



LOUDOUN COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT

21000 Education Court
Ashburn, Virginia 20148
(571) 252-1020

Eric Williams, Ed.D.
Superintendent

June 5, 2019

Dear Members of the Ad Hoc Committee on Equity,

On February 12, 2019, I announced the plan to conduct a systemic equity assessment in Loudoun County Public Schools. This spring, the Equity Collaborative, an organization with expertise in equity in education, conducted a series of qualitative interviews and focus groups across 24 schools in the division. The interviews and focus groups that were conducted included students, parents, community members, teachers and school leaders.

I am writing to provide you with the draft report from the Equity Collaborative. The report is based on the focus groups and interviews. It includes sample comments expressed by students, parents, and staff members during the interviews and focus groups, emerging themes from the conversations, and recommendations for action.

This draft report will be presented to the Ad Hoc Committee on Equity tomorrow. Once the draft report is reviewed by the committee, additional interviews and focus groups may be conducted prior to the report being finalized and presented to the School Board.

This draft report serves as a call for additional action. As the authors observe, staff members “indicate a low level of racial consciousness and racial literacy. People are unclear and fearful on how to participate in conversations about race, let alone respond to racially charged incidents.” We must address this. The report also highlights racial insults/slurs to which our students are subjected. We must make it clear throughout Loudoun County Public Schools that we reject this painful, racist language that encourages discrimination, hatred, and violence. Addressing these needs and others identified in the report will allow us to better fulfill our mission of empowering ALL students to make meaningful contributions to the world.

This systemic equity assessment and the Ad Hoc Committee on Equity’s review of it will inform our actions moving forward, including the development of a comprehensive equity plan that will include a clear vision and specific strategies for systemic change. Thank you for your participation in this important work.

Sincerely,

Eric Williams, Ed.D.
Superintendent



INITIAL REPORT
Systemic Equity Assessment:
A Picture of Racial Equity
Challenges and Opportunities in
Loudoun County Public School District

PRESENTED TO:
Eric Williams
Superintendent of Schools
Loudoun County Public Schools

Submitted June 6, 2019

REPORT CONTACT:
Jamie Almanzan
The Equity Collaborative, LLC
510.967.4705

jalmanzan@theequitycollaborative.com

FRAMING THE ISSUE: A FOCUS ON DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION

The Loudoun County Public Schools (LCPS) is committed to providing a world-class education to every student and mobilizing resources in the face of any barrier that challenges this commitment. Additionally, similar to many school systems across the country, LCPS recognizes that an important component of providing a world-class education involves addressing issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

While LCPS has a long history of providing educators with high quality professional development and support on instructional matters, few LCPS educators have had formal training or support on appropriately weaving social and cultural differences into the fabric of schools and classrooms. Hence, issues such as poverty, race, gender identity, and sexual orientation are perceived as not only difficult to traverse or poorly traversed, but better left untouched or ignored. Attempts by parents to discuss or by staff to conduct meaningful work in these areas usually evoke feelings of anxiety, apprehension and disbelief.

Because the struggle to address issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion is so tall, many educators tend to sidestep differences in the students and families they serve and resolve to treat all people “the same.” This is indeed a noble effort, except for the fact that how students and families experience school varies widely based on social, cultural, and racial factors. Schools’ attempts at fairness and equality within school walls are rarely noticed among student, family and community groups that perceive they have been historically and traditionally marginalized because that is not their experience on a day-to-day basis. In many ways this dilemma frames the reason that Loudoun County Public Schools initiated a partnership with The Equity Collaborative: to find and elevate the voices and stories of those whose experiences are not widely known or accepted and make recommendations for a path forward.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Preliminary Findings & Recommendations

In the spring of 2019, as part of a larger move toward addressing racial inequity, Loudoun County Public School's Superintendent Eric Williams engaged in conversation with The Equity Collaborative to gather additional data and perspectives from LCPS students, parents, and educators around issues of racial equity, to further understanding the student and family experiences based on their social, cultural, and racial factors. Superintendent Williams expressed the need to use an Equity Assessment process to begin to identify and address inequities within the division at the School Board meeting on February 12, 2019.

"In addition to the strategic plan, more work needs to be done. The Department of Instruction has been collaborating with The Equity Collaborative, an organization with expertise in equity in education, to develop a plan for a systemic equity assessment to be conducted this spring. The equity assessment will utilize our existing quantitative district data and will involve a series of qualitative interviews and focus groups. This assessment will include in-person interviews of division leaders, teachers, students, parents, and community members. The team conducting the assessment will compile an assessment report that will inform the work of the ad hoc committee. It is important that this type of assessment is done by experts in the field rather than internal staff. It is also important that this assessment utilize our current LCPS data and collect qualitative feedback from stakeholders as well. This assessment is an essential step in developing a comprehensive equity plan that will include a clear vision and specific strategies for systemic change."

From mid-April through the end of May, The Equity Collaborative staff conducted a series of focus group sessions and interviews at 24 schools across the division. The focus group participants provided descriptions of their experiences in classrooms, within the school as a whole, and their interactions with school leadership. They expressed their frustrations on how some racially motivated acts of intimidation have been handled, provided hopeful recommendations for improvements, and declared their commitment to fostering productive partnership with the division for county-wide success. Five salient themes emerged, informed by insights shared by focus group participants. Four primary recommendations are identified to further support LCPS in addressing pervasive inequities division-wide.

