

System Strategies to Advance Educational Equity

Lessons from a
District Learning Cohort



Center
for Global
Education



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DISTRICTS IN COHORT		# OF STUDENTS
CA	Cajon Valley Union School District	17,468
CA	Compton Unified School District	22,975
FL	Broward County Public Schools	271,517
FL	School District of Palm Beach County	176,724
MO	Springfield Public Schools	25,609
OH	Middletown City Schools	6,248
OH	Princeton City School District	6,141
OR	Portland Public Schools	49,478
SC	Richland School District 2	28,565
WA	Highline Public Schools	17,837

Creating truly equitable school systems is the only way to guarantee that every child has an equal share in the promise of public education. Right now, too many kids across our country are being denied the promise of what public education can, and should, give.

—*Superintendent
Susan Enfield
Highline Public Schools,
Washington*

System Strategies to Advance Educational Equity

LESSONS FROM A 10-DISTRICT LEARNING COHORT

At the time of this writing, in the summer of 2020, equity is at the center of conversations about school district policies, the design of the school day, and student learning experiences. The COVID-19 pandemic and rapid shift to remote learning that occurred nationwide in March 2020 highlighted both the central role of schools in the lives of students and their families and the stark inequities that impact student learning—from food security to access to remote instruction to socio-emotional needs. Opportunities to reimagine education through an equity lens were amplified through the movement for racial justice following the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis in June 2020.

For many districts, the path to developing a more equitable system began long before these crises. In fall 2019, the Center for Global Education (CGE) at Asia Society invited teams from 10 districts—members of the Digital Promise League of Innovative Schools who were already working to create more equitable education systems—to join a learning cohort designed to foster dialogue

and peer-sharing. Four webinars and a two-day study tour of Toronto’s school district grounded the learning cohort. Toronto District School Board (TDSB) is a 247,000-student district whose history and recent leadership put equity at the core of its mission. The expectation of the visit was not that districts would replicate TDSB policies and practices, but rather that TDSB’s approaches would spark discussion within and across districts about strategies for designing a more equitable school system in their local context.

CGE engaged Policy Studies Associates (PSA) to document the reflections of system leaders in this learning cohort, and emerging strategies for articulating the commitment to equity and for operationalizing this commitment in these districts. Based on PSA researchers’ participation in the webinars, Toronto visit, and interviews with district leaders in spring 2020, this report summarizes those reflections and provides concrete examples of the ways in which districts are taking steps toward designing more equitable school systems.

The Toronto Experience Was a Catalyst for Districts

A BOLD COMMITMENT TO EQUITY

TDSB, the largest school system in Ontario, Canada, and a member of Asia Society's Global Cities Education Network, is committed to providing equitable access to learning opportunities for all students and has integrated equity into its school improvement process.

In April 2018, the TDSB Board of Trustees authorized a revised Equity Policy, originally adopted in 1999.¹ This 43-page policy explicitly places equity as a systemwide priority and foundational principle: "Fairness, Equity, Diversity, Acceptance, Inclusion, and the elimination of all forms of Discrimination are essential principles of our school system and are integrated into all TDSB policies, procedures, programs, operations, and practices." The policy document creates the infrastructure for TDSB to invest in supports for equity—whether through staff positions, professional learning, or data analysis—and to hold itself and schools accountable for achieving greater equity.

A CALL TO ACTION FOR BOLDER, MORE COURAGEOUS EQUITY CONVERSATIONS

Ten teams joined the Equitable School Systems learning cohort, committed to their district's equity journey. Leaders sought to join in a community to learn, share, and develop strategies for improving equity, expressing a desire to "move from rhetoric to action in equity issues." Toronto leaders opened the January 2020 convening in

Each and every student is capable of success. Our focus is ensuring that all students can succeed by having access—the same access—to opportunities, learning, resources and tools; with the goal of improving the outcomes of the most marginalized students. That's equity.

To do this, the TDSB has made a bold commitment to equity, human rights, anti-racism and anti-oppression. This sets the foundation to support those who have been traditionally and currently underserved, and will raise the bar for all students.

—Toronto Equity
Statement



photo by Santi Vedri on unsplash

Toronto with a call to action, encouraging districts to “place the truth on the table” in challenging the status quo. Language is important, they emphasized.

A major outcome of the Toronto visit was an inspired set of district leaders reenergized and emboldened in their equity work. Comments from attendees across the 10 districts provided evidence that seeing how TDSB operationalized its equity policy served as a catalyst and validator of efforts back in their districts. TDSB’s recommendations to lead and communicate with courage resonated with districts, and attendees were inspired to become bolder and more intentional:

- “Are we ready to strip ourselves of the terminology of equity and just say anti-racist? Is our school district and our community willing and ready to talk about anti-racism? ... [Toronto] kind of became a lightning bolt and a catalyst for us to say, we may not be ready, but it’s time.” —Superintendent Baron Davis, Richland School District 2, South Carolina
- “We already had equity on our mind. And when Asia Society approached us with this opportunity to go to Toronto and really take a deep look at the systemic efforts that they have, the policies and practices, it really catapulted our thinking forward. It started challenging what we were thinking so that

Name racism when you see it. We used to talk about bias, discrimination, coded in a lot of other language.

