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HIGH-ACHIEVING SCHOOLS PUT EQUITY FRONT AND CENTER

How does professional learning look and feel in high-poverty schools where every student makes at least one year's worth of progress every year? How do schools and leaders put all the varied components of professional learning together so that they support all students learning every day? What professional learning grounds and sustains educators in high-achieving, high-poverty schools that personalize learning?

We studied two rural and two urban schools with significant free-lunch eligible populations whose achievement data outperformed most schools and narrowed the achievement gap for multiple student groups over time. The four public schools differed from one another while sharing unique ways of linking equity and professional learning. This article conveys their common characteristics as well as specific examples from one of the study sites — Stults Road Elementary School in Richardson, Texas.

EQUITY FOCUSES AND DRIVES DAILY PRACTICES.

Educators commit to every student — no exceptions — making substantial and continuous progress. Equity and high standards travel hand-in-hand. Some students do this with a little help in certain areas, others need a lot of supports in every area. This whatever-it-takes attitude permeates philosophical statements, instructional and student support practices, and professional learning. Equity for these schools exists in the context of high expectations that incorporate national or state standards but are not limited by them. They are the floor, not the ceiling, of what is possible.

Most educators and school communities have and believe statements about achievement for all. Yet these statements can remain aspirational, like many New Year's resolutions or wishes for world peace. They are valued in concept but are not realistically planned for or actualized over the long term. School meeting agendas, instructional plans, and professional learning days may be perpetually one or two steps away from directly focusing on equity.

In the end, it is expected and acceptable that only some students do well (Hilliard, 1991). Goals can be too low, or too narrowly defined, to accomplish high achievement for all. Political pressure and policy goals may focus dispro-

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portionately on test scores. This may improve overall scores without fundamentally improving student learning. At best, these efforts make baby steps. We get to equity for some, but not across the board, and not consistently over time.

At Stults Road Elementary School, the equity commitment is evident in tag lines the school uses as organizing themes for a year. One year, the theme was: “Know them by name, know them by need.” Another year, it was: “Meeting the needs of all students isn’t extra work. It is THE work.” These statements appear in newsletters, on faculty and student T-shirts, on school walls, and they are made real by specific commitments. Clear and thoughtful language is essential as a starting point. These equitable ideals are then enlivened by a range of specific practices.

All four of the schools studied make a central commitment to equity over time, both in the language of their values statements and in their practices. It is explicit in missions, vision statements, communications with the community, and explanations of programs. The equity language at all the schools, developed collaboratively and with intentionality, evolves as educators get clearer about what students need and what is possible. See box above.

At Stults Road, for example, interventions take place to support both student learning and teacher learning when interim assessment results show that students are not making expected progress. As one would see in many schools, if a student score is below the 80% threshold on interim assessments, the student is provided immediate targeted support through the response to intervention program. If a group of students or a whole class score below 80%, a similar set of supports is activated for teachers.

What of the professional learning? Coaches and specialists respond immediately to support the teacher in question to deepen his or her approach to a concept, or a colleague might come into the classroom and demonstrate a model lesson that has been successful with students on that academic standard. The expectation is that all adults are responsible to work together to ensure that all students will reach benchmark goals — no exceptions. And because teaching is a complex profession, all teachers will be supported to improve and grow to meet that expectation.

EQUITY COMMITMENTS REQUIRE PROFESSIONAL COLLABORATION AND COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY.

The shift from settling on some students doing well to ensuring every student does well catalyzed changes in thinking about professional learning. Educators at the schools studied understood that once they made this commitment, they could not be successful being isolated in their own classrooms.

They had to collaborate because no one teacher’s in-

EQUITY COMMITMENTS

- Our goal for students is not for them to merely be doctors, teachers, or lawyers, but rather doctors, teachers, or lawyers that change the world.
- Students will score at least 80% on key assessments (whatever the proficiency score is), or get support until they do.
- Every student will graduate ready for college.
- Every student will make at least one year’s progress.
- Every student and teacher will achieve his or her personal best.
- We don’t just conference with the “problem” students. We conference with all students.

dividual success was enough and because no one teacher could be expert at supporting every student’s gifts and challenges. If it wasn’t good enough for just some teachers to personalize or some students to do well, they all had to rely on one another. This was propelled by another value: a sense of collective responsibility. Everyone was responsible for all students, not just students they knew or taught, and everyone was responsible for helping colleagues in a pinch.

