

# TRANSFORMING SCHOOL CULTURE

## School Equity Audit

**Hill Education Center**

**Novato, CA**

October 2021



## What is a School Equity Audit?

A school equity audit is an in depth analysis of the readiness and commitment of a school as it relates to equity in student achievement. A commitment to equity is an important part of a school's culture. Most schools claim openly their commitment to serving "all" children, and this audit analyzes the depth of commitment to that claim.

A **healthy school culture** is defined as "A school with an unwavering belief in the ability of each student to achieve success, and they articulate that belief to others in overt and covert ways. Healthy school cultures create policies and procedures and adopt practices that support their belief in the ability of every student" (Peterson, 2003). This report is designed to provide tangible evidence concerning a school's commitment to equity through its **policies, practices, and procedures (formal culture)**; and **beliefs and perceptions (informal culture)**. The combination of health in both areas constitutes a healthy school culture, therefore increasing the likelihood of equitable student outcomes. Inconsistency or toxicity in either area indicates a need for growth.

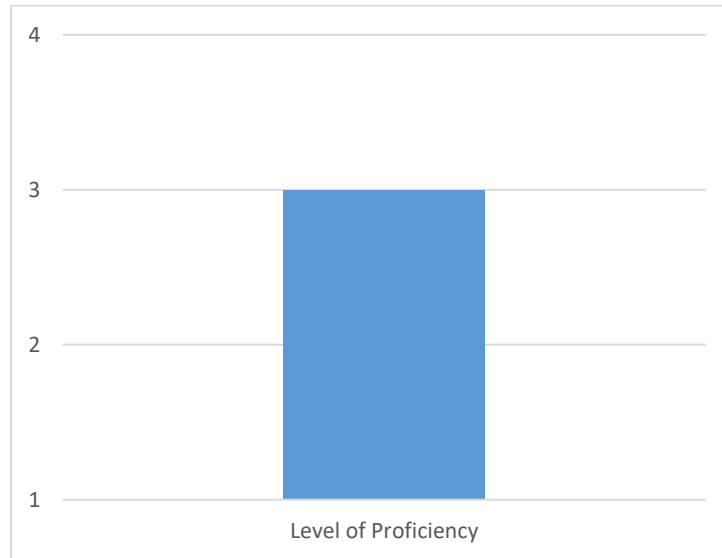
The formal culture will be rated on a four-point rubric for five different indicators, based upon data collected in various forms. The informal culture will be analyzed based upon a staff survey given to all professional staff members (see appendix A) and formal interviews conducted with a representative sample from both the teaching and non-teaching staff.

## Policies, Practices, and Procedures

Indicator 1	4 Exemplary Level of Development and Implementation	3 Fully Functional and Operational Level of Development and Implementation	2 Limited Development or Partial Implementation	1 Little to No Development and Implementation
<p>School has openly discussed, defined, and committed to student equity and access</p>	<p>Evidence exists that diversity and inclusion is an essential part of practice and systems</p> <p>School engages in continuous learning to improve the impact of their practice in the promotion of equity and inclusion</p> <p>School constantly monitors evidence of impact on underserved student groups and makes real time adjustments to practice</p>	<p>Staff members can clearly define their common philosophy about equity and diversity and there is philosophical consensus</p> <p>Issues of equity are frequently discussed and the collaborative dialogue leads to change in practice</p> <p>Staff members are empathetic towards underserved student populations and are eager to change their practice to meet their needs</p>	<p>Staff members can express a few common core values with little philosophical disagreement about diversity and equity</p> <p>Issues of equity are occasionally discussed and analyzed, but it rarely leads to tangible change</p> <p>Staff members are empathetic towards underserved student populations, but it does not inspire substantive change</p>	<p>Staff members cannot express any of the school's core values and wide philosophical disagreement exists about diversity and equity</p> <p>Issues of equity and inclusion are taboo and avoided</p> <p>Staff members may become hostile or deflective if issues of fairness and equity are discussed or analyzed</p>