*—Associate Director,
Equity, Well-Being and
School Improvement,
Toronto District School
Board*

we held true to our commitment to equity. We have deepened our understanding of equity and had a chance to really explore some of the systemic pieces that they've been practicing for years in Toronto. They really inspired us here in Middletown." — Superintendent Marlon Styles Jr., Middletown City Schools, Ohio

- "We're probably one of the first in our region to move this aggressively and do this equity work. That can result in a lot of pushback, both internally and externally, but it was affirming to hear that other districts are working through this together." —Superintendent John Jungmann, Springfield Public Schools, Missouri
- "We walked away saying, 'Oh my goodness. They've asked the tough questions and they've received all the arrows from the community for even asking those questions. They looked at data. They interrogated the reality, and what they found was not pretty. They were owning it and working toward redefining that.' Our district has not done that to the same extent. We've done it in a general sense, but not in a targeted 'This is what we need to do for our black students. This is what we need to do for our socioeconomically disadvantaged students.' It's all been generalizations." —Principal, Cajon Valley Union School District, California.

As a superintendent committed to building a truly equitable, anti-racist school system, I have to be very clear on where I stand and why, and I also have to be bold and take risks.... I think it's knowing your why and what you are not willing to compromise and what you are willing to lose your job over, because this is not work for the faint of heart.

—Superintendent Susan Enfield, Highline Public Schools, Washington

Strategies and Actions

This report describes the actions and strategies in TDSB and learning-cohort districts for communicating their systemwide commitment to equity and, in turn, translating equity commitments to action, organized around six themes:

1. Set a clear and explicit vision for equity
2. Ensure that equity is owned at all levels
3. Translate equity plans into actions
4. Build equity capacity among school staff and leaders
5. Ensure equitable access to quality instruction
6. Enable students and families to thrive

1. Set a Clear and Explicit Vision for Equity

TDSB's multi-year strategic plan, developed through a critical inquiry design process, has five goals, including: *Provide equity of access to learning opportunities for all students.*² The plan sets the equity vision for TDSB and commits the system to reviewing policies and procedures to ensure equity of access to learning experiences for students, and to positions of responsibility for staff. TDSB leaders shared that this vision can create pushback—and anger—as voices of power and privilege feel challenged as systems are questioned and redesigned.

ARTICULATING A COURAGEOUS EQUITY VISION REQUIRES VULNERABILITY

District leaders in the learning cohort are prepared for the dedication required for equity work to be deep and sustained. Reflecting on the visit to Toronto, Tom Burton, superintendent of Princeton City School District in Ohio, noted the need to both “model vulnerability and be really blunt” as the district develops actionable steps toward equity. The assistant superintendent of Global Education and Community Outreach in the School District of Palm Beach County, Florida, resonated with TDSB's advice that success comes when there is a willingness to grapple with discomfort.

She noted the need to change the culture of school systems: “Let's try to figure out a culture and an environment in which we are able to tell

each other, ‘Hey, that hurts me,’ or ‘That made me feel uncomfortable.’ ... We have to create that culture. And that is hard, hard work. And the worst part about that work is that it requires a level of humanity, and humility, and empathy, and partnership, and trust. What it doesn't require is the fake nice. The fake nice is what we are very good at.”

Similarly, Dr. Susan Enfield, the Highline Public Schools superintendent, echoed learning from Toronto that district leaders must take risks, calling out inequities and serving as examples of commitment and self-reflection. She explained, “As leaders, we really need to model it and show our colleagues that we are learning as well.” She reflected on how leaders of color have had to conform to the system and that she has a role to play in ensuring they can be their authentic selves without fear of being held to a different standard, whether by faculty, community, or supervisors. She acknowledged that calling out anti-blackness or other issues of race and identity often gets pushback, but that it is essential to do so in carrying out an equity vision, and that includes in discussions with students.



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THE EVENTS OF 2020 HAVE BROUGHT NEW URGENCY TO CONVERSATIONS AROUND EQUITY

Shortly after the visit to Toronto, the COVID-19 pandemic and the call for racial justice following the death of George Floyd accelerated the urgency for districts to address inequities. The events of 2020 have also provided an opportunity to put a spotlight on inequities and to gather support. One superintendent explained, “Before if we had a conversation around equity, not many people wanted to listen or hear what you had to say.... We as a profession have to try to take advantage of the moment right now, and the sheer number of people who want to join the fight around equity.”