At Stults Road, when a teacher first arrives to work at the school, he or she is observed and given feedback with intensity over the first few months. Colleagues are required to observe and be observed by colleagues while teaching. The new teacher is also scheduled to visit colleagues’ classrooms. This is true whether the teacher is new to the profession or simply new to the school.

Getting into the habit of giving and receiving feedback in order to support student learning is part of the school culture and commitment to advancing equity. Teachers need to be comfortable or quickly become acclimated to this practice if they are going to be effective in this school culture. The working assumption is that colleagues have to be in each other’s classrooms. They need to know each other’s students and each other’s practices so they can help each other as particular instructional challenges with individuals or groups of students arise.

Each school studied had stated expectations that collective responsibility means every teacher and staff member figures out ways to support a range of colleagues and expects others to pitch in and help.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING TO ADVANCE EQUITY REQUIRES UNDERSTANDING INDIVIDUAL STUDENTS AS PERSONS AND AS LEARNERS.

If every student matters, then every student needs to be understood for who he or she is. Educators across the study schools were conscious of hiring teachers who sought

to understand students as persons and as learners and engage families as part of that. In addition, professional learning was expected to help educators broaden and deepen their understanding of and commitment to students.

Educators in these schools needed to understand the talents and weak spots of their colleagues to focus their individual efforts and align them. As a result, educators were clear about what competencies they needed and those they needed to develop. Focused use of a range of formative and summative data informed starting places with students and tracked progress with an eye to continuous improvement.

At Stults Road, building relationships with students and their families over time and inventories that consider learning styles and preferences are essential. Data specialist Lin Wall says, “Each student has to know multiple teachers. That gives them a lot of people who care about their learning.” Beyond peer coaching, teachers also have dismissal duties in different parts of the campus to give them a chance to interact with students beyond “their” students and outside of the classroom. Insights from these informal interactions are considered important and part of team-based conversations about students.

Knowing students as learners is grounded in the regular use of learning data. Teachers discuss classroom, benchmark, diagnostic, and unit assessment results in biweekly grade-level meetings as well as biweekly content-based team meetings, in which all teachers participate. These meetings focus on tapping the expertise of multiple educators — including English as a second language, special education, and academic coaches — to clarify students’ current knowledge and develop and clarify next steps for student learning. This is not just one grade’s practice, but something that is systemic.

These examples are consistent with all study schools, where the focus on understanding students was a central part of pro-

fessional dialogue and where the time that is set aside for this is inviolate. Team time allowed teachers to look closely at student learning needs, document and celebrate progress, and develop consistent and high expectations.

ADVANCING EQUITY MEANS DEVELOPING CULTURAL COMPETENCE.

Knowing students well means considering what educators don’t understand about them already. Sometimes this means deepening an understanding of what data conveys about student knowledge or developing skills to respond to particular students. Other times, it means developing cultural competence — educators’ ability to understand their own background in terms of race, class, culture, gender, language, and ability. With greater cultural competence, educators develop a greater understanding and appreciation of the range of backgrounds represented by students and adults at their school and improve their capacity to engage, challenge, and support students.

This professional learning may stem from an understanding that everyone has cultural blind spots and biases and needs to continuously deepen his or her awareness and competence. It could be prompted by a changing demographic. Or it could be a response to a practice or comment that communicates low expectations or exclusion of an individual or a group of students. See below for a list of ways that the schools studied supported cultural competence.