# Indicator 1

Rating: Level 3 Fully Functional

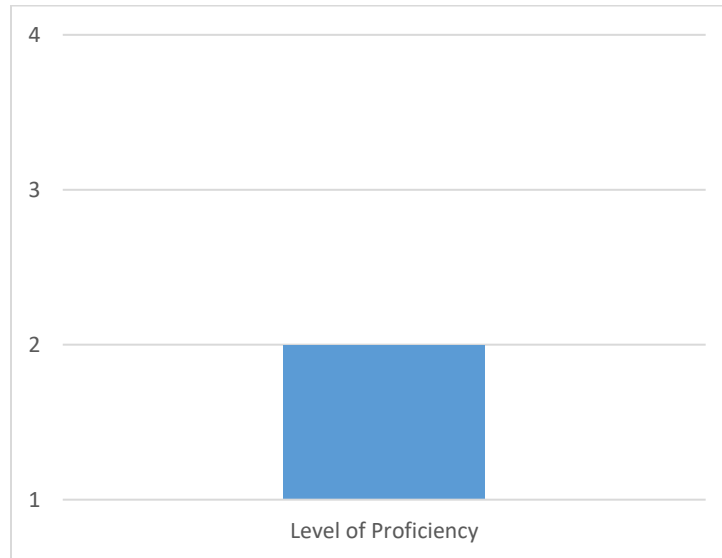


- School and district have invested in initiatives like Ethnic Studies curriculum and resolution, Equity Imperative, Anti-Racist Resolution, and Restorative Justice. Evidence of implementation or impact of any of these initiatives could not be found.
- School website contains a “Non-Discrimination” clause.
- School website contains a link to Title IX Anti-Discrimination information.
- School website openly and publically commits to a *culture of caring*, a *culture of competence*, and a *culture of excellence*. The school also openly publishes their commitment to 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning framework.
- School has moved beyond discussion about access and equity and has constructed a diverse approach to meeting student learning needs which includes alternative school format, online learning, and adult learning.
- Interviews revealed that staff members tend to universally embrace the published philosophies of the Hill Center and its diverse programs and learning opportunities.

Indicator 2	4 Exemplary Level of Development and Implementation	3 Fully Functional and Operational Level of Development and Implementation	2 Limited Development or Partial Implementation	1 Little to No Development and Implementation
<p>School regularly collects, analyzes, and acts upon equity data both academically and socially</p>	<p>School collects, analyzes, and openly shares disaggregated student performance data with all stakeholders including parents and the community</p> <p>School uses unpleasant student performance data to engage all school stake holders both internally and externally</p> <p>School staff members accept the validity of the performance data to inspire change in both their individual and collective practice, including parents and the community at-large</p>	<p>School seeks, embraces, and values the insight gained from disaggregated student performance data in their improvement efforts</p> <p>School staff members seek unpleasant student performance data to provide insight into critical areas of need for school improvement</p> <p>School staff members accept the validity of the performance data to inspire change in their individual practice</p>	<p>School recognizes the value of disaggregated student performance data, but does not collect it frequently</p> <p>School staff members accept unpleasant student performance data and are empathetic towards students from underserved student groups</p> <p>School staff members accept the validity of the performance data, but does not inspire them to change their practice</p>	<p>School does not recognize or value the need to collect and analyze disaggregated student performance data</p> <p>School staff members become hostile when presented with unpleasant student performance data</p> <p>School staff members challenge the validity of any performance data that does not validate current practice</p>