However, these same events highlighted fears that the commitment to equity will be tested in many districts, and leaders reflected on the need for more intentional conversations as they navigate decisions and policies for supporting students and families that have been marginalized historically:

We have done for years a lot of work on racial equity, and nothing has changed. And you begin to think, we’re just going through the motions, but are we really doing anything that’s actionable? And I think that now, God willing, none of us have any choice but do the actions that need to be done.

—Assistant
superintendent,
Global Education and
Community Outreach,
School District of Palm
Beach County, Florida

- “There is a tension in our system at large to respond quickly to COVID-19, but it is important to slow down enough to ensure proper response, or we can confound the inequities even more than they already are. For example, COVID-19 has added financial strain to districts across the state. As such, we need to be very intentional about how resources are used so that we do not exacerbate preexisting conditions of inequities.” —Dr. Kimberly Matier, senior director of Professional Learning and Leadership, Portland Public Schools, Oregon
- “When resources are scarce, equity becomes even more critical. We have to make sure that every family sees that they are getting support, but yes, some are going to get more support than others. We have to navigate those conversations courageously and intentionally.” —Superintendent Susan Enfield, Highline Public Schools, Washington
- “We have the conversations, but when you continue to see the inequities still there, you are not putting your policies to good use.... I know that we have structures in place, but it’s Band-Aids rather than solving the real issues. That’s what I’m starting to hear now in the national conversations. If we want to live in a society where everyone can flourish, what role does the school system play?” —Dr. Daryl Diamond, director of Innovative Learning, Broward County Public Schools, Florida

2. Ensure That it is Owned at All Levels

SCHOOL BOARDS CAN BE CRUCIAL PARTNERS IN EQUITY

Equity policies and frameworks are valuable, but change will occur only when there is commitment to the work throughout the system, including in school board priorities. In TDSB, this commitment is anchored in the adoption of the Equity Policy and multi-year strategic plan by the Board of Trustees.

Districts in the learning cohort also noted the role of the school board in fostering commitment and accountability for equity. In

Equity is not something that sits on its own; it has to be infused throughout the entire organization.

—Associate Director,
Equity, Well-Being and
School Improvement,
Toronto District School
Board

We stand in a really strong position to be able to say: “This is not just administration pushing, this is our Board of Trustees agreeing that we have to look at equity, and we have to figure out how to make our system equitable.” And so that makes our job easier as we start putting forth new ideas to some people who have been a little reluctant to get on board.

—*Superintendent Baron Davis, Richland School District 2, South Carolina*

South Carolina, the Richland School District 2 board has been instrumental in the district’s equity progress. It adopted a strong equity policy in August 2019 and has expressed support for practical implementation of the policy. The policy was drafted by the superintendent, senior leaders, and the district’s legal office, after which it went through a couple rounds of revision based on board feedback. The policy, coupled with authentic support for action, has given district leaders cover to advance changes.

In April 2020, a few months after the visit to Toronto, the Springfield Public Schools board in Missouri adopted an expanded strategic plan that includes a goal focused explicitly on equity and diversity, resulting from recommendations that emerged through a community engagement process. This created accountability for equity, as the district is driven by its strategic plan and reports twice a year on progress on every goal in the plan to the board. It also expresses the value of equity work for the board and community. According to the superintendent: “There are policy changes that the board will have to review and have public conversations about that are certainly probably outside the comfort zone of a rural Southwest Missouri region.... It’s not going to be easy to do, but it’s the right thing to do and the board’s committed to it and we’re not afraid to say that we need to modify policies.”

In Middletown City Schools in Ohio, Superintendent Marlon Styles Jr. engages the school board as a partner in equity work, saying, “The biggest thing I think that is allowing us to really be effective in reimagining systemic equity here is active participation and collaboration between myself and the Board of Education.” Board members have been involved in districtwide equity trainings and school visits, and participated in the visit to Toronto to dig into equitable education systems. The superintendent communicates with the board through weekly and monthly updates on equity and other matters, describing his approach as “overly communicating about what we are thinking, what we are doing, why we are doing it, and what we hope to get out of it.”

The Highline Public Schools board established an equity policy roughly 10 years ago.³ The policy, now in its fifth iteration, is regarded as a living document that has become clearer and more actionable over time. In addition, the board conducted an equity audit, which along with the equity policy, enabled the superintendent to make equity-driven recommendations for full-day kindergarten and equitable course offerings across high schools. The board has a long track record on this work and continues to be actively engaged. Several months after the Toronto visit, the board and cabinet began holding retreats on how to work toward becoming an anti-racist system, using the TDSB Equity Leadership Competencies as a framework.⁴

ELEVATE EQUITY TO BE CENTRAL IN DISTRICT CONVERSATIONS

TDSB has adopted a Land Acknowledgement—a statement acknowledging the traditional and ancestral lands of Indigenous people that begins all events, gatherings, and meetings, and each school day.⁵ Inspired by this acknowledgement, Princeton City School District superintendent Tom Burton is integrating a statement in all meetings about respecting the Princeton community and each student served. Through this statement, he aims to keep equity at the center of conversations and amplify respect for each student in the district.

