



# EQUITY THROUGH MUTUAL ACCOUNTABILITY

COLLECTIVE CAPACITY BUILDING HELPS EDUCATORS ADDRESS THE NEEDS OF ALL STUDENTS

BY JOAQUIN NOGUERA AND PEDRO NOGUERA

**T**oday, over half of students served in our nation's public schools are students of color, and over half of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch (Rich, 2015). Because of the persistence of race and class segregation in housing patterns and a lack of willingness to implement past court orders for school desegregation (Rothstein, 2017), many schools are characterized by hypersegregation by both race and class (Orfield, Ee, Frankenberg, & Siegel-Hawley, 2016).

Moreover, in much of the country, the most disadvantaged children are most likely to attend underfunded schools (U.S. Commission on Civil

Rights, 2018). They also typically obtain the lowest test scores, graduation rates, and, in many cases, are more likely to be subjected to punitive forms of discipline. Too often, the services needed to address their health, nutrition, social, psychological, and emotional needs are either inadequate or elusive.

These unmet social needs invariably have a negative impact on academic performance (Ladd, 2012). For too long, state and federal policy has assumed that achievement gaps could close without addressing such glaring gaps in educational opportunity.

We may now be approaching a moment when there is greater willingness in many schools to address

some of these core equity issues and an opening for doing so.

The adoption of ESSA (Every Student Succeeds Act) in 2017 and, with it, a reduction in state testing requirements bring a new phase of reform, enabling districts and states to take a new approach to accountability, one that opens new possibilities for pursuing equity in new ways.

One of those ways is shifting from *top-down* accountability, in which schools and educators are subject to various mandates and pressures to improve, to *mutual forms of accountability* (Quinn & Fullan, 2015), wherein schools and districts address equity challenges collaboratively. Rather than relying on scrutiny and pressure,



they are engaged in *professional and institutional capacity building* to drive their equity goals.

Mutual accountability calls for each stakeholder — students, teachers, parents, and administrators — to work collaboratively in pursuit of educational goals. As we show in the pages ahead, such an approach is essential for pursuing equity because it makes it possible to avoid debates about blame when implementing strategies to address the needs of all students.

We present here two cases of this new approach to accountability: a school and a district in which collective capacity building helps teachers and schools become more accountable to each other and more effective in addressing the academic and social needs of all students.

The two cases are important because they illustrate how mutual accountability plays out at different institutional levels: the classroom and school site, and the district central office.

Though the dynamics at play are different, the goals — meeting the academic and social needs of all students — are similar and can be illuminating to educators.

## PROFESSIONAL CAPACITY BUILDING:

### FOCUS ON THE WHOLE CHILD

Schools generally reflect and embody the inequities present in society. Given that our society remains deeply stratified by race and class, it is hardly surprising that most schools reflect these patterns. But what would happen if a school were designed to

meet the social-emotional and academic needs of low-income students of color.

The school provides a broader array of supports than a traditional school, including the arts, social supports, and enriched learning opportunities in English and Spanish. In addition to

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explicitly counter racial inequality and injustice? In such a school, is it possible for educators to enact strategies that interrupt and counter the various ways that racial inequality is reproduced?

That is beginning to happen at one community school in a low-income urban area in northern California. Founded in 2015 by an acclaimed educator with more than 20 years of teaching and school leadership experience, the school aims to counter adverse community conditions and

meeting students' academic needs, the school seeks to ensure that they develop both deep knowledge of themselves and a strong sense of social responsibility to the wider community.

To make this vision a reality, teachers needed support to meet students' needs. The founder's deep knowledge of the community and compelling vision enabled him to attract teachers and school leaders of color, who also brought compassion, a deep understanding of the need for

caring relationships with students and strong partnerships with families, and a passion for social justice.

But many of them were novices who struggled to provide high-quality instruction — for example, to support literacy or intervene when students failed to comprehend the logic behind problem solving in math.

In addition, the faculty observed that some African-American students who had transferred to the school frequently experienced academic and behavioral difficulties, including exposure to trauma, that teachers were not equipped to address.

