

In the Name of Equity

By Baninder Mahabir and Gail Pawlikowski, Chief Academic Officers,
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If someone created a wordcloud based on public school professional development in the United States, we would guess that Equity would be one of the largest words depicted. Events over the last couple of years have reinvigorated a national drive to be equitable. It is an elusive term that is the gold standard, the goal to which we always strive, and have always been working toward but haven't quite been able to achieve. It seems that the practices required to be an equitable district, school and classroom should be common knowledge, and common practice, and yet here we are in 2022 discussing what it means to be equitable in and out of the classroom. So, how does one begin this daunting Equity journey to ensure that all students are provided what they need?

Reframing Our Thoughts:

As Edison began the journey, we invited into our schools Cornelius Minor, well known literacy consultant and author. During the planning meeting, Cornelius presented new terminology that seemed to perfectly capture what we felt was the crux of all of these conversations. He used the term “un-practiced conversations” rather than courageous conversations, explaining that for some, these conversations about race, anti-racism and equity were not brave but part of life and yet others may never have had an opportunity to have engaged in such discussions. Accordingly, all Edison teachers, supporting staff, supervisors, assistant principals, and principals met with Cornelius for three sessions. Each time they learned more about equitable practices and were challenged to reflect on their daily practices. Cornelius Minor helped us begin the mindset shift away from state assessments

and test scores and back to our students and their needs. To help support his message, we purchased Cornelius Minor's book, *We Got This* for every staff member.

Emphasis on the Social Emotional:

With politics swinging back and forth with NCLB and the ESSA, the focus on testing and technology had become immense over the past decade. However, with our shift, priority was placed on supporting and developing our students. Our goal at the outset of the process was to provide our students with environments that considered and addressed their social emotional wellbeing. Students learn best when they feel safe and that is what we set out to do. We began with messages in our staff newsletters, met with teachers and administration

about the importance of relationships; we created a video of district teacher testimonials and suggestions for Reimagining Education. The NJ SEL Competencies were embedded into the curriculum to ensure that teachers knew they were a priority. We met regularly with our administrative team to ensure we were working together to move the district forward on this path.

We knew our classroom practices needed to change. We had already introduced Responsive Classroom at the elementary level and then changed the daily schedule to allow time for morning meetings. With this implementation, we saw our disciplinary referral numbers decrease in one year.

September 2021 gave us the opportunity to reinforce the need for patience, repetition and relationship building as we reacclimated students back to environments they had not been in for extended periods of time. A 10-minute brain break was implemented across all elementary schools, preferably to be taken outside to allow students to reset and focus on learning. At the secondary level, this shift also started taking place by providing professional development on The Nurtured Heart Approach.

Curriculum:

No matter what approach is taken, it always comes back to the curriculum. What is taught and how it is taught in the classroom designates importance to our students and becomes the norm culturally. We knew we had to look closely at our curriculum to ensure we were providing curriculum that included varied perspectives and representation of our student body in the literature they were reading in ELA/English, the songs they were singing in Music/Choir, the games and sports they were playing in Phys Ed. and the leaders they were studying in Social Studies.

We adopted a new program for ELA that incorporated social emotional learning and diverse texts. The gifted and talented program was reviewed, and the analysis led to a complete overhaul of the program, including criteria and construction of modules

that honored student talents in all areas. Secondary teachers spent the summer updating curriculum to include varied perspectives and diversity. For all levels, texts with diverse characters were purchased for the school and classroom libraries. Also, waivers were adopted to allow students and parents to request enrollment in a higher level course, despite not meeting the placement criteria.

Our ELL program was demagnetized, allowing for students to remain in their home schools with their neighbors and siblings, and for each building to have access to an ESL teacher. This was coupled with an overhaul of record keeping and entrance and exit criteria, and the establishment of a systemic methodology to train teachers in Sheltered Instruction.

We shifted our focus from deficit identification to learning acceleration. This past summer we offered many courses to help students prepare for their upcoming classes. Middle school failure make-up summer school was eliminated and as an alternative, students were offered Camp Acceleration, a program developed by three district supervisors that focused on developing student efficacy while preparing them for the next year of math and English.

Administrators:

Edison explicitly began this journey a year ago. When we decided to move forward, we knew that the first cohort of people that needed to understand this work were the administrators. We moved forward with two goals in mind: Our administrators needed to understand the purpose and importance of the work and needed to feel comfortable enough to speak with their own staff about it. Data is often the point of analysis for most things equity, and though we knew that would be part of our journey, we also knew that understanding and empathy begin with the knowledge of self. We started by using personal narratives, self-identity explorations, anecdotes, and exploration. After an initial whole group piece, we often broke into smaller groups, chosen

purposefully and consistently. Once the groups had bonded and developed more of an understanding, we began a book club focused on *Courageous Conversations About Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools* by Glenn Singleton.

Singleton's work centered us on terminology, so that we began to speak the same language. It was here that we began to delve into our unexplored data. Each school began identifying inequitable practices.

This year, we partnered with NJPSA/FEA for a series of four workshops for administrators. The NJPSA Team of Vicki Duff, Emil Carafa, Donna McInerney, George Jackson, George Guy, Heather Moran, and Christy Stoehr presented workshops remotely that have helped us to narrow down a problem of practice, which will tie into our district and school goals and will serve to frame our district strategic plan. It has been an endeavor considering we have over seventy administrators in the district.