Superintendent Marlon Styles Jr. asks Middletown City Schools district leaders to reflect on core values and how those connect to equity actions. He has prompted discussion by asking his executive team and others “Do you value equity for all kids?” and subsequently tried to keep this value connected to daily work. He explained, “Your core values have to match what you desire to put in place to help all kids. If you don’t value deep in your heart what you’re trying to do, the impact will not meet your expectations, nor will it serve all kids the way you dream of it serving.”

When I joined the board, we had a top-down culture. But we are changing the culture and the system to be more inclusive. The system was not built for a lot of our kids, and that results in large populations in our schools being underserved. When we are disrupting the status quo, we also must contend with mandates and accountability measures. So we grapple with: How do we rebuild our systems? Where does the change really need to take place?

—Board member,
Middletown City Schools,
Ohio



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3. Translate Equity Plans into Actions

In Toronto, the strategic plan sets forth concrete goals, equity actions, and indicators of success, including:

- Transforming learning by challenging inequitable structures and using restorative practices
- Integrating anti-oppression and anti-black racism into all professional learning
- Ensuring that students feel that their identities are represented positively in school
- Eliminating systemic barriers and discriminatory practices by infusing human rights principles into the work of the board, in every school, and in every workplace

The equity actions provide a level of detail that helps make the commitment to equity and the equity policy concrete in the daily work of schools and of system leaders.

We have the conversations but when you continue to see the inequities still there, you are not putting your policies to good use.

—Dr. Daryl Diamond,
director of Innovative
Learning, Broward
County Public Schools,
Florida

IDEAS ARE NOT SUFFICIENT WITHOUT A PLAN FOR ACTION

Leaders who participated in the Toronto visit reflected that districts can have courageous conversations and agree on a vision for greater equity, but that ideas alone will not lead to change. As in Toronto, a commitment to concrete practices and supports will be required for real change. A Broward County Public Schools leader described regular courageous conversations about enhancing equitable access to academic pathways and disrupting inequitable discipline policies. Those conversations are important, but insufficient for addressing the root causes of inequitable outcomes in the district.

AN EQUITY FRAMEWORK OR TOOL CAN OPERATIONALIZE POLICY IN DECISION-MAKING AND PRACTICE

Leveraging inspiration from discussions in Toronto, Richland School District 2 in South Carolina is developing a framework that will be used to apply an “equity test or equity lens” to decisions in the district, building off the 2019 board-approved equity policy. The district’s strategic plan and practices will be judged on whether they are equitable. Superintendent Baron Davis described an ongoing effort to comprehensively review district and board policies to ensure they do not “create some sort of systematic or systemic obstacle or barrier for our students, regardless of their race, gender, creed, or religion, or whatever it may be.”

How do you make sure that whatever equity lens or equity tool you’re using is actually impacting day-to-day practice?

—*Superintendent Susan Enfield, Highline Public Schools, Washington*

While Highline Public Schools in Washington has long had an equity policy, Superintendent Susan Enfield pointed to the persistent challenge in translating an equity vision into daily practice districtwide, so that it is “infused in everything you do.” In response, the district has developed an Equity Lens tool that asks staff to consider questions about the impacts of a decision on historically marginalized groups and communities. For instance, when a school is thinking of adding, modifying, or ending a program, the team will use questions in the tool to examine equity implications. At the district level, senior leaders use the Equity Lens to consider the intended and unintended impact of changing school boundaries.

4. Build Equity Capacity Among School Staff and Leaders

The TDSB builds the capacity of all system leaders and staff to impact equity, responsiveness, and engagement through professional learning, with a focus on anti-oppression and anti-racism. In debriefing school visits, members of the learning cohort observed:

- “The principal was phenomenal, the way he facilitates creating the conditions, and that cascades from director down into classroom. He understood distributive leadership and how to build capacity.... The custodian is called a ‘caretaker’ and helps to build academic identity of students. It permeated every aspect in school and community.” —Dr. Kimberly Matier, senior director of Professional Learning and Leadership, Portland Public Schools, Oregon
- “We saw an equity coach who is doing training beyond what the principal can do. The coach was modeling instruction in the classroom and they talked about policy work to move the school forward. That focused resource could help the building grow.” — Chief Equity Officer, Springfield Public Schools, Missouri



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LEARNING FROM VISITS TO TDSB SCHOOLS

While in Toronto, CGE and Digital Promise organized participants from the 10 districts into six school visit teams. Each team visited a school selected by TDSB leaders, where they spent a half-day observing and discussing educational opportunity and equity with students, teachers, and school leaders. During and afterward, participants said they gained new insights and inspiration related to school-level practices and staff capacities. Salient takeaways from the TDSB schools included:

1. School leaders set the conditions for creative thinking and a shared commitment to equity “that cascades down to the classroom.”
2. School staff use a shared language of opportunity and anti-racism, and they engage in ongoing on-the-job professional learning and collaboration to improve equity.
3. School staff are creative and bold in organizing educational programming to expand opportunities for all students to pursue their interests and make the most of their assets.
4. School staff leverage student voice and agency to ensure that student experiences reflect their interests and that the school can continuously improve.
5. School staff work to ensure the well-being of students, such as by addressing trauma, restoring the dignity of all learners, and counteracting institutionalized oppression.
6. School staff engage students in structured learning experiences that focus explicitly on their experience of identity, privilege, and racism.

