luis Rivera, Jobyina Caldwell, Gay Thomas, Matt Weinstein, Giselle Weinstein, Jennifer Valentine, America Wyatt, Mary Freeman, Jessica Watson, Georgia Allen, and Bonnie Beni (staff support)

First issue: Felons and Reintegration of Teens

More effort and programs need to be developed to assist citizens who have been incarcerated and are re-entering the workplace and school environment.

Address options for people who commit minor offenses to have the ability to complete their college education. A professor shared her experience of incarcerated students with the desire to complete their college education as a means to advance them after release not being afforded this accommodation through the correctional system.

We need to look for solutions/models from other cities/states. Don’t re-create the wheel.

The State of Virginia needs to have a voting ‘opt’ system like the state of Oregon which automatically registers citizens who turn 18 and allows reinstatement of voting rights for people who have been incarcerated...

Second issue: Documented vs undocumented workers and school registration

There’s disparity in the student registration process for VBCPS. The requirements are not consistent at each school. The VBCPS need to address the professional development of all registrars to ensure proper training is given to all registrars and that the principals are accountable for this action. In general, some citizens possess false perceptions of immigrants generated out of fear. Many immigrants have broken family units to create a better life for their family members.

Recommended Actions:

- Create a pathway to citizenship in a clear and respectful manner. Virginia Beach should develop a humanistic pathway to solve the problems
- Youth need a vehicle to be engaged with work/job while engaged in school
- Immigration sponsorship laws need to be updated. It’s a very complicated process to understand and follow
• Guardianship vs undocumented immigrants are a problem. Need to make a process that is equitable and smooth
• VBCPS leadership wants to know if a parent is having a difficult time with registration. A Parent Advocacy Office/Services is needed
• Clarify that school principals are the advocate for students and parents

Third issue: Homelessness

Although the City of Virginia Beach is working hard to create more housing for the homeless population, the demand is continually rising and more resources are needed to maintain this problem. Many people who suffer from homelessness have mental or physical challenges. It was stated that Virginia is “pathetic” when it comes to providing mental services and that the legislature has not worked on behalf of children, the poor, veterans, mentally ill, or incarcerated parents. Children cannot vote and need advocates. VBCPS currently has 708 students who are homeless. There are many young people who are ‘couch hoppers’ who are very vulnerable to human trafficking. State and local housing regulation conflict with one another and causes more complications to the homeless issue. There are agencies, such as the grass root program “Stand Up for Kids”, who works with young people living on the streets.