



VIRTUAL EQUITY

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DEVELOPING SYSTEMS OF EQUITY FOR A NEW GENERATION

Monday, October 25, 2021 • 10:30 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.

CHELTENHAM SCHOOL DISTRICT

The Long Journey Towards a Districtwide Educational Equity Policy

“How are the children doing?”

A CASE STUDY

Cheltenham School District

Cheltenham School District serves Cheltenham Township and is an inner ring suburban school district right on the outskirts of Philadelphia. Cheltenham Township has a population of nearly 37,000 and encompasses an area of 9.06 square miles. It shares three borders with Philadelphia. Yet, it is the 10-mile, 60-foot-wide Cheltenham Avenue that extends through the entire southern portion of the township that serves as a physical and cultural dividing boundary line of the Philadelphia residential neighborhoods.

Cheltenham School District has a long tradition of providing an excellent innovative educational space for its children. The district serves about 4,600 students and has seven buildings.

The district has four elementary schools: Cheltenham Elementary, Wyncote Elementary, Myers Elementary, and Glenside Elementary; one grades 5-6 middle school; Elkins Park Middle School; one grades 7-8 middle school; Cedarbrook Middle School; and one 9-12 high school; Cheltenham High School. The close geographic relationship to Philadelphia has allowed Cheltenham to become increasingly economically, culturally and racially diverse. The student body is 53.1% Black, 27.5% white, 8% Latinx/Hispanic, 6% Asian, and 5.2% multiracial. About 34% of the student body is economically disadvantaged. About 18% are students with special needs. The district boasts a wide range of academic programming.

Developing an Educational Equity Foundation for Cheltenham

The conversation about equity is not new in the district; it is decades in the making. The district has been disaggregating data focused on how students were doing well before No Child Left Behind in 2001. The data indicated that disparities existed in the district specifically related to achievement, as well as opportunity gaps in discipline and school climate. Students were sharing powerful and impactful stories about their inequitable experiences in the school district.



A decade later, the quantitative and qualitative data continue to highlight disparities and lack of opportunities for students of color as well as special education students. Data has shown that there is a lack of opportunity for students of color to access to certain higher-level courses. Furthermore, the discipline data showed an overidentification of students with special needs.

To meet the needs of students, the district has undergone an extensive equity program focused on professional development and strategic planning. It has been embarking on culturally responsive professional development throughout the entire district, working with the University of Pennsylvania, the Department of Education and others. The board has also engaged in equity-focused professional development.

The former superintendent also developed a culture and climate group made up of board directors, administrators, teachers, community members, families and students.

Solidifying Equity with an educational equity policy

In 2015, the district started the work of creating a strategic plan. The purpose of the plan was to align the district's priorities around student achievement and create a roadmap to address the areas that were blocking and preventing that effort. The district identified five pathways; Curriculum & Instruction, Student Achievement, Professional Learning, Holistic Experiences, and Communication and Engagement.

The development of the strategic plan also helped to realize the district's collective mission and vision for future impact. After the strategic plan, discussions about formalizing equity efforts with an equity policy began.

At the time, the board and district administration believed that they were going to just create a policy. However, after doing research on educational equity policies across the country and in Pennsylvania, conversations began about what equity mean for Cheltenham. The district realized that there was a lot of work to be done before it could be ready for a policy. What started off as a two-month process became a two-year endeavor. This process required extensive administration, student, community and stakeholder involvement to make sure that there was a common understanding of equity and to develop buy-in for the equity efforts in the district.

Equity Statement:

To build capacity for the policy, it was essential to define equity for the district. The process alone to define equity took over a year and a half because it required deep discussions on what equity is and why it is important for the district. To develop a statement, it was important to assess the disparities in the district and analyze the data specifically related to racial, gender, sexual orientation, and special education inequities that exist in the district. It was also important that the community was incorporated into the process of developing an equity statement that made sense for the lens and local context of the district. This statement also reinforced an ongoing commitment to equity by the board and administration, but most importantly, the community.