I don't know how you get systemic results if you don't strengthen school leadership. We don't want pockets of success. We want systemic success. School leaders are a lever for building capacity across the system.... What are those leadership moves that disrupt and create better outcomes for our historically underserved populations?

—Dr. Kimberly Matier,
senior director of
Professional Learning
and Leadership, Portland
Public Schools, Oregon

SCHOOL LEADERS ARE LEVERS FOR EQUITY

Over the past year, Portland Public Schools in Oregon has developed a Racial Equity and Social Justice framework⁶ and begun working with various district leaders to strengthen equity leadership.

Leadership is regarded as a key lever in creating the conditions for school change in the district, and Portland Public Schools is developing a system for aspiring principals and new leaders driven by state leader standards. The district, with support from the New York City Leadership Academy, is training district leaders to identify bias- and deficit-based beliefs, and what to look for to know that leaders are translating equity knowledge into practice. Part of this work is also ensuring that administrators have shared nomenclature and understanding of racial equity and social justice in hiring practices, leadership training and development, and principal supervision.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AT ALL DISTRICT LEVELS CAN PROMOTE MEANINGFUL CHANGE

To operationalize its equity vision, Highline Public Schools in Washington implements Teaching Tolerance Social Justice Standards,⁷ infuses curriculum with books and conversations about race and bias, and holds book studies for staff and families. The district also holds districtwide equity symposiums, led in part by Superintendent Susan Enfield, including a symposium to kick off the 2019–20 school year focused explicitly on anti-racist work. The superintendent also pointed to deep capacity within the district, saying she taps into that expertise to change staff understanding and behavior. Though Highline Public Schools has been facing recent budget cuts, the Toronto visit reinforced a commitment to investing in equity-focused professional learning, and the superintendent is exploring the feasibility of creating an equity coach position that would work with school and district teams on using an equity tool to inform decision-making processes.

At Springfield Public Schools in Missouri, the Chief Equity Officer is a direct report to the superintendent, elevating the importance of the position. In addition, the entire district senior leadership team participated in Facing Racism training. The district is

identifying Equity Champions in every school building—a teacher or a counselor—trained by the Chief Equity Officer to promote the district’s equity priorities and facilitate responses to emerging needs within schools. Through these multiple touchpoints, the work of the Chief Equity Officer can permeate more deeply in the system, with both supports in every building and the ear of the executive leadership team.

BUILDING EMPATHY CAN BE A FOUNDATION FOR EQUITY

Some Cajon Valley Union School District schools in California engage staff in poverty simulations⁸ designed to build empathy to better engage in equity work and support all families, and the district aims to scale up these simulations to all schools. Through these simulations, staff experience the decisions and tasks that students and families face each day, faced with limited resources and with language and/or cultural barriers. As a principal explained, “If we can help teachers understand what those implicit biases are and understand what kind of empathy steps they need to take to truly understand who they’re serving, we’re going to get a huge return on investment by identifying the barriers to the person that we’re serving. I like to say that we’re a community of many and a school of one. How are we using that power to identify the needs of the individual that we serve?”

Similarly, in 2018–19, every employee of Middletown City Schools in Ohio, and all board members, participated in a half-day poverty simulation. The following year, across four weeks, every district employee engaged in poverty and cultural-bias training in partnership with community organizations.