Five Emergent Themes

1. Despite efforts from the division, school site staff, specifically principals and teachers, indicate a low level of racial consciousness and racial literacy. People are unclear and fearful on how to participate in conversations about race, let alone respond to racially charged incidents.
2. Educator focus groups indicated a desire to recruit and hire diverse school staff that reflect student racial and language backgrounds.
3. Economic diversity across the county/division complicates the discussions about race, leading many people to steer the conversation away from race to focus on poverty.

4. Discipline policies and practices disproportionately negatively impact students of color, particularly Black/African-American students.
5. Many English Learners, Black/African-American, Latinx, and Muslim students have experienced the sting of racial insults/slurs or racially motivated violent actions.

Four Primary Recommendations

1. Produce and publish on the “Superintendent’s Message” page a new division-authored statement defining and condemning White supremacy, hate speech, hate crimes, and other racially motivated acts of violence. Require individual schools sites include this message on their webpage and in communications to parents twice a year (not only in response to an incident).
2. Review the current/establish a clear policy with built-in accountability for addressing racially motivated acts and create proactive leadership measures to address the student use of racial insults. Name that the N-word is not tolerated by anyone in LCPS.
3. Design additional opportunities for LCPS educators to engage in professional learning about color consciousness and implicit bias. Further establish a culturally-responsive framework to inform curricular and instructional efforts across the division.
4. Revise the current/establish a short- and long-range action plan to address challenges related to hiring for diversity, equity, and inclusion.

INTERVIEW AND FOCUS GROUP STRUCTURES

During the spring of 2019, from mid-April through the end of May, The Equity Collaborative staff conducted a series of focus group sessions and interviews at 24 schools across the division to review division culture related to diversity, equity, inclusion, and race. Elementary, middle and high school students, staff, parents and administrators were interviewed for at least an hour each. Questions asked were used as prompts for deeper discussion. The Equity Collaborative staff gathered all of the qualitative data, removed all names and other identifiers, sorted the comments by themes, and share the resulting analysis in this report. Below is a list of roles and groups that participated in interviews or focus groups sessions.

- Minority Student Achievement Advisory Committee
- Principal & Assistant Principal/Administrative Team Interviews
- Teacher/Staff (credentialed and certificated) Focus Groups
- African-American and Latinx Parents Focus Groups
- African-American and Latinx Teacher/Staff Focus Group
- Student Focus Groups (newcomers, Special Ed, mostly but not exclusively students of color)

The report highlights peoples' experiences across the system. It is meant to serve as a means of listening to multiple constituencies and validating those experiences. Using these qualitative assessment processes is helpful to understand the LCPS community issues and needs. The data gathered expresses motives, opinions, feelings, and relationships, in addition to the small actions, or pieces of community history or context that affect the current situation. We acknowledge the fact that experience is subjective – that it is filtered through the perceptions and world views of the people going through it. It is important to understand those perceptions and world views.

EQUITY ASSESSMENT

Loudoun County Public Schools carry a well-deserved reputation for academic excellence. Nearly every educator interviewed was able to speak to the division’s academic achievement and stature in the greater Washington DC area. The division has made significant financial and human capital investments in instructional supports, such as implementing Project Based Learning and Personalized Learning Initiative programs, and effective communications about inclusion in Special Education services and practices. The division’s top performers can compete with students from any schools in the country and attend prestigious colleges and universities.

Yet division data and anecdotal reports show that there are academic performance and opportunity gaps between student groups as well as groups of students who feel disconnected from the school environment. Virginia’s Standards of Learning (SOL) performance measures show that division and school site academic interventions are not yet effective in sufficiently supporting the success of economically disadvantaged students, students with special needs, students of color and students with developing English.

Poverty

LCPS staff frequently speak about the number of students living in poverty and the broad economic spectrum of families in the division. Indeed, the division does have significant achievement gaps between students who are economically disadvantaged and those who are not.

	Non-ED Students	Economically Disadvantaged
HS Graduation	96%	88%
Advanced Diploma	72%	42%
Standard Diploma	23%	46%
ELA Reading	86%	65%
ELA Writing	89%	72%
Math Proficiency	83%	62%

Staff address the economic differences with sincere care for the impact of living in poverty and with questions about the cultural gaps between families across the economic divide. Especially at the Elementary School level, staff are very aware of the living conditions of students from the rural parts of the division whose families struggle with poverty. There is a general awareness that living in poverty can have an impact on student learning, but not much deep understanding about the impact of trauma, hunger, and other poverty-associated conditions have on the brain.

Staff, students and parents also talk quite openly about the cultural gaps between affluent and poor families. Sometimes this dialogue also acknowledges urban-rural differences. When probed about

these differences, most respondents had no sense of how to possibly bridge these cultural differences better than what the schools are already doing, such as Backpack Buddies.

Learning Disabilities

When LCPS staff are asked about equity issues, they most frequently speak about the number of students with disabilities and current inclusion practices. The data on student achievement shows that significant achievement disparities in LCPS are between general education students and students with disabilities.

