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EXPLORING EQUITY ISSUES

Putting and Keeping Equity at the Center in Education: During COVID-19 and Beyond

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Disclaimer

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PART I: THESE UNPRECEDENTED TIMES



In the past few months, the COVID-19 pandemic has further exposed the deep inequities in our society. After experiencing months of limited education, the effect on students will include extensive learning gaps, particularly for at-risk students. As we all return to school, educators need to keep equity at the center of their focus and actions.

For this brief, equity is defined as:

- Seeing and knowing each student as an individual, with specific assets and needs.
- Determining and offering whatever is

necessary for every student to thrive socially and emotionally and to meet or exceed grade level or curricular standards.

Equity does not mean giving everyone the same thing. Equity means giving each student whatever resources and support they need to optimize their learning and achievement. Putting equity in the center means making all decisions based on that commitment.

The State of Children in the U.S.

According to the [2020 KIDS COUNT Data Book](#), racial inequities in child well-being persist. When the pandemic started, the nation was already failing “to provide African American, American Indian, and Latino children with the support necessary to thrive while states failed to dismantle barriers facing many children of color. Not surprisingly, nearly all index measures indicated that children with the same potential experienced disparate outcomes.”

The pandemic has exacerbated existing inequities.

- Some families are now out of work or under-employed. Many experience food or shelter insecurities, don't have access to the internet, and/or don't have access to medical care.
- Other families are employed, but unable to work from home, so they cannot supervise their children's schoolwork.
- Some children are experiencing higher rates of abuse. While reports of child abuse from police and child protective services have plummeted, emergency rooms are seeing more children with very serious injuries ([Schmidt & Natanson, 2020](#)).
- Some children are also witnessing increased violence at home. The UN has called domestic violence the shadow pandemic. Experience shows that ["epidemics exacerbate existing inequalities, including those based on economic status, ability, age and gender."](#)
- Significantly more people who are Black and Latinx are dying or seriously suffering from COVID-19 than White people. A recent report from The Brookings Institute concluded, "Race gaps in vulnerability to COVID-19 highlight the accumulated, intersecting inequities facing Americans of color (but especially Black people) in jobs, housing, education, criminal justice – and in health." ([Ford et al., 2020](#)).

The Impact of the Pandemic on Students

Educators have long known that students can only be ready to learn when their basic needs are met. Maslow described a hierarchy of needs where basic physiological and safety needs must be addressed before higher order needs of belonging, esteem, and self-actualization can be fulfilled (Maslow, 1954). When students lack adequate food and shelter, these inequities create barriers to developing self-esteem, self-confidence, and achievement.

All students have suffered from having missed three months of traditional schooling and are likely to miss much more. Students who are struggling or who lack the supports that their wealthier counterparts have will fall further and further behind.

In addition, students who have experienced multiple adverse childhood experiences (ACES) often need additional support because they are "more likely to be chronically absent, suspended, score poorly on standardized tests, or retained in a grade level. They are likely to be overrepresented in special education, at times simply because schools are ill-equipped to respond to their behavioral and emotional needs" (Romero et al., 2018, p. 67; Sacks et al., 2014).

PART II: PORTLAND PUBLIC SCHOOLS, ME (CASE STUDY)



Educators grappling with the daunting task of planning for the 2020-2021 school year face technical and adaptive issues. The technical challenge of determining the logistics of keeping students and adults safe is their first consideration. The adaptive challenge requires educators to redesign schooling to meet the diversity of today's students and to prepare them for tomorrow's opportunities. Now is the time to reinvent schools to keep equity at the center.

Background: Portland Public Schools, Portland, ME

The Center for Education Equity (CEE) at MAEC has been providing technical assistance and professional development in the [Portland Public Schools \(PPS\)](#) since 2018, as one of the many partners in Portland's commitment to equity.

Educators interviewed: Barrett Wilkinson, Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion; Melea Nalli, Assistant Superintendent of Teaching and Learning/Chief Academic

Officer; Aaron Townsend, Assistant Superintendent of School Management; Grace Valenzuela, Executive Director of Communications and Community Partnerships; Sarah Beam, Social Worker at Gerald E. Talbot Elementary School; and Tracy McGhie, Teacher at Ocean Avenue Elementary School.

Equity as a Guiding Principle for Planning

Equity is the guiding principle of everything done in the Portland Public Schools. After a series of public forums involving staff, students, parents, and other community stakeholders, the Board of Portland Public Schools approved The Portland Promise in 2017. This five-year comprehensive plan serves as a roadmap, aligning the district's work with its mission and vision.

