

Committing to Equitable Outcomes for Students During COVID-19: A Focus on High-Quality Curricula and Instruction

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In partnership with the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine ([NASEM](#)), the American Youth Policy Forum put on this webinar to highlight the efforts of Detroit Public Schools Community District and Chesapeake County Public Schools to strive for equity and inclusion in their education models during COVID-19.

Natalie R. Nielson, Senior Program Officer, Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education at NASEM, provided background on equity priorities. The specific focus of this webinar derives from 16 indicators in the recent National Academy's report, "Monitoring Educational Equity and Building Educational Equity Indicator Systems." The 16 indicators span from pre-kindergarten through high school graduation. They include indicators related to disparities in student outcomes, and disparities in learning opportunities for different student groups.

For this webinar, we focused on the following four indicators: access to effective teaching; access to and enrollment in rigorous coursework; curricular breadth; and access to high-quality academic supports. Despite the fact that the global pandemic has made it especially hard to continue providing these opportunities in an equitable way for students, these two districts have made these indicators a priority. The report provides guidance for what to measure for each of the indicators. For example, the access to effective teaching indicator can be measured by group differences in exposure to novice, experienced, and certified teachers (proxies), and racial and ethnic diversity of the teaching force (proxy). This is merely a guidance as many states and districts are defining and measuring indicators differently based on the respective communities they serve.

Detroit Public Schools Community District

Beth Gonzalez, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction, Detroit Public Schools Community District, and **Naomi Khalil**, Deputy Executive Director, Equity Advocacy, Detroit Public Schools Community District, introduced the work they have been leading to promote equity in Detroit Public Schools Community District. In 2017, their district launched Blueprint 2020, a strategic plan in which they committed to keeping equity at the center of all of the work, they do. This body of work is aligned to three of their districts' priorities: outstanding achievement; transformative culture; and whole child commitment. When thinking about equitable outcomes it is important to start with the makeup of the district. Detroit Public Schools Community District serves 50,000 students and is the largest district in the state of Michigan. Eighty-three percent of students are black, thirteen percent are Hispanic, two percent are Asian, two percent are white, and the rest make up less than one percent of the districts' population. Twelve percent of students are English Language Learners and eighty four percent of students are from low-income families. Part of their commitment to equity is a deep commitment to high-quality instructional materials which was a theme throughout their presentation. When Gonzalez started in this role four years ago, it had been over ten years since any material or professional learning investments had been made to support teachers. Detroit had to make a drastic big shift due to COVID-19. Pre-pandemic, Detroit Public Schools Community District was already working to promote equity in education, but COVID-19 forced them to engage with that commitment in a different way. For example, engaging in the creation of equity has involved supplying technology devices and materials to teachers

and students and creating a one-on-one strategy. They were able to roll this plan out to students in grades K-8 and then grades 9-12. Each of their educators were given a laptop because many teachers in their districts did not have access to a laptop. COVID-19 inspired a shift from providing teachers with technology to ensuring students had the access that was needed to engage in school. There were a total of eight components to their COVID-19 strategy:

1. Connected futures device procurement and development
2. Canvassing to support families
3. Food and meal distribution
4. District Help Centers - Tech and Resource Support
5. Homework Help Hotline
6. Mental Health Hotline
7. "Are You OK?" campaign
8. Online Platforms & Curricular materials distribution

The first strategy, Connected Futures Device Procurement and Development, came to life thanks to a major philanthropic investment that provided tablets directly to students. Canvassing allowed school personnel to demonstrate their support for the youth by both calling and dropping by their house to check-in on students first as people and secondly as students. Staff from the district office and school-based staff, including principals and teachers, engaged with their local community to support families who were struggling. Detroit Public Schools Community District also worked to provide meals for the community, just as they had pre-pandemic. They ended up distributing more food to the community than any other organization in the city. Next, they launched district health centers which included homework hotlines, tech hotlines, and mental health hotlines, as well as hubs throughout the city where families could come for in-person help if needed. They also launched the "Are You OK?" campaign which involved conducting check-ins with families and focused primarily on mental health and human connection. The district worked hard to make these visits about the people, not about the attendance, class engagement, or students' grades. These visits gave lots of perspective about what life was like, what was working, and what wasn't. Lastly, they worked with over one hundred teachers to find online learning materials that were high quality and user friendly to ensure that quality education was still attainable in an online environment. It was challenging to maintain equitable education when some students are learning face-to-face, some were learning at education hubs (virtually but with in-person support), and some students were completely virtual.

