



## ADVISOR SPOTLIGHT

Maurice Swinney

# PROFESSIONAL LEARNING GROUNDS EQUITY WORK IN CHICAGO

Maurice Swinney is chief equity officer in Chicago Public Schools and a member of *The Learning Professional* advisory board.

## **Y**ou have worked for equity your whole career. What’s unique about the role of a chief equity officer that drove you to your current position?

I was a neighborhood school principal, a teacher, and an instructional coach. I knew firsthand what my students deserved and were capable of and how some policies and lack of resources got in the way. I also wanted to bring people who didn’t normally have a seat to the table.

The role of chief equity officer became very intriguing to me because it was designed to mitigate and correct historical injustices and racialized outcomes for student groups who are furthest from opportunity, meaning their social and academic outcomes are furthest from the goal the district is trying to meet. The role is designed to call out disparities associated with race, gender identity or expression, social, and other life factors that have been used to predict outcomes.

With this role, I could help co-design what transformation would look like under the CEO, Dr. Janice K. Jackson, who is deeply committed to promoting and advancing equity, including racial equity, throughout the system. I report directly to her, which allows a direct line of communication for the equity office team to share our perspectives and expertise. It also allows me to function across the organization, collaborating with leaders working to advance equity in policy, finance, student supports, and other areas.

## **Why is it important to have a team that is dedicated to building equity?**

Without a team, I believe an equity officer is set up to be a performative talking head who has no power to deeply influence work across a district. Having a team situates people, time, and money to implement what the district says it values. Also, a leader can’t be in all spaces at once and can’t get all of the work done. I work with a data strategist, policy strategist, achievement specialist, director of professional learning, officer manager, and a host of college interns and fellows. This team allows our office to connect with many different people and find multiple ways to mitigate inequity and injustice.

## **How have you embedded professional learning in the office of equity?**

I’ve always been invested in professional learning. I’ve been connected with Learning Forward since it was the National Staff Development Council and had an opportunity to weigh in on the current federal definition for professional learning. I prioritize professional learning in my role because a huge part of equity work is about hearts and minds. We have to learn continuously and together; otherwise, we are perpetuating the cycles of “do as I say, not as I do.”

The learning I lead and engage in with Chicago Public Schools colleagues takes into account

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## RESOURCES

- Chicago Public Schools Equity Framework: [equity.cps.edu/equity-framework/download](https://equity.cps.edu/equity-framework/download)
- Chicago Public Schools Equity Toolkit: [equity.cps.edu/](https://equity.cps.edu/)
- Liberatory Thinking resources: [equity.cps.edu/equity-framework/equity-lens/liberatory-thinking](https://equity.cps.edu/equity-framework/equity-lens/liberatory-thinking)

history, current reality, research, storytelling, and processes that cause change. It emphasizes liberatory thinking, which centers on challenging personal and interpersonal beliefs, ideas, and practices that perpetuate racism and stifle progress toward justice and liberation for all.

### **What is the CPS Equity Framework and what role does it play?**

To do this work in such a large district, we knew we had to have an equity stance, guidance, and resources. The CPS Equity Framework grounds all of these and can serve as the equity voice in a room where no one else is present. The framework helps to demystify what equity means and provides tools to help us act on the principles we say we value.

We also created a CPS Equity Toolkit to share stories and provide tools to support ongoing learning and implementation. We've also created professional learning focused on liberatory thinking for school leaders and facilitated professional learning for different offices and departments within the district. The district is now rolling out our Skyline Curriculum Equity Initiative to support schools with implementing culturally responsive instruction and practices.

### **What advice do you have for other districts who want to establish or bolster an office of equity?**

Put your money where your mouth is. Provide a budget for a team that includes an equity officer who reports to the superintendent or the CEO. Collect data and allow the equity team access to data. Help the team form



partnerships with community-based organizations and research partners who can help to uplift the work. Provide executive coaching to the leader to create a safe space for discussing challenges. It's also important to cultivate equity champions throughout the system. Develop a racial equity task force or steering committee that helps to understand the multiple perspectives needed to advance change, and commit to hiring people who lead with a racial equity lens.

### **There are many challenges to doing this work. What do you want people to be aware of and prepared to address?**

We must elevate healing and cultivate joy within schools and communities. That includes recognizing

and thanking school faculty and staff for the hours and efforts they put in. Schools are some of the only places where hundreds of people come together hundreds of days at a time to have thousands of interactions; the only other places are prisons and nursing homes.

As we recover from the pandemic, it would harm us if we rush back to traditional lessons and assessments and fail to center ourselves in relationships with other people. We also have to lift the voice of students, asking them what should school be like. When we go to the doctor, restaurants, and clothing stores, they ask us about our needs. That same collectivist approach is needed in schools. We have to heal together in order to be together in order to learn together. ■