## Indicator 2

Rating: Level 2 Limited Development or Partial Implementation

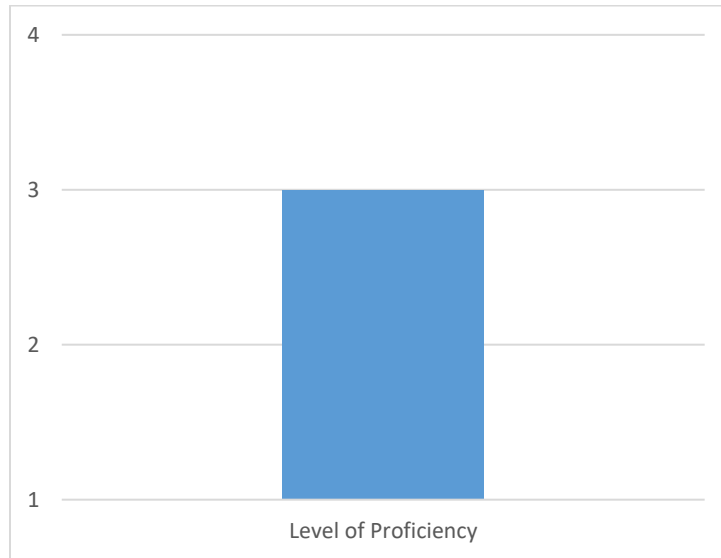


- Though it is very easy to get comprehensive descriptions of the diverse program offerings at Hill Center, it is very difficult to obtain data on impact and performance from local or state sources.
- Student transiency, size, and diverse format makes it difficult to gather and analyze student performance information on state or national assessments. The diversity of program, and relatively small size makes disaggregation difficult.
- The state of California reports that between 2016 – 2019, a gap of at least 17% in proficiency on state reading achievement tests for male students when compared to female students.
- The state of California reports that between 2016 – 2019, Latino students outperformed the school average in math, but performed below the school norm in reading, at a rate of near 10%
- Student math performance appears to be a major concern across all student groups at Hill according to state math assessment reporting data.

Indicator 3	4 Exemplary Level of Development and Implementation	3 Fully Functional and Operational Level of Development	2 Limited Development or Partial Implementation	1 Little to No Development and Implementation
<p>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</p>	<p>School staff accepts and does not challenge the concrete existence of bias and discrimination and it is willing to analyze and understand their personal and collective biases while engaging internal and external stakeholders</p> <p>Any attempt to reveal or confront institutional bias is considered progressive and the staff embraces the evidence, leading to concrete changes to policies and practices</p> <p>Discussion of bias openly or privately stimulates intellectual dialogue focused on improving equity efforts and external stakeholders are included</p>	<p>School staff accepts and does not challenge the concrete existence of bias and discrimination and is collectively willing to analyze and understand their personal and collective biases</p> <p>Any attempt to reveal or confront institutional bias is considered progressive and the staff embraces the evidence in its attempt to improve equitable student outcomes</p> <p>Discussion of bias openly or privately stimulates intellectual dialogue focused on improving equity efforts</p>	<p>School staff generally accepts that bias exists both consciously and unconsciously but is generally uncomfortable with analyzing it personally or collectively</p> <p>Any attempt to reveal or confront institutional bias will result in enlightenment, but rarely change in practice or behavior</p> <p>Discussion of bias openly or privately results in discomfort, but generally stimulates self-reflection and empathy</p>	<p>School staff believes that they are individually and collectively free of bias and any attempt to assess this reality is personally and professionally disrespectful</p> <p>Any attempt to reveal or confront institutional bias results in hostility towards the initiator</p> <p>Discussion of bias openly or privately results in deep discomfort and potentially hostility</p>

## Indicator 3

Rating: Level 3 Fully Functional and Operational Level of Development



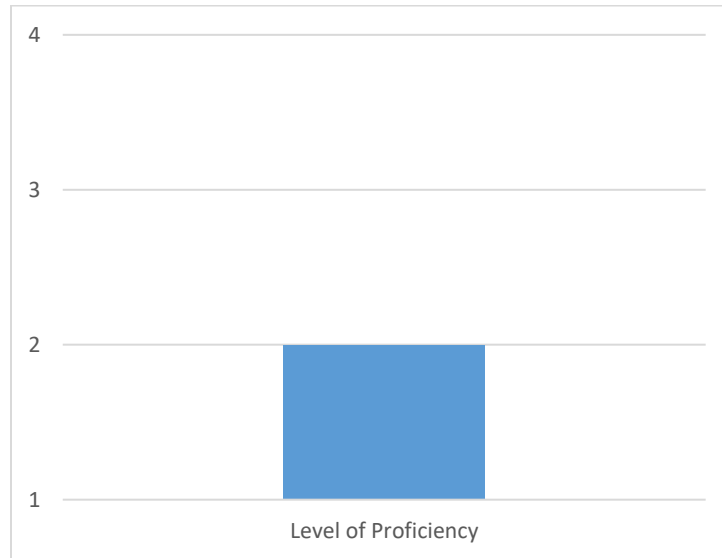
- Interviews revealed that the staff believes that the current principal and leadership team are very equity minded and that they push their thinking about fairness and equity on a regular basis.
- Interviews revealed that the staff is generally comfortable, both formally and informally, addressing deficit language and deficit thinking as it relates to students.
- School environment reflects respect for multiple cultures, languages, and sexual identity and orientation.
- Interviews revealed that collaborative staff dialogue is solution-focused and issues of bias and fragility are often a part of the discussion and school policies, programs, and initiative are implemented with a level of philosophical consensus concerning equity and student access.
- Student voice and participation appears to be a major feature of Hill Center and influences perceptions, practices, and policies.