Naomi Khalil spoke to the previous focus on and dedication to equity as the foundation for their COVID-19 response as a school district. Starting during the 2018-2019 school year, Detroit Public Schools Community District worked with Dr. David Kirkland on professional learning opportunities. In addition, they have partnered with [The Equity Collaborative](#) to provide equity-centered coaching. This year specifically, the district has engaged with two equity-centered books, *Cultivating Genius* and *How to Be Anti-Racist*. *Cultivating Genius* has helped the district shape not just the quality of *what* students learn but also *how* teachers deliver the content. They chose the second book, *How to Be Anti-Racist* because it was important for their district to work on dismantling the systems that hurt their students the most. In

July of 2020, the district adopted their Anti-Racist Resolution. While many schools adopted similar resolutions, the Detroit Public School Community District sought to make their resolution full of concrete priorities that could be measured to define their success as anti-racists. Commitments included reevaluating curriculum and materials to ensure they were relevant and responsive to the needs of students; only engaging with companies and other organizations that also were committed to anti-racist practices; and training the Board of Education in addition to employees and staff on anti-racist pedagogy as well as practices. Through this process the district has had comprehensive civil rights policies and procedures, developed training throughout the district, as well as updated the employee handbook and employee code of conduct to make it much more restorative in nature versus punitive and deficit-focused. Beyond this, the district is regularly reflecting on the actions taken and the steps implemented to see what has worked, what has not worked, and how they can make it better. They use Panorama data, which is available to the entire district to measure year-over-year growth and impact.

Gonzalez next spoke about the transformation within curriculum and instruction. She addressed the limited fiscal resources available to schools and the reality that no curriculum is perfect for every context. Cultural relevancy was at the center of much of the conversation around what to prioritize in the curricula presented to students. This inspired many changes. For example, for high school English Language Arts, the district adopted a program called My Perspectives, in which diversity and representation is examined through the author's race/gender/ethnicity, the main character's gender/race/ethnicity, as well as the ways in which characters are portrayed (were the characters and stories representative of different socioeconomic status?). It was established that there were gaps between what the district was using within the My Perspective program and what their diversity and inclusion goals were. The district opted to fill the gaps through the addition of four novels that were culturally relevant.

That work continues to evolve as the district received a \$600,000 grant to pursue a project called Detroit Perspectives, which aligns with Dr. Muhamad's framework. Social studies teachers were specifically asked to consider if materials presented conflict to diverse groups and to flag perspectives that stereotyped marginalized communities and ideas. Gonzalez notes that despite the improvements made, this is an opportunity for continual growth and their current goals help make these transitions easier for other schools to implement necessary changes.

Khalil next discussed the ways in which they approached making these adjustments. The two common approaches to working toward equity in education are focused on compliance (title IX, title VI, ADA, Discrimination, Gender Experience) and proactiveness (race, power, privilege, culturally responsive teaching, inclusive schools). Often times schools will lean more forcibly into compliance, but their district is more focused on the proactive side of the conversation. The district hosts trainings that speak to compliance in terms of how to deal with Title IX, but they also have trainings dedicated to the teaching of race, power, and privilege, and curate conversations around changing the narrative from "power over" to "power with."

Under compliance the district has strived to complete Title IX training and reporting procedures, training for school counselors, principals, deans of culture, assistant principals, social workers, Occupational Therapy, Physical Therapy and speech pathologists, and Bus Attendants.

Under the proactive model the district has leaned heavily into tackling as many issues as possible, including but not limited to: understanding power and privilege structures; examining identity, bias, and

socialization; examining the impact of race and whiteness on education; exploring the gender spectrum; restorative practices for the classroom; equity coaching for instruction; leading for equity, supporting LGBTQ+ Students of Color; culturally and historically responsive education; internalized oppression; religion as a social tool of cohesion and oppression; ability awareness and strategies for engagement; and trauma and healing.

Since Fall of 2019, 17,226 people have participated in equity trainings on a variety of topics and in a variety of mediums (in person, online, synchronous, a-synchronous). Partnering with Michigan Department of Civil Rights and Michigan Department of Education has allowed the district to provide as many trainings to as many staff members and community members as possible.