	All Students	Students with Disabilities
HS Graduation	96%	94%
Advanced Diploma	72%	28%
Standard Diploma	23%	67%
ELA Reading	86%	59%
ELA Writing	89%	57%
Math Proficiency	83%	55%

It is clear that LCPS has invested significant financial and human resources in trying to address opportunity gaps and thus the achievement disparities for students with disabilities. And while it is not a major focus of this report, there are elements of equity work that could have additional impact on this specific achievement disparity.

An emphasis on understanding how the brain works can help improve academic conditions for all students with learning differences, whether those be cultural or biological. Additionally, equity work helps to shift school culture to increase expectations for all students, and students with disabilities can gain from a belief system that expects all students to perform at high levels.

English Learners

In continuing the conversations about equity issues, LCPS staff also frequently speak about the number of students who are English Language Learners. The data on student achievement shows that the most significant achievement disparities are in earning diplomas.

	All Students	English Learners
HS Graduation	96%	73%
Advanced Diploma	72%	21%
Standard Diploma	23%	52%

ELA Reading	86%	62%
ELA Writing	89%	57%
Math Proficiency	83%	62%

Race

Like many school divisions in the country, LCPS has significant racial opportunity gaps and thus achievement disparities. While graduation rates are close, Black/African-American and Latinx students complete Advanced Diplomas at a significantly lower rate than white students.

	White	Latinx	Black
HS Graduation	98%	84%	97%
Advanced Diploma	80%	45%	57%
Standard Diploma	19%	39%	40%
ELA Reading	90%	69%	77%
ELA Writing	92%	75%	80%
Math Proficiency	87%	65%	69%

In focus group interviews, Black/African-American students, parents and community members shared that their experience in school does not match students' academic record. As will be explored later in this report, Black/African-American students feel marginalized within the school division and do not feel that they are supported in developing a sense of cultural or academic identity, while at the same time are often performing well academically in spite of those experiences. In interviews with LCPS staff, most professionals also identified that the division does not have very many specific methods for supporting Black/African-American students.

There are, of course, other students of color in LCPS with some regions of the county having higher numbers of Latinx or East Indian (included in "Asian") students. Staff report that the division's English Language Learners are mostly newcomers, also from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Summary: Student Focus Groups

Emergent Themes: Student Focus Groups

1. Discipline policies and practices disproportionately negatively impact students of color, particularly African-American students.

2. Most English Learners, Black/African-American, Latinx, and Muslim students have experienced the sting of racial insults/slurs.
3. There are limited opportunities for Black/African-American and Muslim students to convene in a network of social and cultural support.
4. Students rarely speak with their parents about routine racial incidents experienced at school.
5. There are few school-based personnel that students trust to help navigate the complexities of race.
6. Students indicate a desire to continue and increase opportunities for interesting academic work and different approaches to learning.

The Equity Collaborative staff engaged groups of students at each of the elementary, middle and high schools visited. The groups were mostly, but not exclusively, comprised of students of color. Each group participated in structured dialogue to express their perceptions and experiences of how race unfolds in LCPS. In general, the feedback from students added a more intrinsic layer to the needs identified by MSAAC, other community members and parents of Black/African-American students. Whereas community members and parents of Black/African-American students expressed concern about the limitations to educational opportunities their students encounter, student focus group members shared how the weight of race shapes how they feel about themselves, their peers, and their school community.

Some Black/African-American students shared openly about their experiences with race in LCPS. In fact, many students were relieved that other adults were interested in what they had to say. The atmosphere in the groups could be described as having an aura of validation and affirmation - the recognition that their experiences, both positive and negative, were indeed real and authentic. Summarized below are vignettes that capture the essence of what students encounter in the racial landscape of LCPS.

Racial Slurs, Insults, and Hostile Learning Environment

We live in a world where race matters. It is a social construct that shapes our identities – how we think of ourselves and how others perceive us. To some degree, we may be able to control how we view ourselves as individuals. It is exponentially more difficult to influence what others project on us because of our race. Focus group students explored the frustrations in their everyday experiences being targets of racist comments and acts of violence from both their peers and teachers. Most disturbing was a growing sense of despair among those interviewed that such racist events, large and small, are ignored and school leaders do not believe their reports of mistreatment. *“Nothing happens”* or *“It gets swept under the rug”* were common comments across the county.

Focus group participants highlighted the pervasive use of racial slurs and insults directed at students of color. Most focus group members have been on the receiving end of racial insults personally or have witnessed incidents in school or through social media platforms. Students also shared that those who hurl the insults frequently hide under the cover of humor or mockery, discounting how harshly they affect the targeted student. One example offered was *“People will ask me do you like watermelon or grapes...do you like chicken? And then laugh.”* Students continued to share that White students will deny having said the insult to avoid repercussions and to make Black/African-American students look as if they are needlessly complaining, pulling “the race card.” While insults have taken on many forms, it is shocking the extent to which students report the use of the N-word as the prevailing concern and consistently discussed among students in the school environment. Focus group participants were also very specific to say that the vast majority of the racial insults come from White students, White teachers, and White parents.

A group of White kids [at my school] used the N-word and then denied it.

White kids will use it as a joke or because they think they can say it because you’re friends. They treat the word like a joke and they think its funny. I have heard teachers say things, too.