At Stults Road, the faculty participates in a simulation that assigns people to different roles in order to deepen their understanding about economic class differences. Every teacher has a role: teacher, parent, or student. Stults educators reflect on students’ home lives and the implications for their school experiences. Insights from these conversations then resurface in team meetings, where teachers think through individual student

DEVELOPING CULTURAL COMPETENCE

ALL SCHOOLS:

- Use shared readings as a way to build common understanding about equity.
- Confront expressions of low expectations regarding a particular student or a group of students.
- Differentiate learning to honor different interests, intelligences, and capacities.
- Name and discuss specific expectations and how they will be manifested and tracked.
- Use the data to inform what the student performance is, and use high expectations to shape instruction and support.

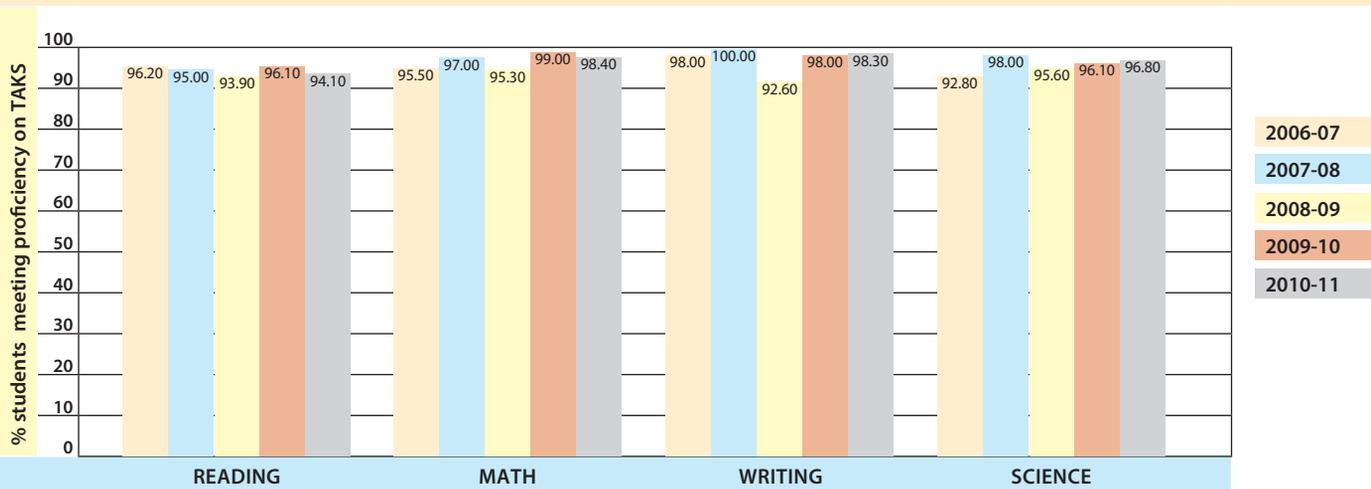
ONE OR MORE SCHOOLS:

- Work collectively to understand general issues of race, class, language, culture, and privilege.

- Explore personal bias, how it impedes student learning, school and district practices, and what to do about it.
- Design antiracist, antibias curriculum and assessments.
- Use instructional materials that acknowledge and incorporate student backgrounds.
- Participate in a simulation where participants take on the role of economically poor people in different circumstances.
- Consider different dimensions of learners by developing interest inventories, learning about multiple intelligences, or using True Colors or Myers-Briggs Type Indicator.
- Learn about family strengths and contexts, their structures, values, and patterns.
- Conduct student home visits.
- Use student survey data to ensure students feel personally supported in their learning.

STULTS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STATE ASSESSMENT SCORES 2006-11

The table illustrates results on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) over five years. Stults Road has scored consistently above the state average.



and family supports.

Teachers at Stults Road consider some of their cultural competency to be developed alongside work with experts as they deepen use of instructional strategies, knowledge of student learning styles, differentiated instruction, and pedagogy. Here they integrate knowledge and awareness of students with best practices of teaching. Sessions that raise sensitivity and awareness are not stand-alones.

Whatever the approach, each school had adults who were thinking about when challenge or achievement could be low for a particular group of students, and what professional learning could help raise awareness and deepen understanding so that low expectations or misunderstandings about students were not an impediment to achievement and the giftedness of an individual or a group of students had space to reveal itself.

data-driven learning in teams, observing students in a range of learning environments, and leadership conversations. As school communities sought to understand students as persons and learners in order to best support and challenge, they understood they needed to do the same with the adults. The more adults were understood for who they were, the more it was possible to help them make progress helping students.