Lastly, Khalil discussed the variety of ways they promote these concepts on the school level through equity coaching for curriculum and instruction, Teacher Leads for Equity Training Program, and targeted book studies. There have been 200 total equity-focused sessions since Fall of 2019.

Q&A Session with Detroit Public Schools Community District

Q: How have you all ensured that there's input from different stakeholders, including young people?

Gonzalez reiterated the district's dedication to not only focus on direct places where they can engage with people, but also on implementing strategies to ensure no one is missing from the conversation, through broad surveys, translation services, focus groups, listening sessions, and the dedicated taskforce.

Q: Can you talk about the dynamics of Detroit leading the state in this work and the challenges that have surfaced as a result of not having concrete state-level guidance and how you have worked through it?

Khalil spoke to the fact that Detroit Public School Community District is both the largest district in the state, but also the blackest and brownest district, which sets them apart from most of the state of Michigan in terms of the needs of the district and the urgency of these changes towards promoting equity for students who have historically been denied high-quality education. District representatives sit on a lot of Boards at the state-level that allow them to share their successes and failures and help shift resources so that smaller districts like Flint can also successfully shift towards equity-centered education.

Gonzalez added that Michigan as a state allows districts a great deal of autonomy in decision-making, which allows them to work with national experts and other school districts, like Baltimore, that are similar.

Q: Has this work resulted in improved drop-out rates?

Gonzalez talked about the pre-pandemic success of their school district. Schools were focused on decreasing chronic absenteeism, increasing graduation rates, decrease student disciplinary issues, and increasing enrollment. All of these were trending positively, aside from graduation rate, which was complicated because of the reabsorption of some schools when there was a shift in the structure of the district. While the pandemic has been a setback for many of these indicators, they have been working on plans to meet students where they are and bringing them up to speed. Additionally, a recent success was their district being second in largest improvements in student achievement outcomes, after Denver.

Virginia State Department of Education

Leah Walker, Director, Office of Equity and Community Engagement, Virginia Department of Education, introduced the next segment focusing on Virginia's journey towards equity. Four years ago, they began their journey by asking themselves how the Virginia Department of Education could support their districts in the pursuit of equity-centered education. In the last year, Virginia has been making quick progress, but she noted it is important to recognize that there was about five years of moving incredibly slow and building up to the successes of the last year. Their first step was to set a clear definition for what equity in education means for the State of Virginia. Education equity is achieved when we eliminate the predictability of student outcomes based on race, gender, zip code, ability, socioeconomic status or languages spoken at home. By setting this definition, Virginia was then able to give something to individual districts that they could mold to fit their unique situations. Leah highlighted the fact that state-level data informed leaders about persistent disparities. For example, while Virginia's school population is twenty-two percent black, black students made up fifty-two percent of all students suspended. More specifically, in sixty percent of Virginia school divisions, Black students were twice as likely to be suspended. In thirty percent of Virginia school divisions, Black-female students were more than three times more likely than their non-Black peers to be suspended, compared to just nine percent of school divisions for Black male students. There is a large racial disparity in punishment in Virginia schools. Walker shared map visuals of the state broken up by race, socioeconomic status, English learners, and students with disabilities to demonstrate the vastly different rates of English pass rates on Virginia's SOL Tests. This demonstrated an achievement gap.

It is important to look at both the micro and the macro levels to most clearly see the picture of how different identities affect students' success outcomes. On the macro level, the state of Virginia has a high success rate for districts helping students to pass state testing, but on a micro level there was a disparity between races, socioeconomic backgrounds, and body ability. While most districts had a high pass rate for white students, economically well-off students, and able-bodied students, there was a gap amongst districts serving black students and poor students. Most astonishingly, there was not a single district that had a majority of its disabled students passing state tests.

This inspired the creation of a roadmap to plan out how to provide high-quality education to Virginians who do not fit into the most successful demographics. The Department of Education created Navigating EdEquityVA Strategy Notes, which focuses on different marginalized student population groups. The important thing about their roadmap is it is a living document, so as they progress, they reevaluate and realign. Virginia's two priorities are closing opportunity gaps and increasing cultural competency of Virginia's educator workforce. These strategies are highly interconnected. Opportunity gaps focus both on the input into the system that affect outputs the state wants to see for measuring academic achievement. Cultural competency is all encompassing, focusing on school leadership, school climate, instructional materials, resources, and curriculum. Virginia's equity work centers around 5C's: continuous reflection, compassionate student and family engagement, curriculum reframing, courageous leadership, and being culturally responsive. These "c's" are compatible with the 5 "Cs" of a Virginia Graduate found in their handbooks. They establish the foundation and it is critical to note that they are all necessary to achieve educational equity.

