

Equity Goals and Equity Visits

Leaders in a superintendent network jointly study each other's diverse schools to pursue high-leverage academic goals

BY THOMAS HATCH AND RACHEL ROEGMAN/School Administrator, November 2017



Superintendent Jared Rumage (right) and Vice Principal Julius Clark of Red Bank Borough, N.J., Public Schools participate in a discussion hosted by the New Jersey Network of Superintendents.

What does leadership for equity and instruction look like? The New Jersey Network of Superintendents, launched in 2008 and supported by the Panasonic Foundation, has explored this question in monthly meetings for the past nine years. Those meetings have focused explicitly on developing superintendents' capabilities as leaders of instruction and equity.

At first, the meetings centered on instructional rounds in participating districts, with the expectation that those classroom observations would surface issues of equity. But it was often difficult to compare the learning experiences of students from different backgrounds and in

different levels or tracks, and the professionals' conversations shied away from the sensitive topics and potential conflicts that discussions of equity and race often involve.

Those experiences made it clear that a focus on instruction had to be accompanied by an explicit focus on equity. As a result, the monthly meetings now include work on specific, high-leverage equity goals in each school district, an adaptation of instructional rounds called "equity visits" and attention to the specific needs and opportunities of diverse and rapidly changing

populations in each district.

High-Leverage Goals

The basic structure and organization of schools in the United States limit rigorous learning opportunities for many students, particularly students of color and students living in poverty. But reducing the disproportionate number of African-American and Hispanic students who are suspended or placed in special education and increasing the numbers of these students who are in higher-level classes are examples of the high-leverage equity goals that school district leaders can pursue.

The New Jersey network defines high-leverage equity goals as goals that:

- » focus explicitly on the achievement of high-level learning outcomes for all students;
- » provide opportunities for visible and measurable improvements in relatively short periods of time; and
- » establish a foundation for further systemic improvements across a district.

For instance, the leaders of the Freehold Regional High School District in Monmouth County, N.J., created the Freehold Regional Opportunity Index, which shows the extent to which students from different backgrounds are underrepresented or overrepresented in particular categories, such as enrollment in AP classes and in specialized magnet programs.

When the index highlighted the fact that special education students, socioeconomically disadvantaged students and African-American and Hispanic students often “decelerated” in mathematics classes, moving from higher-level courses in 9th grade to lower-level courses in 10th and 11th grades, the district made it a high-leverage equity goal to re-verse this deceleration and increase access to higher-level math classes.

The Freehold leadership recognized what concrete steps they could take to produce relatively quick results, including eliminating the lowest-level math classes and increasing the amount of math support for the lowest-performing students in 9th grade. These initial steps helped guide them as they expanded this approach to science and other subjects.

In Passaic, N.J., a largely Hispanic, low-income district, district administrators focused on a different but common problem: Graduates who enrolled in postsecondary education were required to take remedial courses, which increased the cost and time of attaining a two-year or

four-year degree and raised the likelihood of them dropping out of college.

In response, the district established a high-leverage equity goal of ensuring all students have the chance to graduate with at least 15 college credits and/or a career certification. The Passaic leaders identified specific steps to generate an immediate return.

Those steps focused on the College Board's Accuplacer test, which many higher education institutions use to determine which students need remedial education. When students go to a university or community college, however, many have never heard of the Accuplacer.

"They have no idea about the content and they have no preparation to take it," Passaic's assistant superintendent, Rachel Goldberg, says, "so what we're doing is trying to change that game by viewing the Accuplacer as a key gateway to college."

In 2015-16, the district began administering the Accuplacer to all high school juniors and seniors. The initiative enabled the district to do two things:

- » identify students who are already eligible to enroll in courses that offer college credit, which provides the "quick win" that can build momentum for further gains; and
- » design after-school and summer school programs for students identified as needing extra support.

Passaic also is expanding opportunities for SAT preparation and Advanced Placement courses so all students are better prepared to apply to college and complete a four-year college track.

Quality for All

In addition to access to higher-level coursework, all students need access to powerful instruction to succeed. To help the superintendents and their districts sharpen their focus on both instruction and equity, the New Jersey network members engage in "equity visits" every other month during the academic year in which they may visit a participating superintendent's district.

The superintendents' daylong visits feature small-group classroom observations, as they did in the past. However, observers now also consider disaggregated data on student performance, data on suspensions, assignment to special education, student access to higher-level courses and other indicators related to equity.

Observations often are accompanied by activities such as interviews with students and teachers and discussions of student work. These make it easier to identify discrepancies and inequities in

instruction. The network members also use routines and protocols such as consultancies and fishbowls to surface areas of conflict, ambiguity and superficial understanding in their own discussions.

The discussions involving network participants provide the host school district with key issues to pursue in developing their next levels of work on equity and instruction. At the same time, the visiting superintendents gain new ideas and formulate new questions to ask in their own districts that can advance their work.

Diversity in Diversity

The districts involved in the network share common problems, such as how to increase student access to higher-level learning opportunities. Yet differences in the specific racial, cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds of the students and families in each school district create quite different conditions for each district's work on equity.

In one suburban district, fewer than 2 percent of the residents in 1970 were African American. By 2000, the African-American population comprised more than 30 percent as middle- and upper-income African-American families moved into the district. Now, the percentage of African-American families is decreasing as more Hispanic and Asian families move into the area.

In another high-income district, the increasing numbers of families moving to the U.S. from East Asia has fueled a substantial population increase as well as a much more diverse population. By 2011-12, the student population in the senior class was 60 percent white and the kindergarten class was 60 percent Asian, and by 2013-14, the population of Asian students in the district as a whole had grown to about 60 percent.

A middle-income district that had a largely white population before 2000 has grown much more diverse, as families have arrived from India, China and Mexico. From the perspective of the administrators in that district, the change happened almost overnight. The transformation has continued such that all the schools in the district now have almost equal percentages of white, African-American, Asian and Hispanic students.

Within these districts, gaps in learning opportunities and performance have emerged between white and African-American students from families with relatively high incomes; between high-performing Asian students and high-performing white, African-American and Hispanic students; and between immigrant students from East Asia and immigrant students from Mexico.

In short, the diversity of the population and the speed of population change in each district

contribute to unique conditions that education leaders must learn to navigate. That navigation has to take into account the racial and cultural backgrounds of all members of the community, the specific character of the equity issues that are emerging, the extent to which those issues are recognized by the community and the extent to which those issues already are being examined in opposing or collaborative ways.

The network meetings create opportunities for superintendents to describe and compare their work on equity, reflecting particularly on how to adapt to the needs of their communities.

Pressure and Support

Education leaders should not be left to work on issues of equity on their own. They can benefit from support and engagement in collegial groups, such as the New Jersey Network of Superintendents. By working together, leaders gain access to relevant information, resources and expertise and to the intellectual, emotional and moral support that can help sustain a focus on fundamental questions of equity and instruction.

As one superintendent declared, the network provides both “pressure and support” by inspiring the members to focus on equity and by expecting them to report back on what they are doing. “What have I done since the last meeting to further the work?” another says. “That’s where the guilt emerges, but it does give hope.”

In the end, the work of the network members demonstrates the essential contributions that individual education leaders make to the fight for equity in their school communities. At the same time, the experiences of the network members demonstrate that issues of equity are not just local issues; equity issues cut across all communities.

Progress demands collective leadership that brings together those inside and outside schools in a common commitment to address the social, cultural, economic and political issues that transcend district boundaries.

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