At Stults Road, teacher Heidi Moore, new to the school, came with expertise in teaching gifted and talented students. Her class made significant progress on benchmark data using a particular strategy.

Assistant principal Amber Leblond asked Moore to introduce the strategy to faculty members at their weekly meeting. Teachers discussed the strategy, and whether and how they could start to use it over the coming weeks. Leblond and others followed up to track progress first in implementing, then in getting results.

The expectation at Stults is that every teacher has both examples of very good practice to share as well as areas where they need to focus on growth. That same teacher was having difficulty teaching a unit concept and recognized that her students were not progressing as she would like. She asked for support, and it came right away.

Leblond observed the teacher’s classroom and studied the lesson plan and student data. Together, the two came up with strategies to adjust specific grouping, address pacing, and integrate new instructional techniques. They continued to track progress together over the following few weeks. At one point, Leblond demonstrated a new instructional strategy, then observed and provided feedback to Moore on its use. They worked out and refined new differentiation strategies until progress was accelerated and sustainable.

Discussions about observations, interventions, and how

Stults Road Elementary School

Richardson, Texas

Grades: **K-6**

Enrollment: **524**

Staff: **55**

Racial/ethnic mix:

White:	5%
Black:	41%
Hispanic:	47%
Asian/Pacific Islander:	4%
Native American:	0.2%
Other:	2.8%

Limited English proficient: **38%**

Languages spoken: **Spanish, Vietnamese, Urdu, Arabic, Swahili**

Free/reduced lunch: **80%**

Special education: **12%**

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ADULT LEARNING MUST BE PERSONALIZED THE SAME WAY STUDENT LEARNING IS.

At the schools studied, ensuring student excitement about learning went hand-in-hand with the idea that all the adults needed to be excited and productive in their own learning.

This was evident in a range of ways: individual teacher goal setting based on student data, coaching, new teacher mentoring, new teacher cultural acclimation, collegial learning in teams,

students respond to them arise during grade-level data review meetings, vertical team meetings, and through the weekly meetings focused on developing innovative practices. The learning informs not only Leblond and Moore, but also the entire professional community.

Using this mindset, no teacher is pure genius or low performer, as no student is.

Everyone has strengths and weak spots and needs to be honored for his or her gifts and supported when there is not enough progress. The schools integrated everything they were learning about students and brought it to bear on instruction and assessments.

Dissemination of new knowledge and practices happened through a clear team structure, whereby innovations were practiced, evaluated, and shared with faculty, with the expectation that teachers will work to adopt these new practices. Follow-through was built in, with experienced teachers and academic coaches on hand to support schoolwide implementation, and the feedback loop tightly monitored to ensure teacher use of these identified high-impact strategies.

Just as teachers are the point persons for understanding how each student learns and where they are in terms of what they need to learn next, a range of school leaders were responsible for understanding teachers' knowledge and skills base, tapping their areas of strength, and supporting their growth in pointed ways.

Ontario district embraces an evolving approach to learning

Continued from p. 22 in the York Region District School Board. Prepared for the 2009 Scottish International Summer School on School Leadership. Available at <http://dhackshaw.abel.yorku.ca/leadershipdevelopment/questjournal2009/LeadershipInnovation.pdf>.

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POWERFUL PROFESSIONAL LEARNING IS A DEAL-BREAKER TO ADVANCING EQUITY.

The idea of all students learning is not just for dreamers and philosophers. It is practical and doable, and these four schools are the advance team for what is possible. Schools everywhere can help every student succeed, but not without consistent, powerful professional learning that helps teachers scaffold rigorous and engaging learning.

Values and aspirations require steadfast and thorough implementation, alongside professional learning that ensures teachers achieve the goals that support student learning. A range of formal and informal leaders can facilitate educator support and progress in the same way that teachers must support student learning. When rigorous and supportive learning happens for everyone in the educational enterprise, every person can make substantive progress.

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