The pandemic added another layer of challenges to reaching these goals and Virginia followed the following steps to attempt to mitigate the pandemic's impact: meet students' needs first, ensure equitable access and adequate support, centralize communication to all families, and develop an equity centered return-to-school plan. It was important to Virginia to support the needs of the most vulnerable students first. With most of the state being rural, it was necessary to work out a plan to get WIFI and broadband to as many students as possible.

The latest iteration of this work towards equity is the Virginia L.E.A.R.N.S., which focuses on navigating Virginia education in uncertain times through checkpoint processes. Bullet points included leading, engaging, assessing, recovering, nurturing, and succeeding. The Virginia Department of Education seeks to ensure that curriculum has both windows and mirrors, a space for youth to experience both affirmation in the classroom and access to real-world learning.

Chesapeake County Public Schools: A Conversation with Principals

Dr. Sheli Porter, Director of Secondary Teaching and Learning, [Chesapeake County Public Schools](#), spoke next discussing the equity journey for Chesapeake Public Schools. Porter first acknowledged the support and collaboration with the Virginia Department of Education, Region 2 Leaders, and their district- and building-level leaders. This work is important and it is a requirement to ensure their public schools are doing their jobs correctly. Chesapeake Public Schools serves approximately 39,673 students and employ roughly 5,700 teachers, administrators, and support personnel. There is a total of seven high schools, ten middle schools, twenty-eight elementary schools, and two Educational Centers. Their population is made up of thirty-two percent Black, eleven percent Hispanic, forty-four percent White, nine percent multicultural, and less than one percent Indian and Hawaiian. Thirty-three percent of students are low income. Ninety four percent of students graduated on time in 2020. Their dropout rate is three percent.

Chesapeake started working towards Equity in 2016 with Professional Development for CPS Administrators and a Summer Region 2 Equity Conference with 700 participants. In 2017, they repeated the conference with 800 participants. In 2019, they held Equity Training at each CPS school. A total of 1800 teachers and leaders took part in their CPS Summer Region 2 Equity Conference. Their vision is to inspire, engage and empower all students to achieve their highest potential. Last year, they took their work a step further and created an Equity Council, with a commitment to strategically eliminating systemic and cultural biases through consistent opportunities for new understanding and self-reflection for their community. They created the Alignment with Empower 2025, under which there were four goals: academics (culturally responsive instruction, address academic gaps); employees (minority employee recruitment, providing quality professional development); environment (student leadership/voice/agency, inclusive school climate); and community (family engagement, community partnerships).

Dr. Porter next invited four principals, **Dr. Kamar Khoshaba**, Principal of Western Branch Middle School, **Ms. Kinyatta Garrett**, Principal of Jolliff Middle School, **Mr. Michael Perez**, Principal of Grassfield High School, and **Mrs. Naomi Dunbar**, Principal of Indian River High School, to join her in discussing the progress of Chesapeake County Public Schools.

Q: What did you do to ensure access to rigorous course work for students?

Ms. Kinyatta Garrett spoke to pre-pandemic life, discussing the dedication to analyzing data both from her individual school and also their borough which includes feeder schools to better identify inequalities and create plans to reform practices. Reforming occurred through the process of having open discussions with stakeholders. An example of this looked like working to better prepare middle school students to take honors and AP classes in high school.

Dr. Kambar Khoshaba spoke to the correlation between students in honors programs in middle school being more likely to take honor and AP classes in high school, which helps get their foot in the door for college. Sixty-one percent of his school is BIPOC and efforts are being made to encourage more of them to engage in the honors track, but there is still much work to be done. This is being done by working to take down barriers to honors programs like standardized testing and focusing more on independent learning skills, work habits, and academic maturity as qualifications for honors courses.

Q: What are you doing with curricular breadth, to enhance what you offer your students?

Ms. Garrett referred to the new implementation of an African American studies course that will be provided as an option for all students in all divisions. Additionally, there is an advisory council that seeks to audit curriculum and work to include student voice in the conversation.