Indicator 4	4 Exemplary Level of Development and Implementation	3 Fully Functional and Operational Level of Development and Implementation	2 Limited Development or Partial Implementation	1 Little to No Development and Implementation
<p>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 outcome</p>	<p>School leadership recognizes that improving staff capacity in practices that improve equity and inclusion are essential to the school's core improvement efforts and allocates significant resources to improve teacher capacity in these areas and they regularly collect data to analyze the impact of their investments in teacher capacity and practice</p> <p>School staff embraces training to improve their individual and collective practice in the areas of equity and inclusion, and they view the training and resources as vital to the school's improvement efforts and they regularly collect data to monitor the impact of the changes in their individual and collective practice</p>	<p>School leadership recognizes that improving staff capacity in practices that improve equity and inclusion are essential to the school's core improvement efforts and allocates significant resources to improve teacher capacity in these areas</p> <p>School staff embraces training to improve their individual and collective practice in the areas of equity and inclusion, and they view the training and resources as vital to the school's improvement efforts</p>	<p>School leadership recognizes the need to promote practices that improve equity and inclusion as important, and provides limited resources or isolated opportunities dedicated to improving teacher capacity in these areas</p> <p>School staff is open to training to improve practice in the areas of equity and inclusion, but they do not recognize the need to develop in these areas as essential and view the training opportunities are novel or non-essential</p>	<p>School leadership does not view practices that promote equity and inclusion as important and little to no resources are dedicated to improving teacher capacity in these areas</p> <p>School staff does not value training to promote practice in the areas of equity and inclusion and can become hostile when presented with professional development or resources</p>

## Indicator 4

Rating: Level 2 Limited Development or Partial Development

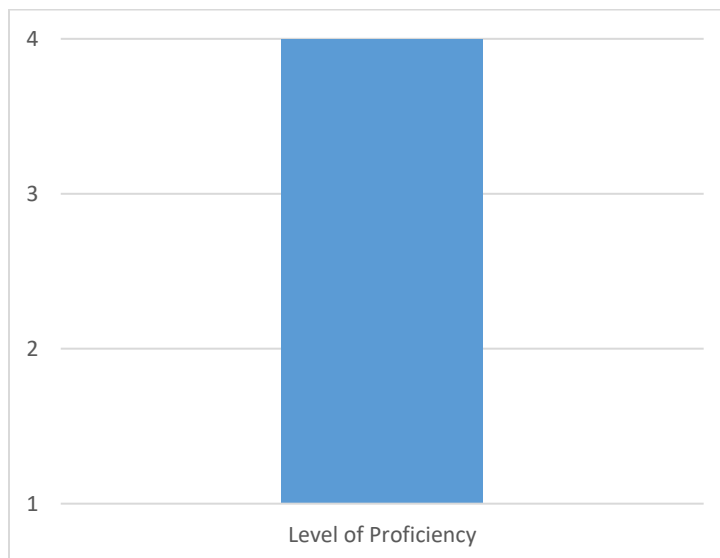


- Interviews revealed that many Hill staff members feel that the professional development and growth opportunities do not match the needs of the students at Hill, and they often find the experiences less than enriching because of the unique needs of their students.
- ELD support and training was consistently identified as the top training and capacity need of the Hill staff.
- Interviews revealed some concerns about new teachers being expected to respond to the deep challenges of the Hill students without proper training and consistent mentoring or support.
- Nova Independent Study staff members expressed concern about being challenged with producing an innovative new program (online) without proper resources and financial and training support within a very short window of time. The interviewees expressed deep satisfaction with the program, and they credited overcoming implementation challenges to the relative health of their school culture.
- Interviews revealed that the staff felt efficacious and successful despite being underfunded and generally neglected by the district as a whole. Though this is very admirable, altruism is not a sustainable form of practice and more strategic planning and dialogue is necessary between the Hill staff and district leadership.