The four goals in the [Portland Promise](#) serve as a blueprint to guide student learning: Achievement, Equity, Whole Student (social-emotional health), and People (foster wellness and collective efficacy). The Portland Promise details key strategies for meeting those goals and defines the metrics they will use to measure their progress as a school district.

The planning process for the coming school year models keeping equity at the center for all decisions and actions, every step of the way.

One administrator shared an internal working document, *2020-2021 School Reopening*

Planning Update, June 2, 2020, which included a detailed summary of their work at that time. Several excerpts from this 16-page document follow, giving insight into their process and priorities.

Utilizing a design-thinking process, the team has empathized with and sought input from members of the PPS community. It has researched, ideated, and prototyped an initial set of ideas the team believes might not only enable PPS to reopen its school “planfully,” but also bring us collectively closer to realizing our Promise goals. Many of the ideas have the potential to endure well beyond the pandemic.

The Design Team motto of planning school reopening is ‘We have the opportunity to reimagine schools, not just adapt.’

The internal working document of June 2 included Assumptions for the Cross-Scenario Strategies to Preserve Health and Accelerated Learning. These assumptions further reflect the district’s mindset of keeping equity at the center of all decisions and action:

- Through our process, we’ve discovered several core needs shared by students [and] families—particularly families further from opportunity: interpersonal connection; interactive support and guidance; choice; engagement in learning; agency; access to a safe, conducive learning environment; clear, high expectations; and a consistent learning experience.
- Social Emotional Learning and Wellness is

also a major need of students, families, and staff.

- More students than before will not have had the opportunity to master grade level standards (as a result of the challenges of the quick remote learning transition).
- Accelerated student learning occurs when educators accelerate students’ exposure to grade-level content.
- Deploying consistent strategies across scenarios reflects all of our school reopening design principles.

The Design Group outlined three scenarios for learning: cross, full implementation, and socially distanced.

Across all possible scenarios, these strategies anchor our work toward our goals to be safe, preserve health, and accelerate learning. The safety approaches are proactive, aligned to state and CDC guidelines and take into account the developmental stages/needs of our students. The current context has provided an opportunity to reimagine how we serve our students and families; the learning strategies we’re developing reflect that. We believe these strategies will endure beyond the pandemic and will move us closer to our Promise goals—particularly our Equity Goal. We anticipate implementing the learning strategies will require a multi-year plan.

The Cross-Scenario Learning Strategies:

- Student Advisors

- Personalized Learning Plans
- Standards-based Modules
- Differentiated Educator Roles and Collaboration Structures
- Technology Usage
- Tech Education and Support
- Consistent School Structures

The Superintendent sent a [letter](#) to families on June 18, 2020, detailing the planning process.

Our plans are all grounded in the Portland Public Schools' core values and align with our four Portland Promise goals. Each plan is designed to mitigate learning gaps (Equity), foster wellness and collective efficacy (People), support connectedness and social-emotional health (Whole Student) and advance essential standards (Achievement). They all also prioritize our most marginalized students to ensure they can succeed in each scenario.

The District put equity at the center throughout their response to the pandemic, including:

- Assuring that all kids had access to food.
 - Distributing technology to families that didn't have devices and/or internet access.
 - Creating differentiated materials for those who were learning English and struggling to access the online work.
 - Allocating the 5th day of the week to Tier 2 and 3 support by teachers reaching out individually to help students with work they didn't understand.
- Repurposing the last two weeks of school to be an early version of summer school ("Sun School") for students identified by teachers as furthest behind in their learning. All teachers and staff were devoted to helping identified students reach the grade level standard during the two weeks of Sun School.

The remaining categories represent many ways that Portland Public Schools are putting and keeping equity at the center. The descriptions are a compilation of the voices of the six Portland educators interviewed:

Using lessons learned for planning the coming school year

- Accelerating the development of Africana studies, promoted by student recommendations that the curriculum become more reflective of their culture and lived experiences.
- Coordinating family outreach, so families aren't overwhelmed by check-ins from many teachers and service providers during remote learning.
- Using fewer platforms for communication so parents don't have to learn several platforms.
- Surveying parents about workload, how things were going, and their child's level of independence; and offering Zoom

follow-up meetings to answer questions.

Engaging students, families, and the community

- Listening to student leaders' perspectives on racism following a Black Lives Matter protest. In partnership with Portland Empowered, all high school and district leaders listened to students via a Zoom meeting and also conducted listening sessions with students after school closed.
- Working on revising the discipline policy to be more equitable, in accordance with policy recommendations from CEE and recommendations from the Family Advisory Partnership Committee.
- Conducting focus groups with multilingual families, including providing translators for parents who do not speak English, to learn about their experiences and to inform Portland's planning.
- Improving communication with families by teaching educators about optimal ways to share information with families.