The school responded to these potential teaching and learning challenges by strengthening mutual accountability and capacity building. The school developed a system that used the knowledge and skill of two experienced lead teachers to support their less-experienced peers.

Teacher leaders offered instructional coaching to colleagues when requested or when site leadership determined it was needed. However, lead teachers were responsible for their own classrooms, and it soon became clear that the support they could provide their colleagues was insufficient.

The school then formed a partnership with a literacy curriculum provider that supplemented the coaching available to teachers. This capacity building started with an initial workshop to introduce a particular practice to groups of teachers from across the school, followed by targeted coaching in grade-level professional learning communities (PLCs) that sometimes included modeling from coaches on particular lessons.

By working together in learning teams and focusing on shared goals, teachers became accountable to each other, rather than simply to site leaders. They also gave input into the types of professional learning they needed



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and engaged in regular analysis of data obtained from formative assessments to monitor student progress.

Their collective focus on pursuing equity through mutual accountability fosters an atmosphere of openness where it is recognized that students' needs are treated as a reflection of individual teachers' needs.

The vision and mission of the school are visible in action: the dual immersion program, the infusion of ethnic studies and the arts in the curriculum, and the welcoming atmosphere evident throughout the school. The school has seen evidence of progress in student learning, including among its high-need students.

While students appear happy and engaged, significant challenges in teaching and learning remain. Close examination of student work reveals that many are struggling with basic skills, and many teachers continue to struggle in figuring out how to teach them. Using literacy coaches, a literacy-rich curriculum, and restorative discipline practices are all helping to create a positive learning environment at the classroom level, but change takes time.

Yet, as the school enters its fourth year, it is becoming clearer to leaders and staff what it will take to fulfill the

school's commitment to social justice and community transformation. School leaders understand that they must ensure that the pursuit of equity is based on an ongoing commitment to collective capacity building and a focus on academics for students. Without these components, the social and cultural supports the school provides will not be sufficient to guarantee equity in academic and social outcomes at the school.

### **INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY BUILDING:**

#### **ELIMINATE BARRIERS TO EQUITY**

In our work with schools and districts throughout the U.S., educators frequently ask us to cite examples of entire school districts realizing their equity goals. Abington Public Schools, outside of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, is one of few U.S. districts making steady progress in reducing race and class disparities in academic outcomes for several years (Blankstein & Noguera, 2015).

The district has demonstrated that, by embracing its equity challenges and focusing on the ways in which race and class are implicated in achievement patterns, it can generate concrete evidence of improvements for all students.

Abington is a diverse community where race and class patterns overlap: 60% of students are white and middle class, but the other 40% are students of color from low-income families. Research has shown that school districts with similar demographics exhibit deep and persistent race and class disparities in academic performance, and progress is difficult to achieve even with an abundance of resources (Lewis & Diamond, 2017; Noguera & Wing, 2006). Abington defies those patterns.

Much of Abington's success can be attributed to the willingness of its leaders to take on equity issues

without fear, communicate their equity goals clearly to the community, and support students and teachers. When Superintendent Amy Sichel implemented a districtwide initiative in 2001, she presented data demonstrating the pervasive nature of race and class disparities throughout the district. She pledged that she and her staff could do a better job serving all students.

Despite the positive nature of her message, she encountered fears and protests from affluent white parents who believed their children would be shortchanged by the equity agenda. Sichel anticipated this response and responded to the school board and the community that the pursuit of equity was not about lowering standards and expectations.

Even as the district eliminated all forms of tracking and expanded access to honors and advanced placement courses, she pledged that the district would maintain quality and challenge all students.

The district pursued its ambitious goals by ensuring that whenever an equity barrier was eliminated (e.g. providing increased access to honors and advanced placement courses), teachers engaged in professional learning to make the change effective.

For example, in 2006, Abington placed all 8th-grade students in algebra. The move was based on research in the district and elsewhere that showed that, by expanding the number of students who enrolled in algebra by 8th grade, the district could significantly increase the number of students who graduated from high school college-ready (Noguera & Wing, 2006).