Indicator 5	4 Exemplary Level of Development and Implementation	3 Fully Functional and Operational Level of Development and Implementation	2 Limited Development or Partial Implementation	1 Little to No Development and Implementation
<p>School community engages in action research in their attempt to promote equity and inclusion</p>	<p>Issues and concerns about equity and inclusion are addressed strategically and professionals collaborate and implement substantive changes to policies and practices and both internal and external stakeholders are included in the discussion and implementation phases</p> <p>Suggestions or attempts to change individual or collective practice in the promotion of equity and inclusion is based upon concrete evidence and research and the staff fully and sincerely engages at both the individual and institutional levels and data is collected on a frequent basis to inform the impact of the experimentation</p>	<p>Issues and concerns about equity and inclusion are addressed strategically and professionals collaborate and implement substantive changes to policies and practices</p> <p>Suggestions or attempts to change individual or collective practice in the promotion of equity and inclusion is based upon concrete evidence and research and the staff fully and sincerely engages at both the individual and institutional levels</p>	<p>Issues and concerns about equity and inclusion result in surface-level or non-invasive experimentation that results in no substantive change in student outcomes</p> <p>Suggestions or attempts to change individual or collective practice in the promotion of equity and inclusion results general curiosity and partial investment at both the individual and institutional levels</p>	<p>Issues and concerns about equity and inclusion stay at the conversational phase and never translate into change of policy or practice.</p> <p>Suggestion or attempts to change individual or collective practice in the promotion of equity and inclusion are met with resistance at both the individual and institutional levels</p>