Prioritizing budget and resources

- Communicating equity as a top priority by naming the budget "Addressing the Opportunity Gap."
- Changing the school calendar and communicating with parents to explain the change in the school calendar (including a letter to parents) that

explained Sun School and planning for the coming school year.

- Ending the Memorandum of Understanding with the police department, which had funded the School Resource Officers at two of the city's high schools.
- Funding a program for students who are autistic.
- Offering Language Academies for middle and high school students who are newcomers to the United States, to support their early English language development and their adjustment to school.
- Growing a five-year plan to expand Pre-K access across the city by increasing the number of classrooms each year.

Being intentional about curriculum and instruction

- Continuing to develop and offer Wabanaki Studies, through the efforts of Fiona Hopper, ELL teacher, to teach history from the perspective of the indigenous experience. Collaboration includes Wabanaki leaders, Maine-Wabanaki REACH (an organization working to advance Wabanaki self-determination by strengthening the cultural, spiritual, and physical well-being of Native people in Maine), and the Abbe Museum.
- Decolonizing social studies curriculum by

accelerating the development of Africana studies.

- Selecting and implementing the Illustrative Math program in the coming year. This program provides more opportunities for students to have conversations with peers to solve problems, which is particularly helpful for students building English language proficiency.
- Selecting and implementing the Lively Letters program in the coming year. This phonics program provides direct instruction in how letter sounds are formed, which is especially helpful for students who are learning English.
- Implementing a proficiency-based requirement for graduation, beginning in 2021, and continue developing and strengthening proficiency-based learning and assessment in classes.

Promoting equity through professional learning

- Expanding the capacity of Equity Leaders to facilitate their own and their colleagues' deeper understanding of implicit bias.
- Equity Leaders at Gerald E. Talbot Elementary School will partner with the Leadership team and administration to incorporate equity topics as part of staff development time. In addition, staff will have opportunities to engage in book

groups focused on ways teachers can recognize how they can make changes to pedagogy and curriculum so all learners feel more welcome and included.

Reviewing structures and policies, looking for systemic racism and other forms of discrimination, including xenophobia, homophobia, and sexism

- Continuing to diversify the teaching force, including through improved hiring practices that focus on eliminating bias in hiring using the Equity Hiring Toolkit launched in 2019.
- Writing and continuing to implement a school equity plan to eliminate school structures that impede students' full access to the curriculum, to be achieved within a three-year performance goal.

With so many things being done and planned in Portland, one administrator reflected on the difficulty of the work.

“We are realizing that there is much more work to be done to operationalize the equity goal. It requires a shift in mindset, attitude, and heart to bring everyone along.”

**PART III:
LEARNING FROM EDUCATORS**

Four Ideas to Keep Equity at the Center of Planning and Actions

We feature the following schools and districts to highlight the ways they are keeping equity the focus of their planning for the 2020-2021 school year. The information is based on interviews and materials from educators in a variety of roles, including classroom teacher, equity teacher leader, principal, and central office administrator. They identify as biracial (Asian & White), Black, Latinx, Native American, and White and they are of varying ages. Their schools and districts are in Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Utah. The following are quotes excerpted from the interviews.

Accountability Keeps Equity at the Center

Brian Yazzie, Diversity & Equity Coordinator, [Provo, UT](#)

If you are White and the system you are in was designed by people who are White, it fits that group the best. But if you're Latino, Black, Pacific Islander, Asian, Native American, or LGBTQ+, it doesn't fit. We must develop a bridge within our community to better understand our differences between our Black, Asian, Pacific Islander, Latino, and Native American community members.

We organized six multicultural advisory committees to create an opportunity for each

of our ethnicities, and LGBTQ+ identification to have a voice about how we educate their children. It is not about a group of White people helping us figure out what our students of color and LGBTQ+ students need. The number one stakeholder group is parents, guardians, and caregivers; their priority is their children. They must be part of the system to tell us how we can meet the educational and social needs of their children. And we must be accountable to those folks that pay taxes and fund our district.

We also created a Diversity and Equity Community Council, with representatives from non-profit organizations that serve our communities of color or who are LGBTQ+, and also including administrators, teachers, and members of each of our multicultural advisory committees: 35 in all. They are currently working on a new diversity and equity strategic plan for the district. Their plan will give guidance for everything we do in the district to ensure we're meeting the current and future needs of our students of color or who are LGBTQ+ and our employees of color or who are LGBTQ+.