A kid who said something dumb – said it was OK because he had “the N-pass.”

The N-word gets used ALL the time here.

Kids are always getting on me about my skin color and my hair. They call me out my name and call me the N-word and my teacher just turns the other cheek – because they are uncomfortable – but if I say the B-word or any other word – I’m in trouble.

You can’t say it is disturbing you – then they’ll laugh in your face. Or they will stop and all their friends will start and make up a song of it. I have to hold myself back.

Maybe they should pay attention to how kids’ parents behaved. I’ve had racist remarks made to me by another kid’s parents.

I don’t take it as a joke, I take it personally.

No – that’s not OK. I don’t like it from anyone.

Focus group students seem to understand the complexities surrounding the N-word. In some spaces it can be used as a term of endearment among students from various social and cultural backgrounds, and in other spaces, the word is used to demean and humiliate. Nonetheless, focus group students acknowledged the historical significance of the term and its problematic nature whatever space its use. As quoted above, several students expressed that they’d rather never hear it at all.

Although confronting racial insults and slurs is a part of the Black/African-American student experience in LCPS, English Learners, Latinx and Muslim students also experience insults and slurs because of their race, religion, language and culture. These students also reported the instances of being subjected to racial insults came from teachers as often as White students. And similar to the experience of Black/African-American students, they too cited the use of jokes and humor as cover for the slurs. When asked if anyone had experienced racial slurs, one student replied, *“Yes. They think it’s funny, but it’s not funny.”* Other students shared:

One of my teachers told me to go back to my country. I was in shock. I was born here.

In middle school and there was something in a book about Arabs and the teacher said – All Arabs are terrorists. I raised my hand and said “I am Arab and I am not a terrorist.” She just stared at me.

The other day we had a teacher mention police – not in a mean way – to a student. Hispanic kids are dealing with immigration and deportation and for that girl, hearing “the police” means a lot to her.

The White kids came up with a word for Hispanic kids.

Core Value 3 in the LCPS Vision 2020 Strategic Framework put forth from the LCPS Board of Education states that the division values “An inclusive, safe, caring, and challenging learning environment serves as the foundation for student growth.” With students hearing racial slurs and insults everyday in hallways, at recess, at lunch and in the classroom, coupled with their experience and perception of little to no repercussions for those who use such hurtful language, students are forced into a hostile learning environment that not conducive to academic success.

Academic Expectations

Students were just as descriptive about how teachers respond to them in academic settings when students self-advocate for support. Students indicated that they all had at least one teacher recently who was unsupportive.

“When we go for help, they just give you more worksheets.”

“If you say ‘I don’t understand that’ some of the teachers are mean and don’t want to go back over it.”

“We weren’t this mean to each other at my other school [in another state].”

“They treat us like we are super dumb - we get help on the things that we don’t need help on and don’t get help on the things that we do need help on.”

When instruction and educational experiences were positive, however, students' faces lit up indicating they enjoyed this type of instruction and that the teacher believes in their academic ability -- "*In math she tells me – you can do it – you're smart.*" Students were eager to share about other innovative approaches that hooked them.

Wiggle room Wednesday – we started a few weeks ago in 5th grade – we had a playlist of worksheets and things to do on your Chromebook and you had a couple of weeks to do. On wiggle room Wednesday there were no mini lessons – we just do everything on our Chromebook. We can do our work in any order, and can work with our friends, we just need to get it done by the end of the day.

I like the way the teachers teach this year – they are a lot more fun and do a lot of activities. Say a teacher stands there and tells you a bunch of things over and over again. Or say you do a really fun activity – like learning about acids and bases and using vinegar. Which one do you think you'll remember better for the test? The activity because it was more fun and engaging.

Uneven/"Unfair" Discipline Practices

Almost all student participants acknowledged that their school has a discipline policy, but that is often experienced as discriminatory and particularly "unfair" for Black/African-American and Latinx students. Students are very tuned in to the tone and phrasing that teachers and administrators use in the disciplinary process. They see and hear about who received which "type" of punishment, who gets suspended and who does not, and for how long.

No, it's not fair. Skipping class, my White friend got a less punishment.

Some teachers don't know the difference between discipline and disrespect.

But some kids will get off really easy. Yesterday two White boys got in a full on fight and only got 2 – 3 day suspension. Last year 2 Hispanic girls got in a fight and the one that threw the punch got kicked out [of school].

Why is it that when a kid who is misbehaving and is Black – why do you hear "that kid's going to end up in jail someday" – but you don't hear that about the White kids who mess up.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were informed by information gathered from the student focus groups. The recommendations were also shaped by conversations with parents, members, and school site personnel. However, these recommendations should not be viewed as the only solutions needed to

address the challenges identified by students. It will also be important to leverage and possibly rethink existing structures and practices in LCPS to move this work forward.

Recommendations: Student Focus Groups

1. School administrators establish proactive measures that intervene and mitigate the impact of racial incidents experienced by students of color in order to build an inclusive culture that doesn't tolerate harassment.
2. Create a clear discipline policy that works to address necessary changes in discipline practices across the division with input from school-based student groups to include student voice.
3. Establish student affinity groups at all levels to support the social and cultural identities of students of color. This recommendation is important because it:
 - a. Creates a formal structure that serves as a network of care for marginalized student populations and establishes a safe place for students to unpack feelings and emotions in times of social or cultural conflict.
 - b. Provides a vehicle for outside community or business partners to disseminate important information about educational opportunities or to provide mentoring and encouragement to students of color.