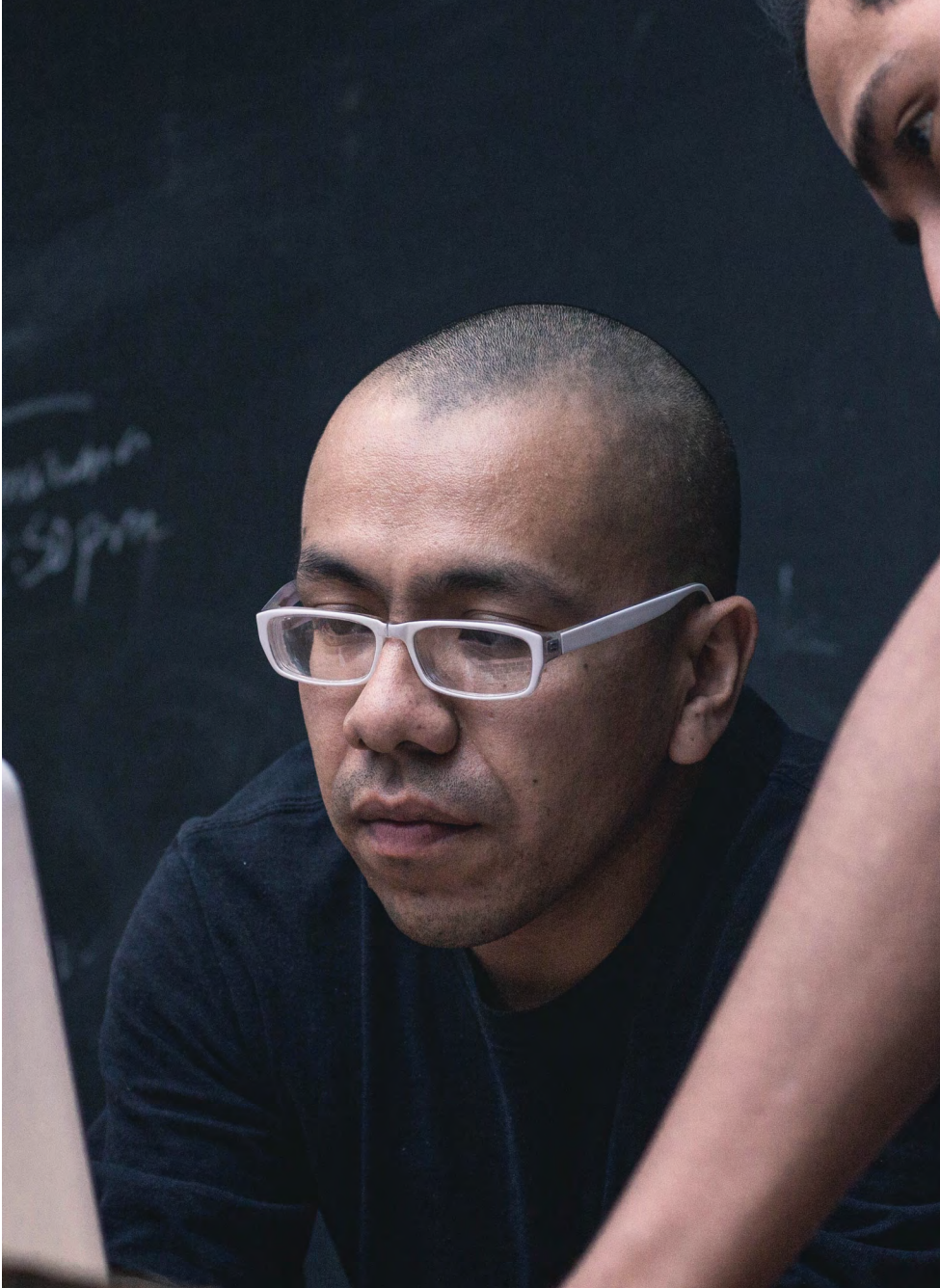


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I hear from African American teachers, “I’m not authentic in the classroom,” or they struggle with this idea of being authentic. It’s difficult to be fully self-actualized if you’re not authentically who you are.... One of the things that we wanted to do with this support system was to make sure that our black men did not feel isolated.

—*Superintendent
Baron Davis, Richland
School District 2, South
Carolina*

A DIVERSE WORKFORCE CAN BE CULTIVATED AND SUPPORTED

Richland School District 2’s equity strategy includes ensuring that students have access to culturally relevant pedagogy, including by working to increase and sustain the number of African American male teachers in the district. Superintendent Baron Davis saw a need for teachers who could connect with and serve as positive role models for students of color. Whereas roughly two percent of teachers are black males nationally, the district’s teaching force is composed of six percent black males—a proportion he believes should be increased to improve student outcomes. To expand the pipeline of candidates of color, he has partnered with local educator-

preparation programs and brought aspiring teachers to the district for a day for school visits, meetings with district and school leaders, and discussions over meals. He also promotes teaching as a career to current students, hoping to develop a long-range pipeline for the district.

Nevertheless, he is working to overcome challenges in attracting and retaining black male teachers. He has developed support structures, such as mentoring and informal networks, and encourages the teachers to be their authentic selves and take risks. Though it was disrupted by COVID-19, the district planned a conference of black male educators, for those in Richland School District 2 and others across the state to engage in discussion of pedagogy.

5. Ensure Equitable Access to Quality Instruction

TDSB leaders discussed their commitment to ensuring equitable access to high-quality instructional opportunities, including by examining data for inequitable trends that can be interrupted. School leaders in Toronto are challenged to bring an equity lens to the data for their schools and identify what they can do for students who are marginalized or outliers in the data. They are encouraged to put contextual information around the data, asking themselves: What contributes to the data you are seeing?