## Indicator 5

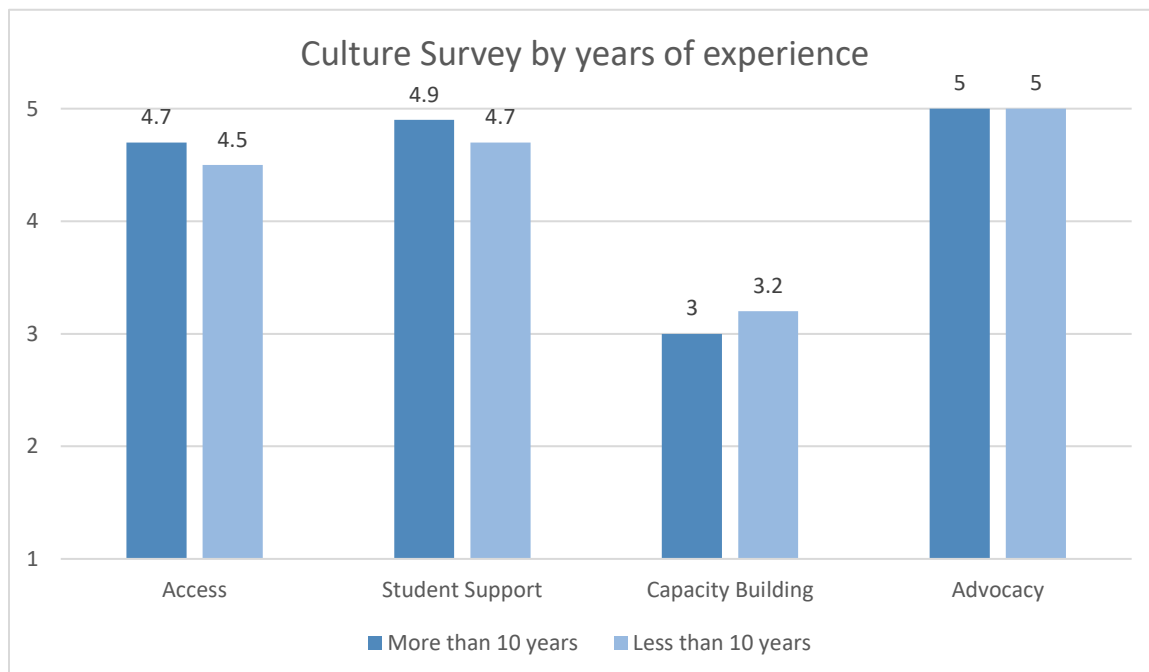
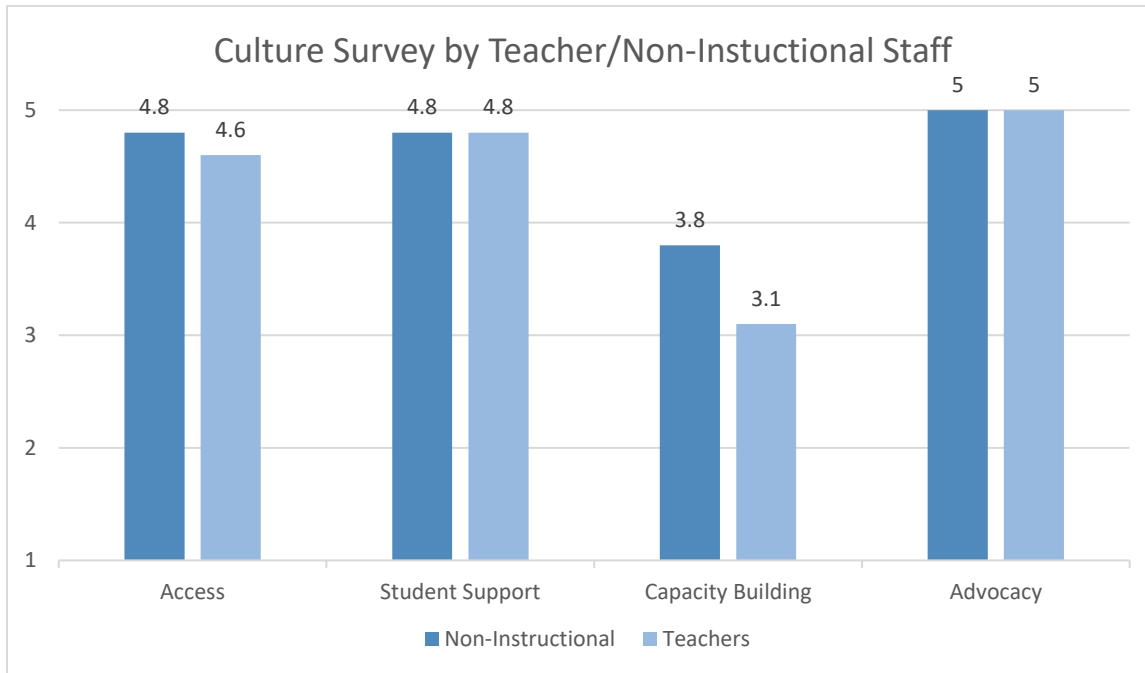
Rating: Level 4 Exemplary Level of Development and Implementation



- School is a living testament to creativity, action research, and student-centered change.
- School offers several learning formats and structures based upon the diverse learning needs and styles of students (Marin Oaks High School, Nova Independent Study, and NUSD Adult School)
- School analyzes, plans, and implements policies aimed at meeting students social and emotional needs (i.e. Bridges Program and meditation protocol).
- School analyzes, plans, and implements policies and strategies in partnership with community (i.e. Novato Blue Ribbon Coalition)
- School analyzes, plans, and implements policies and strategies aimed at meeting the diverse career and post-secondary needs of their students (i.e. Dual enrollment, Academic Counseling, College and Career Center, and RTI protocol when student grade drops below a “C”)

## Perceptions

The teachers and non-instructional staff were given a survey to complete. The questions were organized into four categories based upon the four pillars of equity (Liberation Mindset); **Access, Student Support, Professional Capacity, and Advocacy**. Teachers and non-instructional staff answered questions on a 5 point Likert scale from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree). The data is shown below in two charts. One chart shows the data broken down by teacher or non-instructional staff. The other graph shows the data sorted by years of experience.



# Access

## Key Findings:

No significant gaps were found between perceptions of student access to rigorous opportunities.

Interviews revealed that both teaching and administrative staff believed that students should get access to the best opportunities at the school, but many cited some social and economic concerns that make access difficult for some (i.e. transportation).