Summary: Parent & Community Stakeholder Focus Groups

Emergent Themes: Parent & Community Stakeholder Focus Groups

1. Racial incidents occur often in and around LCPS schools, making regional and national news, and set the tone for the larger systems of racism within the division.
2. Parents fear for their children's safety and well-being at school and do not trust the division to support them.
3. Economic diversity across the County/Division complicate the discussions about race by steering the conversation away from race to focus on poverty.
4. Response to racially motivated incidents from schools and the division is slow and ineffective.
5. There is the continued need to hire racially diverse school site staff, particularly teachers, counselors, and front office staff.

As The Equity Collaborative staff interviewed parents from across all levels and areas of LCPS and members of the Minority Student Achievement Advisory Committee (MSAAC). The general feeling was distrust of the Division and the inability of Division representatives to adhere to the mission of LCPS with

its responsibility of “Empowering all students to make meaningful contributions to the world.” Theoretically, the mission situates students at the center of all the Division’s efforts. LCPS is a proud division that describes itself as having a culture/“tradition” of support, togetherness, and family. Critical to realizing this mission is an increased understanding and validation of the experience of race that is described by students or their families.

The excerpts below are from our discussion with parents and other stakeholders in May 2019. The stories that parents shared in focus groups were full of raw emotion. Although every parent did not have the same personal experience, they largely and widely agreed about a theme of significant distrust between families of color and the division. This report shares several anecdotes from parents to help readers understand the parents’ perspective. The Equity Collaborative cannot validate the specific claims of parents. The focus of this report is to elevate the voices of marginalized individuals throughout LCPS.

“Early in the year, [there was an] incident with a student of color and with a White student who is known for getting into issues of race. They had an issue and we were involved because there was a video. The White student jumped the Black student. The Black student spoke up for themselves and was brought to the ground and hit. Kids with the video were told to delete the video and to not share it. Both students were taken to the administrator’s office. The Black parent was informed later that the Black student had a concussion that was not addressed. It was determined that both students were at fault and both were suspended. The student who did not engage in violence received the same punishment. The administration intimidated students to delete the video. The White student who initiated the fight had been previously found yelling “Make America Great Again.” He has been known to target and antagonize students of color. This White student hit a Muslim student for the Muslim student not standing for the pledge. The White student brought a knife to school. He has hit a student in the head so much his own hand broke. One student who took the video sent it to a parent before it was asked to be deleted. The Black student who was attacked did not do anything to fight back. It is the inconsistency. The administration handled the situation poorly. The White student’s parent was called in one hour. The Black student who has a concussion order, his parents were not called in 4 hours. This impacts the other students of color where they do not trust their safety with the administration. The administration did not call the SRO. The past experience with a video has administrators so afraid. There is an administrator who I don’t believe has the best interest of students of color. That student who was beat up by a White student was followed by administration. He was scared to push back. Other students of color were afraid. We are walking the line in the system in hopes that there will be change. When you have a student with a racist history, and another student of color who is an A student, you now have a distrust that we’re still trying to recuperate.”

Another parent shared the following experience.

“My daughter experienced a racial incident a few weeks ago. Serious enough that we contemplated contacting the NAACP. My husband was so fearful of her safety, so I followed protocol. I spoke to the teacher, got the run around for a week. Put me off, went around us, didn’t speak to us for a week. I had to call the administrator. Her group of friends have been saying hurtful things about her hair, that her eyes are so black that she looks evil. Then the kids created a sign language at school and there are videos of her friends using the sign language, the first video is about the N word. My daughter didn’t know what was going on. I waited a few days after, one administrator never spoke to me, only another administrator. “I have been very busy with other matters, not that you’re not important. I haven’t spoken to anyone outside of the school.” I had to call the parent resource center to get information about who to call. The parent resource center gave me a person to call. They already spoke to someone in central office who then spoke to the administrator. The way they were going to handle the situation, not addressing my daughter. They were going to have the students go to the counselor to create a poster of inclusion and computer safety. The new symbol is about White supremacy. They don’t take it seriously. It is extremely frustrating. Where does a parent go with this? How can I trust them?”

Another parent shared the following experience.

“There are guidelines on how to deal with the trauma of racism, where the child is first. Let the child be first. You’re not bad, you’re ok. When a child was called the N-word, the principal called the child a liar without the parent there.”

Another parent shared the following experience.

“I have personally submitted data, phone calls, meetings, about so many issues. They ‘listen’ to me just fine. Here we are again. We’re all frustrated, we all feel ignored.”

Recommendations: Parent & Community Stakeholder Focus Groups

1. Define Diversity, Equity & Inclusion and include as LCPS Core Beliefs.
2. Establish parent affinity groups at all school levels in support of stronger partnerships and open communication between parents, students, and school administrators.
3. Utilize the Equity Ad Hoc Committee once a month meetings and/or establish a parent led group to provide equity leadership and guidance and feedback concerning division plans for advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion in its programming.
4. Provide specific social emotional support for students and families dealing with the traumatic impact of racism and discrimination.