DATA CAN MAKE THE CASE FOR MORE EQUITABLE INSTRUCTIONAL POLICIES

A core component of equity plans for districts in the learning cohort is ensuring that all students have access to high-quality instruction and learning opportunities. Districts are committed to identifying subgroups whose academic performance should be improved. The School District of Palm Beach County uses data as a tool to guide conversations with school leadership teams around equity. For example, predictive data analysis brought to light inequitable

What is our story based on what our data says? ... When you can look at data honestly and communicate moral imperative, you can start on redesign. So you start shining light on levers and can see a result, not the final result, but a result.

*—Dr. John Malloy,
former director of
education, Toronto
District School Board*

course placements; leaders examined the performance of incoming students in middle and high schools, and their predicted success based on those incoming scores. They compared those data to actual course placement. According to the assistant superintendent, “It was mind boggling. It was a good eye opener for many principals. Because you had kids, African American kids, that had predictions to be highly successful in those classes that were not placed in higher courses.... These kids actually had every indication in their academic profile that they were ready for that course. It was you that didn’t place them in that course.”

Highline Public Schools Superintendent Susan Enfield also described data as essential in making the case for equity. When she arrived at the district, she shared disproportionate expulsion and suspension data with the board to discuss changes to discipline policies. Similarly, the stagnation of graduation rates provides evidence for the need for change. She explained, “Data can daylight the issue, and then it’s not about me or what I want; it’s about what the data compels us to do.... Keeping the data at the core is how you make the case.”

INVESTING IN ENRICHING LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES CAN SUSTAIN EQUITABLE ACCESS

The Compton Unified School District in California strives to provide rich, rigorous learning opportunities for all students, on par with those available to students in wealthier districts. To amplify equitable access to rich learning, the district has invested in providing students with access to instructional technology; improving the hiring and retention of high-quality teachers; and creating a culture in which teachers are supported in taking risks.

As a result, when COVID-19 closed schools, instructional quality in Compton was less disrupted than in other districts. Compton Unified had already built a comprehensive distance learning portal and continues to improve upon it in the COVID-19 era. The portal provides core academic resources and a wide variety of project-based and enrichment opportunities, whether for the school year,

Equity is improving teacher quality, recruiting and retaining good teachers, and creating a culture that takes risks. This has been huge in distance learning where they moved from using technology as a substitute tool to redefining the learning experience.

—Senior Director of Instructional Technology, Compton Unified School District, California

summer school, or after school.⁹ Students can take advantage of online learning experiences in coding, music, commerce, eSports, artificial intelligence, app development, video production, and so on.

ACCESS TO DEVICES IS CENTRAL TO ACCESS TO INSTRUCTION

COVID-19 also highlighted the importance of investing in technology to support access to learning opportunities, and this commitment was also evident in Compton Unified's actions. After schools closed, the district worked expediently to ensure students could access learning opportunities. Within two weeks it had deployed 17,000 devices and surveyed the community. Leveraging its partnerships with Verizon and Digital Promise, it identified students without Wi-Fi at home, distributed Wi-Fi-enabled iPads, and established more than 1,000 hot spots, so that all students could participate in distance learning.

Middletown City Schools in Ohio also regards internet access as an equity issue, one made more acute in the COVID-19 era. Prior to COVID-19, the district had already been working hard to address equitable access to instruction, such as through ensuring a 1:1 device-to-student ratio for students in grades 3–12. Yet the pandemic made clear that many students do not have reliable internet connections, and expecting students to walk or drive to a Wi-Fi connection is an unsustainable and inequitable solution. As a result, Middletown City Schools is partnering with community groups, businesses, and internet service providers to develop a plan for universal student connectivity, but this is a difficult task for which there is no road map or clear funding stream.

We have encountered a version of the instruction and homework gap where we can't sleep at night because we know not every student has access to reliable internet inside their home. Coronavirus or no Coronavirus, remote learning or no remote learning, we know not every student is connected once they leave the walls of our school. That doesn't speak to our core values.

*—Superintendent
Marlon Styles Jr.,
Middletown City
Schools, Ohio*



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6. Enable Students and Families to Thrive

In TDSB, an Enhancing Equity Task Force pushed the system beyond a narrow definition of equity in student outcomes, to think more explicitly about strategies to give students access to opportunities to thrive.¹⁰ For instance, the TDSB multi-year strategic plan includes commitments to student well-being, calling out mental health, physical health, and student voice, as well as the expectation for “the conditions for every child in every school to experience the support of a caring adult.”¹¹

PROMOTE STUDENT VOICE AND AGENCY

A prominent takeaway from the learning cohort's visits to TDSB schools was that student voice and agency were seen as key levers for improving opportunities for students, particularly those who have been historically marginalized. Students are valued stakeholders within schools for decisions about educational and socio-emotional offerings, and they provide feedback about inclusion and access issues that can illuminate problems that need to be addressed. While the TDSB schools implement strategies for amplifying student voice—such as engaging them in structured courageous conversations about identity and race, providing opportunities for creative expression, and devoting time and structures for each student to build relationships with adults in the school—learning cohort members noted that school staff and leadership appeared to promote student agency in all their interactions with students. One said, “They focused on restoring black students’ dignity,” and another observed, “Student power is if the student has an opportunity to act on their voice.”