Q: Talk to us about your high-quality supports that you have been pulling in.

Mrs. Dunbar started by addressing the core issue of minority students being underrepresented in rigorous courses. Just over a month ago, her school received information regarding the proportionality of rigorous high school coursework, and it was found that they had decreased white representation by four-point five percent, meaning there was an increase in minority representation in the classroom. Additionally, she described their new management learning system which more regularly checks in on teachers to see what they are teaching in their classrooms through the monthly review of individual teachers. Also, during COVID-19 the school has adopted Support Fridays where education is asynchronous and allows administrators and teachers time to review data and find areas of weaknesses and brainstorm ways to improve. When students are falling behind, they make sure to personally reach out and engage with the student, they listen to the student and learn what the student needs to be successful. This way the school can be pro-active in their goal of helping students improve their grades, sharpen their skills, and cross the graduation stage. For this summer, her school is looking into ways to provide support to “yellow students” or students that are on the border of not passing or not graduating so remediation can occur.

Q: Tell us about what your school has been up to?

Mr. Perez emphasized the importance of intention and purpose, and shared exciting news about an African American History Course being offered for the first time with four sections. One of the tactics their administration uses is to see which students are exceling in regular classes and encouraging those students to consider signing up for honors courses. They also discuss with parents the potential of their children so that students can feel as though their parents believe in them and want them to succeed. Perez shared a story of texting a student and encouraging him to show up to school that day to avoid falling further behind.

Q: Why are you committed to this work?

Mrs. Dunbar reminded viewers that her student population is seventy percent global majority youth and her teaching staff is thirty-one percent global majority and that there are so many students in her building whose strengths have not yet been tapped into. Each year she meets one on one with seniors to talk with them about their successes and challenges and to remind them that she is in their corner and she will be the adult who believes in them. This year, because of the pandemic, she meets with them in groups of five. This year a post card encouraging students to finish strong was mailed to each student in the school.

Dr. Khoshaba talked about how in the past, having a ninety or ninety-five percent success rate on state testing used to be taken as approval that the school was doing everything right. Now, with the pandemic, his staff and himself are working towards adjusting success to an individual level. Schools are only as successful as their least successful child, Khoshaba said, arguing that it is the duty of everyone who works in a school to reach out and continue to fight for all its students, not just those that are thriving.

Dr. Perez discussed his personal experience as the “latch-key kid” who did not excel at school, but he made it out and made a life for himself and he is committed to supporting youth who are going through the same challenges he went through. He pointed out that everyone is going through something and as a principal he wants to cultivate a school climate that supports all students no matter what is going on in their personal lives.

Ms. Garret talked about the importance of schools helping kids work through trauma and providing them with a secure space to question and interact with their identities. She described her passion for helping her school do everything it possibly can for all its students and faculty.

Follow-Up Q&A

Q: How do you select members for the Equity Council and what does that look like?

Ms. Garret talked about the forming of the council in response to the murder of George Floyd with a focus on moving in the same direction as the social justice movement, but with a different focus. They started with fifteen staff members last June and met monthly to engage in conversation and planning. Each week sub-committees meet and starting in June of 2021 the council plans to open to more stakeholders, including students, parents, and community members. Students especially have driven the work they do and helped to show the council where they have fallen short in its goals for equity.

Q: Any advice for other districts who might be trying to reengage students who are already being disconnected from school?

Khalil engaged with this question by addressing the myths around student disconnection. She pointed out the English Language Learner students in her district have been the most engaged of any youth and while access to broadband is a struggle, the flexibility of virtual communication has helped disadvantaged students better connect with teachers and admin to get the support they need to be successful. Additionally, phone calls and house visits with students really helped the school improve its communication. The house visits inspired the homework hotline and mental health hotline.

Q: Equity is in fashion right now, what can AYPF do to help school leaders who are not yet invested in this work realize its importance?

Walker and Khalil both discussed the importance of national partners engaging in the conversation about centering equity in education to help fight back against voices of dissent. Additionally, national partners like AYPF should continue to hold webinars and other events to help reframe how educators in the United States define high-quality education, away from standardized testing, attendance, and graduation rates, and towards cultural competency and individualized support.

This event summary was written by Taylor Cole, AYPF Policy and Research Intern Spring and Summer 2021.