Educational equity is a shared commitment to ensure every student receives what they need to be successful.

The Cheltenham School District Board of School Directors and Administration believe all students, regardless of background or identity, must be given meaningful and engaging learning opportunities and allowed to thrive.

It is unacceptable that the educational outcomes of students in our district are overwhelmingly predictable based



on students' race, socioeconomic, ethnicity or learning differences. Our community's future success depends on our willingness, commitment and ability to effectively address equity challenges. To this end, we will dismantle institutional barriers by adopting policies and practices and strategically allocating resources that support access and opportunity for each and every student.

Equity Policy Process

The equity strategic plan and equity statement served as important precursors to the equity policy process. Since the district did the heavy lifting with the statement beforehand, the policy process went so much quicker.

The district decided to work with PSBA to support the construction and organization of an educational equity policy. Embedding the strategic plan and statement, Cheltenham's equity policy team developed a policy to meet its needs and context.

There is a misperception that equity is taking away resources from students. The equity policy team had a lot of discussions about this perception. One board director noted that even though the district had limited resources, "we need to be able to use the resources that we do have, in a way that reflects the need ... How are we utilizing our resources if there's a need and that need be met. We know that equity is not equality. Equity really is looking at how we utilize our limited resources to benefit the students that needs it the most." Starting with the purpose statement, the board directed the superintendent to address that perception and the inequities within the school district, and to remove institutional barriers for access and opportunity for all students.

The Board is committed to the success of every one of its students and believes that providing access to an equitable experience within the District is critical to facilitating such success. The purpose of this Policy is to communicate the Board's commitment to ensuring that every student has access to an equitable experience within the District and to put in place policies, procedures and practices to (1) dismantle institutional barriers that perpetuate inequitable outcomes, and (2) promote access and opportunities that benefit every student.

The Board is committed to using quantitative and qualitative disaggregated District, building-level, and individual student data to: 1. Direct the Superintendent and/or designee to identify and remove institutional barriers that result in achievement and/or opportunity gaps for students; and 2. Implement policies, practices and procedures that ensure a student's educational success is neither predetermined or predicated by factors such as a student's race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, student with identified disabilities, individual learning needs, social or economic status, or other identity related factors.

Furthermore, the district had a robust definition section to support the understanding of these terms. The terms included in the policy were the following: achievement gaps, cultural competency, cultural proficiency, culturally responsive, equitable resources, equity, equity lens, explicit bias, implicit bias, inclusion, institutional barriers, intersectionality, microaggression, opportunity gaps.



To develop goals for the policy, discussions focused on the equitable distribution of school-based discipline and the use of restorative practices as a model, high academic standards for every student, culturally responsive hiring practices, culturally responsive resources, equitable access to rigorous courses, empowering students, and developing a welcoming and inclusive school environment, as well as data review.

The board decided to operationalize these goals in the policy through administrative regulations.

One school board director indicated, “that the policy is a blueprint for staff and the school board. This is what we should be doing.”

The board also utilized community and student feedback to customize the language around the policy development.

Still more work to be done

Once the policy was developed and passed by the board, the administration then moved towards the administrative regulations. One board director called this a “cascading process ... The equity statement is aspirational. The policy is what the district wants to do, and the Administrative regulations operationalizes the policies.”

However, there is still so much work to be done.

The next step is to conduct an equity audit to look at the data. The equity audit can allow for measurable identified goals. The board can then make decisions and charge the district from a systemic perspective to determine what items need to be done or undone that would inform strategic planning and district administration of those goals.

It is also important to continue to meet with community stakeholders and communicate information about the equity work in the district and about why equity is a priority. To embed equity will take constant evaluation, constant reflection and constant updating .to determine what must change in order to best support students’ needs.

For school board members embarking on the educational equity process, it is important to ask this question: how are the children doing? To support children, board directors need to care about all of the children in the school district.

