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Executive Summary of Equity Audits

Novato USD

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In October of 2021, I was given the opportunity to conduct school equity audits at all of the school campuses in Novato USD. These audits are based upon the equity construct called the *Liberation Mindset* from the book *Overcoming the Achievement Gap Trap, Liberating Mindsets to Effect Change* (2015). Schools were assessed on five indicators of equity; 1) School has openly discussed, defined, and committed to student equity and access, 2) School regularly collects, analyzes, and acts upon equity data both academically and behaviorally, 3) School engages in activities that seek to identify, assess, and confront personal and collective bias among staff members as it relates to equity and diversity, 4) School invests in professional development and other resources that improve the capacity of educators to improve their practices to serve diverse populations and improve equitable outcomes, and 5) School community engages in action research in their attempt to promote equity and inclusion. Each indicator was assessed using a 4-point rubric. In addition to the rubric based assessment, each professional staff member was given a twelve question survey, and a sample of staff members were interviewed to assess the collective beliefs and theories of each staff as it relates to equity.

Each audit was unique in its findings, but there were some common, district-wide themes that I believe should be considered by the board of education, and Novato USD central office as you pursue equity across the entire school district.

1) Data-driven decision making and strategic planning for equity

It became very apparent that many schools in Novato USD do not regularly collect and analyze equity data from multiple sources. In many cases, the educators were surprised by some of the student disparities reported in the equity audit. In most cases, this surprise was based upon a sincere sense of dissatisfaction, but it's concerning that they were surprised nonetheless. Schools that have a liberation mindset constantly measure their impact of all student groups, and plan and act when disparities are identified.

Recommendation:

I am recommending that each site create an equity team, whose explicit focus is to collect, analyze, and lead action research in the pursuit of equity. Point #7 in the Novato USD Equity Imperative that was adopted on December 5, 2018 calls for each school to "Create or improve the use of an equity-driven data system." The evidence gathered in these audits did not find many artifacts (outside of the High School WASC reports) that even came close to meeting this provision. I am also recommending that each equity team report their progress toward tangible, data-driven equity goals at least two times per school year to the board of education.

2) Professional development

The area of equity where there was the greatest level of teacher consensus professional development for equity. Often, this important facet of equity is overlooked. In my research, I have found that every single school that I have studied that has been able to deliver the promise of equity, were staffed with teachers who were knowledgeable and skilled in serving diverse populations. Simply put, teachers cannot perform a task that they don't know how to perform. The ability to serve students with disabilities, multi-lingual classrooms, and students of multiple cultural backgrounds requires a significant investment in professional development in those areas. Based upon my assessment of the schools in Novato USD, the long-term systemic commitment to that training does not currently exist.

Recommendation:

I am recommending that based upon the most prevalent equity needs after an annual review of equity data, an equity focused professional development plan be created and integrated into the district-wide professional development each year. I am also recommending that each school equity team review its own equity data and submit a plan/request for equity training that aligns with their individual needs. Point #4 in the Novato USD Equity Imperative calls for the district to "Provide Equity Professional Development, Training, and Support." If equity is important, than an investment in teacher capacity will provide a very robust return on investment.

3) Community and parent involvement with equity efforts

It became very apparent during the audit reviews that there was apprehension about pursuing an aggressive equity agenda because of fear of populist opposition. Equity challenges privilege; and generally when the student curve is flattened and more students are given opportunities that have historically only been provided for a few, the advocates of privilege tend to put pressure on officials to protect their privilege. In my research, this construct is referred to as *Advocacy*. Every school that I have ever studied, which has favorable equity evidence, has exhibited a strong commitment to principle over politics. If equity is to become a reality in Novato USD, there needs to be a resolve among all members of the Novato USD community, that the Equity Imperative adopted by the board of education in 2018 is an unwavering objective. This type of resolve will require allies.

Recommendation:

I am recommending that each equity team solicit the support of their parent community. I am suggesting that each equity team include at least two parents from their parent community from the underserved populations identified in their review of the school's equity data. I am also recommending that these advocate/ally parents communicate with other parents in the school community and remain active lobbyists for their children in the development of equity policies, procedures, and budgets.

4) Policy review at each school site related to access to rigorous opportunities

It was apparent through the review of school and district policies that there are some systemic barriers to student access to opportunities. Including cognitive assessments that may not fully and accurately assess the full intellectual potential of students and

forms, documents, deadlines and parent meeting requirements for access to advanced courses. Systemic gatekeepers for opportunity have always been a covert roadblock in the fight for equity. One of the goals in the district Equity Imperative (Goal #1) is to “Increase the number of Latino, socioeconomically disadvantaged, special education, and EL students meeting A-G requirements by 5%.” This can only become a reality if these students are provided with unfettered access to the courses and opportunities that would prepare them to meet A-G requirements.

Recommendation:

I am recommending that school district conduct an evaluation of all policies governing student access to rigor in the school district (including GATE, Algebra in the middle schools, and STEM at the high school level). I am also recommending that each school equity team conduct a similar analysis of policies related to access to the school’s most rigorous opportunities. Once the policy review is complete, I am recommending that the school district leadership and each school equity team provide proposed modifications to enrollment policies for its most rigorous programs and opportunities, and create annual goals and action plans with the goal of completely equitable representation in each program.

5) Use the equity tools already provided

Novato USD has already provided some tools that can profoundly improve the district journey towards equity. Some of these tools include; Restorative Justice, Ethnic Studies Curriculum, and Competency Based Education/Grading. It became very apparent from my visit to each school site that the understanding, commitment, and implementation of these tools vary greatly from campus-to-campus. Each one of the

tools/practices that I described could greatly enhance the school and district's equity efforts.

Recommendation:

It is always a good idea to build in accountability systems whenever an innovation is created and implemented system-wide. When districts provide support with little accountability and oversight, the message sent to practitioners is that this initiative/behavior is a "suggestion." Accountability does not have to be oppressive or a burden. It is simply a systemic collection of evidence to verify what the system deems important. It's a check and balance. I am recommending that equity teams be required to report the use and impact of all current equity practices or initiatives at least annually. This will assist in strategic planning and cut down on waste and improve efficiency. When the school district makes an investment, it has a right to require evidence on the impact of that investment.