Professional Learning for Staff:

At the elementary level, one main point was the information disseminated by teachers around holidays, specifically Thanksgiving and Christopher Columbus Day. Traditions run strong, without reflection and pause.

We pulled together committees to create goals and objectives coupled with resources to present varying perspectives. During our professional development day in November we presented Thanksgiving through the lens of the new NJ Social Studies Standards, using articles and discourse to help our teachers learn about the day. It was extremely well received, as evidenced in a teacher survey without one critical comment. In fact, the teachers expressed their desire for more of these forums and resources for other significant days. We gathered a team of teachers to begin working on other "holidays".

In addition, professional development was provided for staff to reflect on their instructional practices and to begin implementing more equitable

Curriculum	Professional Development	Discipline/Grading/Homework	Student voice	Hiring/Access
<p>Elementary</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Chose an ELA program that included diverse literature and embedded structures for discourse amongst students. Added additional resources and support to teach respect and historical perspectives of high profile holidays. Purchased “Rising Voices” diverse text sets for each building for K-5 Schools with regular author visits have invited in diverse authors. <p>Middle/High</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Added novels to all grade reading lists written by authors with diverse backgrounds. Revised Social Studies curriculum to meet Amistad, LGBTQ and Disabilities mandates New Social Studies resources to include many historical perspectives New courses -- World Literature Intro to African Studies Diversity and Multiculturalism in US Society Contemporary Health Issues <p>District:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Met with several community groups, including students for feedback and perspectives, and ideas on program and curriculum. Added culturally diverse books to all school Libraries. 	<p>Elementary</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teacher-led PD (2018) for grade 5 on the importance and selection of diverse texts as mentor texts and for classroom libraries. CAO- Elem Participated in the NJDOE Equity PLC. <p>Middle/High</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Administrative Team read <i>Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy</i> by Gholdy Muhammad. <p>District</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Purchased Cornelius Minor book, <i>We Got This</i>, for entire administration and staff. In addition, organized four PD sessions with Cornelius Minor for administration and staff. K-12 Administrative book study on <u>Courageous Conversations about Race</u> by Glenn Singleton Trained teachers teaching SIOP courses and those with ELLs in their classes, on the SIOP model. 	<p>Elementary</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Started work on authoring a new code of conduct to be developmentally appropriate and use restorative practices. Prepandemic monthly administrative meetings modeling restorative best practices at the Elementary level Examining and discussing revisions to district systems and practices to ensure Equity Piloting standards-based report card Grades K- 2. <p>Middle/High</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trained administrators and Learning Leaders on Nurtured Heart, which was turnkeyed in schools. Implemented restorative practices Examining and discussing revisions to district systems and practices to ensure Equity Established new MS Summer School - Camp A 	<p>Elementary</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expanded implementation and training for Responsive Classroom Led professional development for administrators on perspectives and the importance of honoring students’ voice and background. <p>Middle/High</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implementing instructional practices that encourage student voice. 	<p>District</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demagnetized ESL program. G&T program revision to be able to open the program to students with varying talents. Expanded content areas for SIOP classes at the high school. Each MS/HS department developed a new vision/mission statement that included Equity Provided hotspots for all students that did not have internet access. Developed a student Waiver system to encourage students to challenge themselves academically.

practices. Teachers were refocused on meeting the students where they are and providing effective feedback to help them grow and improve their work. Grading became secondary. Teacher Learning Leaders supported colleagues with instructional strategies, including student engagement, restorative practices, and more.

Community Outreach:

Coupled with the work we did behind the scenes, there was a conscious effort made to include the voices of

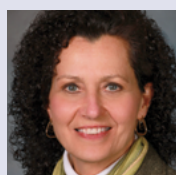
parents, alumni and students. This was done by way of a committee, Community Voices, that met monthly over the course of a year. It was in this committee that we began to understand the many ways we needed to consider equity, representation being just one piece. Mentoring programs were researched, college visits and life skills such as resume writing were planned, and instructional practices were rated. We also spoke with many other groups of alumni and parents to hear their voices and continue to invite parent and

community suggestions and concerns through surveys and district meetings.

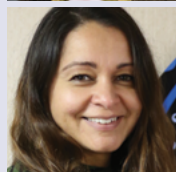
Where Are We Now?

We have a long way to go to reach our goal of Equity. However, we are moving an entire district and shifting the mindsets of an entire staff and are proud of the progress we have made together as a team to become a fully inclusive district, one that honors all of our students and capitalizes on their strengths. Overall, it is an amazing learning experience for all of us.

About the Authors



Gail Pawlikowski serves as the Chief Academic Officer of Secondary Schools in Edison Township. She has been an educational leader for over 20 years. She started her career as an English teacher and then served as the assistant principal of Edison High School before serving as the principal of John P. Stevens High School for 14 years.



Baninder Mahabir holds the position of Chief Academic Officer of Elementary Education in the Edison Township Public Schools. She has served in several roles including ESL teacher, Staff Development Trainer, Supervisor of Curriculum and Instruction, and Elementary Principal prior to her current position.



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