Though the evidence was clear, pursuit of the goal was fraught with difficulty. Not only was a student tracking system deeply entrenched in the district, but teachers were tracked, too. The most highly regarded teachers were typically assigned to teach the



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highest-achieving students.

Math teachers complained that the students who had previously been kept out of algebra were unprepared. Similarly, affluent white parents complained that high achievers would be underserved if they were placed in classrooms with their less-capable peers.

To ensure that parents' and teachers' opposition would not thwart their plan, district leaders decided that students who earned less than a B in 7th-grade math would receive an additional period of math enrichment before beginning algebra.

Recognizing the likelihood that the enrichment class would be composed primarily of students of color, they arranged for the classes to be taught by some of the most highly regarded teachers so that white parents would be more likely to request that their children be placed there. This avoided a common tendency for schools to stigmatize the students of color they are attempting to help.

But for this plan to work, teachers who might struggle teaching heterogeneous groups of students would need support because they were used

to teaching only high-ability students. Eighth-grade algebra teachers were provided a common preparation period so that they could help each other build capacity for designing lessons and developing classroom strategies to address student needs.

The superintendent played an essential role in leading Abington's equity work, but she did not do it alone. The effort relied on a culture of continuous improvement through mutual accountability. Before being appointed superintendent, Sichel had worked as a guidance counselor in the district. Her training had led her to believe that the best way to support her staff in the new equity agenda would be to:

- Solicit their input when implementing new plans;
- Engage in collaborative problem solving as challenges emerged;
- Provide coaching and support to staff when they took on new roles; and
- Appeal to their core values and the belief that educators should be committed to making a difference for all students, even when some didn't actually share this belief.

These principles helped strengthen educators' sense of ownership and mutual accountability, ultimately leading to more equitable outcomes for their students.

The changes in Abington have been slow but steady. The district's success in advancing equity is yet another reminder that this work takes time, courage, and vision.

### **A COMMITMENT TO GROWTH**

Inequity in education is not only perpetuated by a lack of access to educational opportunity. It is also furthered by classroom and school practices that prevent children from

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Amy Polzin wrote *Sugar Subterfuge*, blending the social justice question, “Who is responsible for the rise of childhood Type II diabetes?” with the science question “What are the four macromolecules essential to cell structure and function?”

Anabel Muñana and Donald Rose developed curriculum on Matt de la Peña’s *Mexican WhiteBoy* — “a unit examining definitions of identity, how they are constructed, and how persons may struggle with determining or expressing theirs.”

Hyung Nam, Julie O’Neill, Chris Buehler, and Sylvia McGauley wrote *Civics, Social Justice, and Nonviolent Direct Action: Rebels with Causes*, explaining in their introduction that their lessons make up “a different kind of civics,” one “that is more radical, in that it addresses issues at their deep roots and

may even include civil disobedience.”

These were first drafts, not yet tested in actual classrooms. But the week was a festival of imagination and social justice engagement. And teachers would come back together throughout the following year to reflect, extend, and share the results of their experiments, bringing a commitment to learning and growing this work together.

**CURRICULUM FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE**

The aim of Curriculum Camps, of course, is not just the production of lively and relevant teaching guides that can be shared throughout the school district, although that’s important. The broader objective is twofold: to expand people’s vision of what curriculum is and where it comes from, and for teachers to see themselves —

individually and collectively — as leaders of a movement to infuse social justice into curriculum. Curriculum Camp teachers are activists.

At this moment of increasing xenophobia, racism, and inequality, we need sites of professional learning that help educators teach for a better world. We owe it to our students. We owe it to everyone.

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Equity through mutual accountability

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acquiring the academic skills and knowledge needed to be successful in college, careers, and life.

If educators are to counter the forces that generate inequity in society, they need intentional professional learning that builds their knowledge and capacity to break down barriers and ensure that all children get what they need to thrive. With that knowledge and capacity, they become equipped to hold each other accountable for promoting equity.

Without it, solutions like culturally responsive education or engaging teachers in bias training are unlikely to produce greater equity. A commitment to equity in education is a commitment to personal and collective growth.

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