Summary: Educator Focus Groups & Interviews

Emergent Themes: Educator Focus Groups & Interviews

1. School site staff, specifically principals and teachers, indicate a low level of racial consciousness and literacy. People are unclear and fearful on how to participate in conversations about race, let alone respond to racially charged incidents.
2. Teachers of color see and experience the LCPS hiring process as biased.
3. White teachers are resistant, resentful, or otherwise uncomfortable with conversations about race.
4. Teachers have some experiences with data, but do not fully understand how and why to analyze data to inform instruction.
5. Principals and Assistant Principals could not consistently accurately name or describe the ethnic breakdown of their school.

The Equity Collaborative staff interviewed educators from across LCPS elementary, middle and high schools, including school site administrators, custodial and office staff, parent volunteers, counselors, and teachers. The mission of LCPS situates that its responsibility is “Empowering all students to make meaningful contributions to the world,” theoretically making students at the center of all the division’s efforts. Critical to realizing this mission is ensuring that the division and its staff are responsive to and affirming of all students and their families. LCPS is a proud division that describes a culture of and a desire to provide world-class academic and extracurricular programs for students. However, in our conversations with LCPS educators, the sense of pride did not seem to extend to the understandings of how the diversity of the Loudoun community, the equity of opportunity for students, and the inclusion of concerned stakeholders can be girders for such academic excellence.

Race, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Diversity, equity, and inclusion are concepts that shape current education discourse. These ideas drive education programming throughout the country in areas such as school funding, research, teacher practice, and policymaking. Unpacking the meaning of diversity, equity, and inclusion in LCPS revealed a range of viewpoints that were influenced by a number of factors including job responsibility, grade span, and prior professional and personal experiences.

Teachers, counselors and principals frequently grounded these concepts in the context of Special Education. For instance, when asking teachers what comes to mind when they hear the terms diversity, equity, and inclusion, the most common answers focused on the concept of inclusion and the division’s Special Education services. Some teachers included English Learner programs and poverty, and then, after additional prompting included classroom lessons, and school functions that celebrate cultural diversity.

As shared by several teachers, *"Inclusion is primarily addressed through our Special Education program. We work hard to meet the needs of our kids no matter where they come from. We try to mainstream kids whenever possible. Everyone is trying to push for more inclusion."*

The term "diversity" was most often used in describing the general demographics of the students at school sites. And with this, at all of the 25 schools we visited, the school site staff, from the principal to teachers, could not provide accurate demographic breakdown data. In general, school staff knew the racial/ethnic and language groups at their sites, but not the numbers of each in the population. Participants across the county, educators referred to the rapid pace at which the non-White populations are growing and the anxiety that produces as educators are finding it challenging to adjust pedagogically, programmatically, and linguistically to both student need and parent engagement.

Some staff vocalized that they are not ready or do not feel the need to engage in conversations about race:

"I don't see a problem. All the kids get along."

"I don't see color."

"I really don't have a lot time to do that work and I also teach high level classes, so I don't have those kids."

Other staff do identify there is a problem with race relations in LCPS and are ready to embrace the diverse shift in population of students and families with statements such as *"Why are we always reactionary? Let's get in front of this by planning. This shouldn't be a surprise."* Another teacher implored the division to be more observant of the community and plan professional development based on the trends and influx of those new to Loudoun County:

"You know [Loudoun] is growing, but the system is not prepared. They are very reactive. They are not projecting what needs to be done to prepare the division. Do you now know the diversity of the community for specific schools? Go to Walmart, Wegmans, and listen and hear the different languages to see the diversity."

"It would be great if there were an incentive for teachers to become bilingual. I'd like to be able to call home and talk to families myself."

"At least do these kids the service of saying their name properly."

Even with these more positive attitudes toward diversity and inclusion, the vast majority of educators interviewed expressed trepidation in how to appropriately respond to racially motivated incidents. Some are afraid to lose their jobs while others would rather not engage by saying *"I don't see color."* It was not uncommon to hear LCPS educators describe the invisibility of race and the inconsequentiality of

race to their practice as school leaders and teachers, and therefore unnecessary to address specifically. Many focus group participants wanted to avoid the race topic altogether, ignoring race as the “socio” component of “socio economic status” by declaring, *“I think we should be talking about poverty not race”* and *“Why are we even doing this?”* One LCPS educator summed up the challenge with *“It is sometimes difficult to have conversations about race and it causes [White staff] discomfort.”*

What was also resounding, however, was that educators and school leaders did not fully understand what division (or school site) policies are in place, what lines of communications they should follow, or the kind of documentation they need to acquire to carry the school community through. Some participants in school communities shared experiences of extreme racially motivated acts of intimidation, including nooses hanging from trees at the entrance to the school, swastikas and the N-word carved into the snow outside of the school, and school sites being visited by members of the KKK. Educators are also unclear on what kinds of whistleblower protections are in place for students, parents and other educators who report or express concerns about such incidents. Participants indicated that it is also unclear the kind of care the victimized students and their families can expect. Messages back out to the school community that such racist behavior is not tolerated are seen as weak or intentionally delayed.

“Be clear about policies - I was speaking to one of the students in Spanish and the teacher said .. Oh – I don’t know if you can do that.”