You have to have the administration on board. Our Superintendent champions diversity and equity, as well as the Assistant Superintendent of Student Services who hired me. And there is support from School Board members. People are beginning to jump on board and are now beginning to think about how decisions might affect our students of color or who are LGBTQ+ and not just students as a whole. They're not looking at students as one big group by looking at it as a

melting pot. They're beginning to understand that students of color or who are LGBTQ+ don't need to assimilate to one system. We are beginning to embrace the salad bowl theory. All our students and families of color or who are LGBTQ+ bring an important uniqueness to our community that makes our school district more vibrant.

Learning is All About Relationships

Jay Midwood, Director of Strategy and Development, [Central Falls, RI](#)

Our core values are equity, empowerment, and excellence. Every decision we make goes back to our core values. During COVID-19, the inequities that are deeply ingrained in society and education have pushed to the surface. Systemic racism is generations deep. We are pushing how people think and perceive. Every student and family bring a story that is essential to our success.

When the pandemic started, all of us had to rethink how we reconnect with families. We are a diverse community. A lot of our kids and families require a face-to-face interaction.

For our planning, the social emotional learning is even more important. The 3Rs to learning are really relationship, relationship, relationship.

Students Are Our Greatest Teachers

Dania Vázquez, Founding Headmaster, [Margarita Muñiz Academy](#), Boston, MA

We are a dual language high school where we learn in both Spanish and English in all content areas. The very idea of our school is racial equity. Language is really about culture and identity. We keep equity at the center in all the things we do. We focus our work on equity by asking ourselves, 'are we are getting everyone what they need?' We have to pay more attention to the times we all are living in. We are going to make sure that all students are registered to vote. We won't tell them how to vote, just make sure they are registered. Those are the kind of civic actions that are really important.

Although we have continuously engaged in identity and equity work as a staff, we acknowledge that we have more work ahead. We plan to create and align curriculum with students that is based on their ideas, their desires, and their curiosities. After George Floyd's death, we held a community meeting with students and staff and explored together how this event made each of us feel. We knew that some students did go out to protest. We talked with students about how to engage in the protests in positive ways. In our conversations and community meetings, our students' expressions were so deep. One student said, 'What I want to know is how do I live in my skin?' That is really profound. That's a perfect essential question for the whole school. Our students are our greatest teachers.

Equity Ambassadors Guide the Way

Rachael Mahmood, Teacher and Equity Ambassador, [Aurora, IL](#)

Our Executive Director of Equity, Jennifer Rowe, created a team of Equity Ambassadors, a diverse group of teachers, leaders from elementary, middle, and high school. We provide professional development and support around equity issues to district staff.

We had a Black Lives Matter Summer Summit, where our team taught a variety of equity-related classes, using multiple formats, and facilitated a Young, Gifted, and Black panel of student graduates. Throughout the upcoming school year, our team will offer equity-related professional learning and book studies through our District Academy. Additionally, we will organize equity challenge weeks, and mentor teachers and provide direct support to individual schools to meet the needs of their diverse student population.

We are a cohort of people to learn with and lean on as we help bring the equity lens to schools.

(Teaching Tolerance has published two of Rachael's articles, which are listed in the resource section.)

One Principal's Journey

Daman Harris, Elementary Principal, [Wheaton Woods Elementary School](#), Montgomery County, MD

After reading *How to Be an Antiracist*, by

Ibram X, Kendi, my understanding of who I am has changed. I realized that there are no non-racists, we are either racist or antiracist. I am a racist. When I shared that with the staff, I told them that realizing my racism has been revelatory for me and I believe that their work will be revelatory for them.

We all buy into White Supremacy because it is the hardware of our society. I was really encouraged by seeing such a diverse crowd of protesters after George Floyd died; in the streets, there were young, old, and all shades of folks. Maybe this will be the time for change. Maybe this time outrage won't fade, as it did after the Rodney King riots.

I told the staff that our students have been at the bottom of every 'good' category and the top of every 'bad' category. We have to believe either that something is wrong with our kids and their families, or there is something wrong with our system when our families are always at the bottom. I believe the latter. We have changed a lot of curriculum and worked on social emotional learning and culturally responsive instruction. We have said a lot of words and done a lot of book studies, and we still get the same results. What we've done has been around the edges.

I told the staff that this is not going to be about a good-evil dynamic. If you do something that has racist implications, it is not that you are racist and you will be thrown away. We can talk about it and we can grow from it. I am determined that the work of our school in subsequent years will be focused on

antiracism. It used to be OK with me that you loved kids and wanted to do right by kids and believed that all kids can learn. That is not enough anymore. It is necessary, and it is not enough. We have to change the system. I need you not to just be an ally. You need to be a co-conspirator. We are going to need co-conspirators to work to change the system. We are going to do this work. Get on board with me.

