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# Centering Equity Together in Critical Collaborative Partnership:
# School Boards and District Leaders



*I believe we can change the world if we start listening to one another again...Simple, truthful conversations where we have a chance to speak, we each feel heard, and we each listen well.*

**- Margaret Wheatley**

# Did You Know

## Collaboration Between School Boards and District Leaders Increases Equity

The Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center (MAP Center) congratulates Ferndale Public Schools (FPS) of Ferndale, Michigan for being the recipient of the MAP Center's inaugural *Equity Innovator Recognition*. Ferndale Public Schools was recognized during the MAP Center's 2019 Equity Leaders Institute for their demonstration of tangible and meaningful transformative change towards educational equity. Over the course of a multi-year partnership with the MAP Center, FPS defined ambitious goals that targeted increasing the capacity of school board members and district administrators to lead equity efforts. Realizing the importance of setting a clear and coherent message of equity from the top, prior to engaging school staff in professional development, board members and district leaders focused first on their own professional learning and participated in a series of customized equity-centered professional learning experiences facilitated by MAP Center staff. During a series of four full-day sessions, board members and district administrators examined key practices for equity-centered leadership, collaboratively developed an equity vision statement, and engaged in an equity-centered context analysis, resulting in the board and district leaders identifying several equity priorities for action. One of the most powerful outcomes of the professional learning sessions was the creation of an equity vision statement. This vision statement—now centered within strategic planning—informs policy development and enactment (Payno-Simmons, personal communication, September 16, 2019). Guided by this vision, the board together with the superintendent made policy changes that effectively removed some barriers to accessing opportunities, thereby increasing the participation of marginalized students and adults in school activities.

Working in tandem to develop equity-centered policies, school boards and district leaders can directly disrupts traditional ways of thinking regarding student outcomes, which are often measured in ways that compare students against a dominant white, middle class standard of achievement (Coomer, Jackson, Kyser, Skelton, & Thorius, 2017). Instead, the purpose of school can be (re) conceptualized as providing and increasing access to learning environments where all students "… graduate as critical thinkers, with an appreciation and love of themselves, their communities, the larger society, and the world" (Skelton, personal communication, September 17, 2019). In doing this, students are "equipped to make decisions and actions toward self-determination and positive social change" (Skelton, personal communication, September 17, 2019).

In this edition of the *Equity Dispatch*, we showcase the ways in which the FPS school board and district leaders center equity and join together with a common goal to improve schooling environments and student outcomes (Fusarelli, 2006). We lean on the experiences and narratives of FPS to discuss three barriers - maintaining of the status quo, intra-group conflict, and lack of communication and engagement with diverse community stakeholders that may surface when district leaders and school boards work to center equity as a means of engaging in transformative change (Grissom, 2012; Thompson, 2007; Warren, Kyser, Moore, Skelton, & Thorius, 2016). To close, we offer three equity-centered avenues - constructive conflict, critical discourse, and critical collaborative

inquiry. Through identification, school boards and district leaders can address said barriers and strengthen their collaborative relationship and work.

# Why It Matters
## Barriers to Overcome When Centering Equity

### *Providing the Historical Context of Ferndale Public Schools*

Ferndale is a predominately white suburb of Detroit, Michigan that has a rich, complex history within the realm of integration and desegregation. In 1978, under the Equal Education Opportunities Act, FPS was sued by the federal government for building an elementary school, which specifically assigned Black students and teachers to this school. Despite the lawsuit and desegregation order, elementary schools within FPS remained de facto segregated until 2015 when the school board and district superintendent arrived at a controversial decision to condense three elementary schools into two, resulting in racial and socioeconomic integration in the schools (Dawsey & Wilkinson, 2016). This sparked an intentional journey for school board members and the superintendent to work in concert to center equity within their professional learning, strategic planning, and policy development and enactment to improve schooling for all students within the district.

### *Barriers to Centering Equity Among School Boards and District Leaders*

The first barrier that can emerge when centering equity in decision-making is *maintaining a status quo* (Mthethwa-Sommers, 2014), such that policies and practices continue a marginalizing cycle. Within this pressure to maintain the status quo, school board members and district leaders remove access to opportunities and quality schooling environments, impeding the "experiences and outcomes for minoritized students (e.g. individuals who identify as LGBTQ+, women, disabled, non-Christian, people of Color, and/or emergent multilingual individuals) within their districts" (Smoley, 1999 as sited in Moore, Jackson, Skelton & Thorius, 2019, p. 1). When the FPS school board made the decision to combine elementary schools, the board and district leaders experienced pressure to maintain the status quo prompted by concern for how the community would react. There were thoughts that this significant change would cause families to leave the district. However, the board and district leaders decided to center equity and move forward with reconfiguring the schools, disrupting long-held beliefs that families would withdraw their children from the district. As a result, FPS found community support for the new district configuration.