“The division has not made any sort of declaration – ‘we don’t believe in White supremacy.’ Nothing like that.”

“I have been the victim of racism in this very building. There was a noose hanging out in a tree outside our building. It was jarring. I called safety and security and there wasn’t a quick response....”

“Account for the sincerity of the student [experiencing discrimination].”

“We do not talk to kids or teachers about use of racial slurs.”

“For teachers of color, there is a sense of fear of retaliation if they ‘report’ an incident or express concern about how a situation is being handled.”

“How isolating your job is feeling like you need to protect the students of color because no one else in the building is advocating for students of color?”

“There is a line – as a teacher – where I want to go up to this line and ... I don’t want to go there or I’ll get a pink slip.”

“When I asked for help [in supporting Black students] I was just told that’s not in our job description.”

The seriousness about which school leaders take this issue is not clear at all levels of the organization. It is fair to say based on the interviews that some school leaders are responsive to this matter, but consequences are unpredictable and inconsistent. The Equity Collaborative staff did not observe any proactive measures used to address this serious issue in schools. Contrary to what students shared, the prevailing view among school administrators was that incidents involving the N-word, and other racial slurs, are in general isolated events that do not represent school-wide cultural norms around race.

Several staff also shared that there has been some work across the division and that it has lost momentum, meaning many educators have not had the opportunity for such professional learning. There was also conjecture that the division has an incomplete or not fully informed plan around racial equity. Aligned with LCPS’ Core Belief 1 “A culture of continuous improvement drives the fulfillment of our mission,” the division’s work with school and division leaders, does indeed have a strong framework for advocating on behalf of their students and families of color.

Recruitment & Hiring Practices

LCPS educators and parents described several recent incidents of hate crimes and other racially motivated acts meant to intimidate people of color throughout Loudoun County in general that have made local and national news. In our interviews, at least 5 incidents were referenced having occurred in the past 12 months in the county alone. Also shared in conversations was data from the Virginia State Police that hate crimes have increased by 50% from 2016 to 2017. One news story opened with “A Virginia community is making headlines again for the wrong reasons. Racism, threats and threatening symbols... How is this still a problem in Loudoun County?”

Participants spoke to and connected the frequency of these incidents in the broader Loudoun community, coupled with the pervasive use of the N-word in schools and the many racially motivated incidents targeting Black/African-American, Latinx, and Muslim students, create an extremely negatively challenging work and learning environment for students and staff of color. Focus group participants acknowledged that this current state of Loudoun County, while not appealing for educators of color, is exactly the reason why more intentional and fruitful recruitment and hiring is necessary to the growth and success of LCPS students and staff.

Among school administrators, striving for diversity, equity, and inclusion in LCPS centered on structural challenges in hiring and the capacity to lead for diversity, equity, and inclusion. School leaders openly acknowledged that the demographic makeup of staff, particularly teaching staff, was not reflective of the student population. Further, educators at all levels underscored the struggle of recruiting people of color to the region. Participants in the parent and other community stakeholders focus group also recognized this dilemma. As outlined by one group member, *“Teachers and administrators will not*

come [to this community], and why would they? They would not see themselves reflected in any of our schools. [Prospective educators] need to be able to visualize themselves in our community - identify where they fit in and how they can contribute."

While recruiting Black/African-American educators specifically and other educators of color to LCPS may be a challenge, The Equity Collaborative staff did not come across any school leader that was not open to confronting this difficult challenge. Some offered very concrete ways to diversify their staff:

"Diversify the interview panels. Include as many non-whites as you can."

"If you look at people's resumes – they have masters and doctorates. Hire them if they are Black!"

"Hire bilingual TA's for the front office. Easy."

Recommendations

The following recommendations were informed by insights shared by school and division leaders who participated in focus group sessions and interviews with The Equity Collaborative staff. As previously stated, these recommendations should not be viewed as all-encompassing, but representative of the type action needed to address the challenges identified by LCPS leaders. It will be important to lean on the wisdom and experience of LCPS staff should the division decide to move this work forward.

Recommendations: Educator Focus Groups & Interviews

1. Produce and publish on the "Superintendent's Message" page a division-authored statement defining and condemning White supremacy, hate speech, hate crimes, and other racially motivated acts of violence.
2. Review current and/or establish clear policies with built-in accountability for addressing racially motivated acts and speech.
3. Create, repeat and further emphasize proactive leadership measures that the N-word is not tolerated to address the student use of racial insults. Name that the N-word is not tolerated by anyone in LCPS.
4. Develop and socialize a shared understanding of the meaning of diversity, equity, and inclusion among educators.
5. Establish a cultural responsiveness framework to inform curricular and instructional efforts across the division.
6. Review current efforts and further establish short- and long-range action plans to address challenges related to hiring for diversity, equity, and inclusion.
7. Review current and further design opportunities for LCPS educators to engage in professional learning about color consciousness and implicit bias.

LCPS Division-Wide Efforts to Address Inequities

The following actions and programs are described below to highlight examples of how LCPS has worked to address pervasive inequities in the division. Most of the items listed here have been informed by insights shared by school and division leaders who participated in group sessions and interviews with The Equity Collaborative staff. Though not every item listed here was directly referenced in the focus groups, the actions and programs below connect to recommendations made throughout the report. It is understood that actions and programs listed may not completely achieve the equitable outcomes desired and may need to be supplemented or altered as our collective learning journey toward equity continues.