Conclusion

In 2008, [José Juan Romero SJ](#) noted that the Chinese word for crisis is composed of two characters: danger and opportunity. It may mean that in “every crisis lies an opportunity.” In Greek, the word “crisis” means “to sift” or “to separate”; when passing judgment, keep only what is worthwhile. There is an opportunity in every crisis, and the deeper the crisis, the better the opportunity.

[The Council of Chief State School Officers](#) agrees: “This moment is challenging but brings the opportunity to reflect honestly on how education systems have not served students in the past and to create a new normal—a systemic and sustainable approach with equity at the center.”

The call to action for educators now embodies the commitment [John Lewis](#) made 57 years ago during the March on Washington, when he said, ‘Our minds, souls, and hearts cannot rest until freedom and

justice exist for all the people.’

MAEC believes that to “achieve educational equity, efforts must be intentional, accountable, and contextual. This goal requires an examination of systemic policies and practices, school climate, student access to support for rigorous curriculum, and teaching and learning.”

How will your plans for the coming school year reflect intentionality and accountability within your context? We welcome hearing from you about your endeavors.

Written by Susan Villiani, Senior Program Associate, WestEd

Discussion Questions

1. Peter Levine suggests that educators could “think of equity as equal care for the people we personally affect.” How does this compare with the definition of equity presented at the beginning of this brief? Has either definition affected the way you think about equity?
2. Denisha Jones wrote, “I was immediately intrigued by the idea of applying Maslow’s theory to a school, especially if this new application would provide an additional way to measure school equity. So, I created a new pyramid of hierarchy needs but identified how each need applied to schools. The needs remain the same, but instead of focusing on the individual, we now examine the school to determine if it is providing the environment and experiences that will allow children to successfully have their needs met. In many ways, this new view of a hierarchy of needs shifts from what could be a deficit view of children (e.g., the child lacks self-esteem and cannot learn) and moves to an emphasis on how the school culture impacts a child’s ability to thrive (e.g., the school values and respects all students).” Review the growth needs in the Jones framework. To what extent does your school address those needs? What areas need to be improved?
3. Glenn Singleton advocates for districts moving beyond random acts of equity: “Systemic transformation for racial equity is not merely a statistical exercise or response to external pressures...It must be grounded in intentional efforts to create and sustain a culture and climate in which all stakeholders, especially traditionally marginalized Black, Brown and Indigenous employees, students, and communities discover and produce through their most empowered selves. This requires that all stakeholders acknowledge the omnipresent role of race in all aspects of schooling. Leadership must lead. Systemic equity transformation requires a shift in the organizational culture and climate of school systems and schools. That shift must flow from the highest-ranking leadership to and between staff in all divisions of the district. Achieving racial equity in education is an unapologetically top-down process of boards of education, superintendents, and school leadership” (Singleton,

2018). What do you think about Singleton's assertion that transformation be top-down?

4. In *Restart and Recovery*, The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) proposed that school communities must build conditions for healing and learning that promote reliable, responsive relationships; offer inclusive, safe school climates; and provide for rich, rigorous instructional supports regardless of whether learning is in-person, remote, or hybrid. What do you think about planning to provide conditions for healing and learning before instructional planning?

Resources

- The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) is closely monitoring developments and supporting states in their preparedness and response efforts. <https://ccsso.org/coronavirus>
- Teaching and Learning Guidance Overview (May 28, 2020)
- Serving English Language Learners During COVID-19 (June 8, 2020)
- Supporting SEL and Mental Health During COVID-19 (June 10, 2020)
- Serving Students with Disabilities During COVID-19 (June 11, 2020)
- Addressing the Digital Learning Gap (June 18, 2020)
- Supporting Continuity of Health Services (June 25, 2020)
- CCSSO Restart & Recovery Framework and Tools
<https://docs.google.com/document/d/163ZNDs7sZ0FWOT7-1JFxQ9Lbo6zbQNJhaHSs0LbjCE/edit#heading=h.crn202e4x2iu>
- MAEC Equity Audits <https://maec.org/resource/equity-audit-materials/>
- MAEC Data Inquiry Guide to Identify and Address Equity Gaps. Forthcoming in 2020.
- MAEC Getting Started with Restorative Practices to build community and positive school climate. Forthcoming in 2020.
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- Rethinking Family Engagement During School Closures:
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- Online Reaching Can Be Culturally Responsive:
<https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/online-teaching-can-be-culturally-responsive>
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