Another barrier that manifests within equity-centered collaboration is an increase in *intra-group conflict,* which can occur when diversifying voices and perspectives. FPS board and district leaders have prioritized developing a space where individuals are comfortable feeling uncomfortable as they are trying to solve and address issues that have been longstanding in public education

(Bazzi, personal communication, October 11,2019). This discomfort is often triggered as board members and district leaders have personal pedagogical and cultural stances on the schooling process that may conflict, and thereby are challenged within equity-oriented approaches (Solomon, 2002).

Group members with similar preferences are more likely to prioritize and interpret information in related ways, identifying with one another more easily, reducing conflict (Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center, 2019). Subsequently, intra-group conflict is increased when group members with diverse lived experiences and cultural histories are provided space to share varying perspectives and values as it pertains to the development and implementation of policies. Increasing said perspectives welcomes a variety of alternatives that must be examined, making achieving consensus more difficult (Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center, 2019). Because of this, avoidance might be tempting in a desire to be more efficient. However, negating the inclusion of multiple perspectives in efforts to minimize intra-group conflict is problematic as this lends to the ongoing perpetuation of dominant norms and marginalizing practices. FPS, in striving to develop a district where all students' needs are met and "everyone has the ability to meet their goals, live long and prosperous lives, and have the ability to achieve whatever it is they want to do" (Bazzi, personal communication, October 11, 2019) came to realize that they must create space which welcomes a variety of perspectives and vulnerability within equity-centered discourse.

The third and final barrier is the *lack of communication and engagement with diverse community stakeholders*. Often school boards make policy decisions privately and opportunities for local decision-making, not just input, are rarely made available (Trujillo, 2013). However, board policies and practices should encourage authentic community involvement that values differing perspectives, community histories, and cultural practices (Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center, 2019). To facilitate the inclusion of community stakeholders' perspectives in the identifying district equity priorities, FPS participated in the MAP Center's Equity Context Analysis Process (ECAP) in 2018. The ECAP is a stakeholder-wide (i.e. administrators, staff, faculty, parents/caregivers) data collection, analysis and decision-making process, which helps determine the extent to which education communities have embedded equitable practices in its environment, curricula, and practices. In this way, FPS has lifted and honored the opinions and perspectives of stakeholders who may not traditionally have had the opportunity to have their input operationalized. Authentic community involvement minimizes areas of confusion that is often reflected when personal agendas are moved forward, without effectively communicating and engaging with the demographic being served.

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Through a comprehensive review of research related to the complicated roles and relationships of district leaders and school board members when centering educational equity, MAP Center staff identified three research-based, equity-centered avenues for traversing the barriers outlined above - constructive conflict, critical discourse, and critical collaborative inquiry. While these avenues are used here to navigate the relationship between school boards and district leaders, they can be applied in meaningful ways to all aspects of schooling.

Below each avenue is described, along with key considerations and examples from FPS to illustrate how board members and district leaders utilized the avenues to engage in work that can lead to transformative change.

**Constructive Conflict** appropriately balances the interests of both parties to maximize the opportunities for mutual gains towards social justice (Deutsch, 1973).

*Example from Ferndale Public Schools*
Board members and district leaders have had to become comfortable with feeling uncomfortable, engaging in significant amounts of courageous conversations (Singleton & Linton, 2006) to achieve change within the district (Bazzi, personal communication, October 11, 2019). One example of a constructive conflict included varying perspectives surrounding the district-wide dress code policy, including the policy's implementation. When analyzing data, a disproportionate amount of Black female students were being disciplined for dress code violations. This led to discourse surrounding restrictive language within the policy that dismissed students' rights to individuality and safety within learning environments. Although there was resistance in "loosening restrictions on a dress code," individuals engaged in constructive conflict to understand "dynamics of control versus what's best for students" (Bazzi, personal communication, October 11, 2019). Additionally, when analyzing dress codes largely the district found that often there are marginalizing tendencies rooted in biases within the language and implementation of the policy. FPS found that when adjustments were made to the policy and its enforcement, dress code became a non-issue. Additionally, school administrators reported students' out-of-classroom time was reduced, and that student attire was not distracting to schooling and learning.

