Summary of Recommendations of A School Climate Needs Assessment:
Greater New Bedford Regional Vocational Technical High School

Greater New Bedford Regional Vocational Technical High School’s (GNB Voc-Tech) School Board requested the support of The New England Equity Assistance Center (NEEAC) in understanding the current school climate at the school and in making recommendations for improving climate for all students. In November 2015, NEEAC began a needs assessment at GNB Voc-Tech to systematically determine the current school climate, provide recommendations for improving climate, and support the prioritization of needs and gaps as identified by the data.

The NEEAC needs assessment in GNB Voc-Tech high school included data collected from the following sources, all of which were collected and analyzed by the NEEAC:

- Student and staff equity-focused school climate surveys (2,115 student responses and 351 staff responses);
- Student, teacher, and parent focus groups (eight student focus groups with 56 students; two teacher focus groups with 19 teachers; and two parent focus groups with 13 parents);
- School Leadership interviews (11 school level leadership personnel); and
- The GNB Voc-Tech student handbook, which includes the school’s bullying and harassment policies.

These data were analyzed and determined to be a reliable and valid sample of stakeholders from the school and community for needs assessment purposes; however, it is noted that these methods and data are not designed to include all stakeholder perspectives, rather provide a representative sample.

The purpose of the school climate needs assessment was to provide the School Board with data-driven recommendations to move forward. A focus on recommendations reflects the nature of
NEEAC’s role, which is to support schools in improving opportunities and access for all students while respecting student identity and voice. The data were collected and analyzed to provide a reliable foundation to leverage meaningful recommendations. In some cases, GNB Voc-Tech has already begun work around these recommendations since this data collection, which took place November 2015 through February 2016.

Overall the data gathered at GNB Voc-Tech revealed a generally good school climate where students develop strong relationships with a few teachers and feel physically safe. A good school climate and strong sense of pride does not negate the feelings and experiences of some stakeholders. Acknowledging and addressing incidents will help create a more positive climate for all stakeholders and may create a stronger sense of community. Stakeholders were consistently invested in GNB Voc-Tech and therefore were vocal about strategies to improve communication and collaboration across the school community. Given this foundation, GNB Voc-Tech’s generally good school climate can be improved to better serve all students and parents and reduce the risk of future bullying and harassment incidences.

NEEAC Recommendations for GNB Voc-Tech High School

1. **Review and revise the school’s policies and procedures for responding to incidents of race, ethnic and sex-based harassment and bullying and provide whole school training on what verbal and physical bullying and harassment are, the reporting process at the school, and the communication of incidences.** There were school-wide inconsistencies about what is considered bullying and harassment and at what level students and policy tolerate “joking.” While parents and teachers noted the high threshold that students have for verbal bullying and harassment, information from stakeholders indicated a lack of clear understanding of the boundaries between joking and bullying or bullying and harassment. Athletes, racial and ethnic sub-groups of students, and other gender sub-group of students reported higher levels of bullying and harassment than the average GNB Voc-Tech student. Stakeholders were also not consistent on the reporting process for incidences and reported little to no follow-up communications regarding incidences. One step toward reducing these disparities is providing a consistent, school-wide training that includes the school’s definition of verbal and physical bullying and harassment as well as the reporting process and expectations for follow-up communication. A review of policies and procedures should examine the overall effectiveness of the policies and procedures in responding to complaints of bullying, harassment and
discrimination and ensure compliance with federal and state laws, including civil rights laws. As part of this examination, GNB Voc-Tech should evaluate the policies and procedures for clarity and appropriate dissemination and its process for documenting, tracking and monitoring of incidents. The training should focus on race and sex-based harassment, diversity and inclusion (expanded upon in recommendation two), and athletics given the incidence levels reported by students within the school. With the whole school receiving the same training, this has the potential to increase the opportunities for communication as well as accountability (also expanded upon in recommendation three).

2. **Provide whole school training on harassment, diversity and inclusion to raise awareness and accountability.** GNB Voc-Tech is a diverse school with students coming from diverse communities. Stakeholders appeared to have a sense of the benefits of this diversity, but not the depth. For example, students and teachers often mentioned White, Black, and Hispanic students who get along at the school; however, American Indian/Alaskan Native, Middle Eastern/South Asian, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander students, and students who identified as other gender consistently reported the lowest school climate as well as the highest verbal and physical bullying and harassment incidence rates. Focus group and interview data also noted African American and Asian students as well as student athletes experienced verbal bullying and harassment. Students described that “being different” at GNB Voc-Tech is tough, which is more complex than just being other than the majority/White. Staff and students need to deepen their understanding of diversity and inclusion, which will support the school in implementing recommendation one. NEEAC recommends that GNB Voc-Tech immediately establish an action committee with representation from administration, staff, faculty, students, and parents (maybe one or two from each stakeholder group) to develop a comprehensive plan for training and professional development that addresses topics such as race and sex-based harassment, cultural competency, implicit bias and micro-aggressions. This committee should also review communication and activities to further deeper conversations around diversity and inclusion (building on recommendations three and four below).

3. **Increase opportunities for collaboration and communication among all stakeholders both within and outside the school community.** GNB Voc-Tech has several opportunities to increase communication and collaboration, including: among vocational and academic teachers, among vocational programs/shops, from administration to teachers, students, and parents, and parent and community. Stakeholders noted how the division between academic and vocational
teachers was affecting GNB Voc-Tech’s school climate. The description of favoritism among staff who are alumni and competitive shops was consistent across stakeholders. Additionally, there was a strong interest from parents to be more involved in the school community beyond disciplinary actions. Opportunities like a school newsletter or teacher shadowing between academic and vocational programs were mentioned as activities the school used to do and were useful. It will be important for GNB Voc-Tech to solicit collaboration and communication strategies from staff, students, and parents to ensure buy-in and implementation. Identifying and planning these community events might be another action item of the committee described in recommendation two. Increasing the opportunities, both formal and informal, for collaboration and communication within and outside GNB Voc-Tech will also provide support for recommendations one and two.

4. **Analyze data regarding school level equity and access, and develop strategies for reviewing and responding to these data.** The next step following this needs assessment is to review data focused on equity within the school, including:

- Track student demographics by vocational program, advanced/honors courses, athletics, and post-secondary paths;
- Track ELL students’ identification and services;
- Track incidents of bullying and harassment school-wide disaggregated by student sub-groups; and
- Track and examine staff demographics as a representation of GNB Voc-Tech students in terms of race/ethnicity, gender, cultural background, geographic location, alumni status, and professional development.

NEEAC recommends that GNB Voc-Tech review these data on an ongoing basis, either annually or quarterly to continue to monitor equity gaps. The committee to identify the diversity and inclusion training (recommendation two), might also review the ongoing equity data and provide action steps.

The NEEAC provides these four recommendations to GNB Voc-Tech based on needs assessment data collected. These recommendations organize the equity gaps found in the school climate data collected; however, they require the school to develop tailored action items within each. The NEEAC will continue to consult with GNB Voc-Tech as they develop these action items and work to improve their school climate.