IDENTIFY SUPPORTS FOR STUDENTS TO THRIVE, NOT JUST ACADEMICALLY

Districts in the learning cohort described nonacademic factors that are barriers to growth and learning for students and their families, including lack of access to health care, food security, stable housing, mental health supports, and other essential services that would help them achieve their potential. Some parents and families lack a sense of connection to school or they are uncertain of how to best navigate the educational system or support their children's learning. Districts are tackling these issues head-on, working to fill or bridge gaps in the social safety net. Often these efforts were in close partnership with community partners and other agencies.

For example, Middletown City Schools in Ohio, where nearly 100 percent of students receive free or reduced-price lunches, is committed to addressing student and family wellness so “all of our students are healthy and ready to learn,” says Superintendent Marlon Styles, Jr. The district worked with a health care partner

(which contributes substantial funds) to establish a Student Wellness Center where students can receive high-quality health care during and outside of the school day, including dental, eye, immunization, and pediatric care. The board of education has provided for a van and driver to transport students to the center and return them to school. The district works with parents to help them complete registration paperwork.

Middletown City Schools has also thought creatively about how to feed hungry students. The district operates a food truck that is active year-round and opens at district events and community drop spots to provide free healthy meals to students (adults pay a small fee). Superintendent Marlon Styles Jr. advocated for thinking differently about partnering and allocating resources for equitable well-being.

ENGAGE FAMILIES AS PARTNERS

TDSB engages community liaisons to help provide a bridge between families and schools. Similarly, the Cajon Valley Union School District in California is becoming more intentional in engaging and supporting families. The liaison role in TDSB resonated with a leader for Cajon Valley Union School District, who reflected that “One of the biggest struggles that I see in some of my families is it’s clear that there are some scars from what school was to them.”

In response, the Cajon Valley Union School District’s Family & Community Engagement (FACE) Office is implementing Family-Teacher Teams¹² that repurpose the traditional back-to-school night and parent-teacher conferences into a time of connection. The goal is to provide families strategies to support learning while breaking down the barriers between families and schools. Meetings start with a “harmony circle” in which parents express their hopes for their child. Liaisons who speak the languages prevalent in the school support community outreach and help to improve communication between teachers and families. Many families, including immigrant and refugee families in the district, distrust the education system as a form of government or are simply uncomfortable interacting with educators. The liaison helps to bridge the cultural gap of what is happening in the home and what is happening at school.

Next Steps: Building an Equitable School System Is a Continuous Journey

There is no blueprint for designing an equitable school system. It requires a sustained and contextualized commitment to individual and systemic change. One major outcome from participation in the learning cohort is that senior leaders from the 10 districts convened by Asia Society and Digital Promise expressed a deepened commitment to ongoing reflection, conversations, and meaningful actions to improve equitable opportunities for all students.

In addition to deepening staff capacity for equity actions, these leaders spoke of a need to remove educational barriers that are institutionalized and ingrained in systems designed for inequitable outcomes. An associate director from TDSB elaborated, saying, “[While] our goal is to create a through line from educator preservice to leadership development that continues to deepen our learning

The biggest challenge is in thinking we’ve done enough or that we can’t do more. Equity must be at the forefront of planning. It’s difficult because you can get pulled in any direction. The board wants to improve test scores, and all of a sudden you’re talking about instructional struggles. You have to look at instructional strategies through an equity lens.

—*Superintendent Tom Burton, Princeton City School District, Ohio*



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It takes a courageous leader to step into the space and admit that you don't have all the answers. Because often, as leaders and superintendents, we're expected to have the solutions.

There is no playbook to this.... But if you wait for the playbook, there's going to be a lot of kids that have been underserved and you're not going to be part of the solution. It takes courage, and I think we just need to call up more leaders to be courageous.

—*Superintendent John Jungmann, Springfield Public Schools, Missouri*



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about racism and identity and anti-oppression, ... you can send a changed person into an unchanged environment, and the environment wins every time. Are we creating places where deep and brave conversations can happen?"

Districts in the learning cohort, with support from Asia Society and Digital Promise, have continued to meet and are exploring ways to expand collaborative engagement around the development of equitable anti-racist school systems. Digital Promise convened the districts virtually in the months following the January 2020 visit to Toronto and, with Asia Society, intends to draw on the lessons learned as it builds a systemic redesign initiative. The vision is for a collective of bold district leaders to dismantle inequitable systems and create the conditions for black and brown children to thrive. Such an effort requires sustained courage and significant effort within districts, who can benefit from opportunities to learn from other systems within and outside of the United States, as well as resources and targeted support from Digital Promise and Asia Society.

Notes

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