*Key Considerations:*
- Embrace differences in perspectives and welcome constructive conflict as necessary and productive (Deutsch, 1994) in developing and implementing equitable policies/practices.
- Consistently include discussions of power and privilege (Skelton & Kyser, 2015), as well as an examination to identify groups of students, staff or families who benefitted/have not benefitted from existing structures, systems, policies and practices (Radd & Macey, 2013).
- Demonstrate understanding and respect alternative perspectives and how ones' personal histories, social identities, and lived experiences inform the various issues members

surface (Johnson, 2013) in policy development and implementation.
- Openly discuss opposing positions to uncover personal motivations, individual interests, and hidden agendas to work towards a construction of policies that serves common, collective interests (Deutsch, 1994).

**Critical Discourse** recognizes how social power and dominance in discourse contribute to the reproduction of inequities, and focuses on minimizing discourse practices that control, or otherwise normalize, the social order in order to maintain inequality (Fairclough, 1985).

*Example from Ferndale Public Schools*
The partnership with the MAP Center has allowed for reflective dialogue across board members and district leaders (Bazzi personal communication, October 11, 2019). Specifically, the superintendent Dr. Bazzi highlighted an increase in discussions surrounding the harmful nature of implicit biases and the need to recognize biases in order to address them, disrupting how they negativley impact the student experience. This dialogue has allowed individuals to see through different lenses that they were not necessarily previously open to using.

*Key Considerations*
- Create open dialogue to redress discourse patterns reflecting social power and dominance that marginalize the voice of specific individuals or groups, contributing to the reproduction of inequities related to race, sex, gender, national origin, religion, disability, and/or other historically marginalized identities (Zúñiga, Naagda, & Sevig, 2002 as cited in Jackson, et al., 2017).
- Welcome critical questioning and critique within the development of new policy and assessment of the function of existing policy.
- Discuss and analyze individual identities in relation to students and families they serve (Moore, Jackson, Skelton & Thorius, 2019).
- Engage in discourse to inform the development of policies which increase access, meaningful participation, and progress towards high-quality learning for all students and families within the local context (Fraser, 2008; Great Lakes Equity Center, 2013).
- Provide multiple accessible opportunities for dialogue between leaders and stakeholders (e.g. students, families, caregivers, teachers, community members, etc.) (Morton, 2017) to increase input in the strategic direction and operations of schools in the district.

**Critical Collaborative Inquiry** provides a shared context for the process of on-going dialogue, identifying issues related to equity, proposing and testing solutions, and (de)constructing individual and collective knowledge (Rogoff, 2003).

*Example from Ferndale*
Within their partnership with the MAP Center, Ferndale board members and district leaders engaged in two specific activities, which embodied critical collaborative inquiry. First, Ferndale conducted the Equity Context Analysis Process (ECAP) which is a MAP Center produced data collection tool that analyzes areas of (in)equity within schooling contexts. Here, Ferndale disseminated surveys to all

administrators, faculty and staff, and parent/caregivers. These surveys were designed to gather stakeholders' perceptions about the extent to which equitable practices were demonstrated throughout the district. The school board and district leaders utilized this information to determine areas of inequities to address.

Second, board members and district leaders collaborated to establish and create an equity vision statement. Once developed, board members and district leaders felt the statement was so strong that Ferndale decided to use the equity vision as the overall district vision statement. This statement would be situated at the forefront of the district-wide strategic plan to signal that "equity is the backbone of what we [Ferndale Public Schools] do" (Bazzi, personal communication, October 11, 2019).

### *Key Considerations*

- Strategically engage diverse stakeholders in terms of roles (e.g. staff, administrators, parents, students, and community members) and identities (i.e. race, national origin, religion, disability, sex, gender expression, language) in identifying and refining issues of (in)equity in the district/organization (Great Lakes Equity Center, 2012 as cited in Sanborn, Moore, Jackson, Skelton, & Thorius, 2019).
- Support stakeholders in discussing beliefs about sociocultural contexts and power dynamics surrounding aspects of social identity (Deutsch, 1994; Fairclough, 2013) in relation to policy construction and enactment which addresses educational and social inequities.
- Increase inclusivity by actively collaborating at a variety of times and locations to allow for participants to feel comfortable, safe, and able to contribute to the work (Morton, 2017).
- Collect and review data to determine which, if any, group is adversely affected by policies, practices, systems, structures or relationships that govern everyday operations. Efforts are made to redress marginalizing impacts (National Institute for Urban School Improvement, 2004).

In conclusion, from the work of Ferndale Public Schools, we offer the following words to school boards and district leaders embarking on an equity-centered collaborative journey:

> *No matter how much resistance and how much people are uncomfortable it is never wrong to do right. Be open, trust the process, and be comfortable feeling uncomfortable (Bazzi, personal communication, October 11, 2019).*

# Meet the Authors

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