- Since 2006, LCPS has been implementing Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support (PBIS) for all students across all schools to prevent discipline issues.
- From 2007 to 2018: Designed and delivered professional learning experiences for teachers on *Teaching Cultural Awareness in Social Science; Teaching Sensitive Subjects in Social Science*.
- In summer 2016, HRTD began the implementation of *Mitigating Unconscious Bias with Equity in Hiring* training for hiring managers.
- In fall 2016, Pupil Services, HRTD, and DOI personnel created an Equity Committee whose members researched equity organizations and consultants—as well as school divisions—that have developed equity programs.
- During the 2017-2018 school year, HRTD created a Diversity Champions Network to expand recruitment and onboarding efforts to be more inclusive.
- In 2018, the Department of Pupil Services created and began providing professional learning in *Equitable Practices: Implicit Bias, Vulnerable Decision Points, and Neutralizing Routines*.
- In early 2019, Superintendent Eric Williams made public comments to denounce racism and hate language. One written statement sent to the community included the following: *“Hateful, threatening language such as this can never be tolerated in LCPS because of its harmful effect on individuals, groups, and communities. We reject this painful, racist language that encourages discrimination, hatred, and violence.”*
- In early 2019, the Department of Instruction developed a three-module *Equity in the Center* cultural competence training for all schools to participate in before or during the 2019-2020 school year. As of the date of this report, all principals, assistant principals, deans, and DOI staff have participated.
- In spring 2019, the Department of Instruction created a position and hired an Equity and Cultural Competence Specialist.
- In spring 2019, the Superintendent created a position and hired a Director of Equity in the Office of the Superintendent to lead cross-departmental efforts to promote and sustain equity.
- The LCPS School Board voted to create an ad hoc committee on equity. The ad hoc committee was created in April 2019 and is scheduled to review the draft report of the systemic equity assessment at their June 2019 meeting.

- In the 2019-2020 school year, LCPS is expanding the community school initiative from one to six schools, including making part-time parent liaisons full-time positions and hiring an additional social worker.
- Since the 2016-2017 school year, HRTD has been implementing unconscious bias training for hiring managers, including but not limited to the following:
 - FY17: Unconscious Bias Training for 522 participants
 - FY18: Hiring with Equity Training for 243 participants, Mitigating Unconscious Bias with Equity in Hiring for an additional 277 participants
 - FY19: Continuing training with a train-the-trainer model
- The HRTD department participated in the Inspire-Connect-Educate Conference-conference is focused on targeting young Black and Hispanic males in the DC metro area, in order to conduct mock interviews and make presentations on careers in LCPS.
- LCPS communicates information about recruitment and hiring events to diverse serving organizations to seek their assistance in promoting the event. The organizations include Loudoun NAACP, Asian American Chamber of Commerce, Northern Virginia Black Chamber of Commerce, Virginia Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, Loudoun County Indian Community.
- LCPS has been encouraging diverse participation in our high school Teacher Cadet course and Educators Rising club. This includes outreach intended to target diverse populations through HBCU Showcase, AVID, and CAMPUS.
- During spring 2019, the Department of Instruction formed a formal partnership with the Loudoun Freedom Center to provide professional development opportunities, field trips, and curriculum reviews to remove instances of potential bias or insensitivity.

THE PATH FORWARD, TOGETHER

Educator Horace Mann recognized that education, beyond all other devices, is the great equalizer in society. To this day, Mann's wisdom still rings true. The work of The Equity Collaborative staff uncovered a number of community divisions that if remain unattended, limits Loudoun County Public Schools' capacity to realize Mann's wisdom for the greater Loudoun County, VA area and its stakeholders. In many ways the divisions in LCPS follow similar fault lines reflected in our current society: diversity, equity, inclusion, social class, economics, and race.

The Superintendent's remarks at the School Board Meeting on February 12, 2019 express the need for addressing inequities to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in LCPS.

"Closing equity gaps has been a central part of the Loudoun County Strategic Plan since soon after I arrived in Loudoun as Superintendent. Like the families and communities documented in the Edwin Washington project report, who relentlessly strove to educate their children, we, as a community working together, must never give in or give up until no inequities exist. The Strategic Plan has been the core of that effort for LCPS.

As Superintendent of LCPS, I am committed to dedicating the resources necessary to address issues of equity by further developing strategic actions, engaging outside expertise, and working with our families and the community. Together, we can have a lasting impact on the lives of ALL our students and truly honor and cherish the diversity that defines us."

While the synopsis of experiences in the above report are reflective of stakeholder concerns and insights, the most important question at the center of this review is, can those on all sides of these critical issues move forward together in a community of collective action? For Loudoun County educators, this work would require leadership and an openness to hearing and affirming the stories and schooling experiences of marginalized students and their families. And a willingness to practice from a place of *action* - not only good intentions. For LCPS students, their families, and community members, this work would require a commitment to productive partnerships and a readiness to support educators to bring the LCPS community together. With the support of The Equity Collaborative staff, and other support providers, there is clearly a path forward in Loudoun County.