Interviews revealed Hill Center staff does not spend significant amounts of time debating student readiness or conditions for access, they spend most of their time creating pathways for access and inclusion.

Many interviewees stated a general philosophical agreement with expanding opportunities, and they could readily list a number of current opportunities and pathways offered at Hill.

Covid 19 concerns and student physical absence from school for more than a year seems to cause hesitation in student confidence and interest in seeking and enrolling in rigorous academic opportunities.

## Recommendations:

Regularly gather, analyze, and set measurable goals to monitor academic inclusion efforts. It appears that the staff is philosophically and professionally open to the concept, but the effectiveness of the opportunities at Hill would benefit from a regular, data-driven analysis of impact, followed by a review with district leadership and parents.

# Student Support

## Key Findings:

The survey did not find a significant gap between perceptions about student support between classroom teachers and non-instructional staff.

During interviews, there was a universal consensus that Covid 19, and the year of virtual instruction for students caused strain on their students both academically and socially.

Interviews revealed that Hill staff members embrace the fact they are an “alternative” and that the school is relatively small in size. These realities allow them to creatively produce academic and social innovations that are tailored to their students’ diverse needs.

Hill offers a variety of very innovative student support systems that are academically, socially, and career focused.

A review of publically published school performance data reveals that the school has experienced a long history of low performance in math.

## Recommendations:

I recommend that the school engage in a strategic review of its math opportunities, curriculum, instruction, and support. Though the school has a very transient and fluid student enrollment, math sticks out as an outlier in academic performance data.

# Capacity Building

## Key Findings:

The survey revealed no significant gap in the feelings about capacity building and professional support.

This was the lowest recorded area in all sections and deserves attention. Many expressed a difference in opinion about what central office believed were important areas of professional development as compared to what the teaching staff believed were important to consider for training and professional development.

Turnover within central office leadership, which can lead to different theories about systemic improvement, was cited as a major barrier to the Hill staff's confidence in district led professional development. Many felt that the unique needs of the students at Hill should drive professional development funds and efforts; especially in the areas of academic gaps and student motivation.

Interviews revealed that "initiative fatigue" is a dominant theme in informal conversations. Many also cited that a shortage of substitute teachers made it difficult to have access to trainings and support that they deemed necessary to improve their professional effectiveness.

## Recommendations:

The dominant theme in surveys and interviews was the power struggle with central office about how Hill can improve. I recommend a structured and focused dialogue between the Hill leadership team and central office to map out the next 3 to 5 years of school improvement. This dialogue should be data-driven and strategic in its focus on professional development, initiatives, and resources necessary to move Hill to the next level of performance.



# Advocacy

## Key Findings:

The survey results reveal no significant gap in perception between teachers and non-instructional staff. This area scored highest of all assessed factors.

Interviews revealed that most staff members believe that they are robust child advocates, and they work hard daily to address barriers that many staffs and schools do not have to address in other schools in Novato.

The staff appears to be fully aware of the socio-economic and language challenges that many Hill students face, and the consensus articulated during interviews is that they feel alone, and that they are in many cases, the first and only line of advocacy that students have. Many expressed frustration about the general community perception of the school. Many expressed that they feel that racism and class-bias are at the heart of the misconceptions.

Interviews revealed that instability of Covid-19 and its disruptive influence on education in general has affected Hill students more than most. Many felt that their advocacy is needed now more than ever, but it can become exhausting at times, and the strain affects the mental health of the individual teacher and staff in general.

## Recommendations:

Continue to speak up and advocate on behalf of Hill students, but consider a focus on expanding community and district partnership to relieve some of the burden of advocacy. Altruism is not a sustainable strategy.

Consider and monitor the psychological health of the staff. Hill offers a robust number of responsive student programs and leadership should be mindful to constantly assess to mental and emotional health of the staff in this pursuit.

## Summary

The school culture at Hill Center is considerably healthier than many typical alternative high schools. The school leadership and staff seem to have developed a synergistic philosophy about student choice, access, and performance. The school has concrete evidence of action research and experimentation designed to meet the unique needs of their students. The impact of Covid 19 must be considered when reviewing the results and recommendations of this assessment.

In order to improve the school's culture, I recommend the following:

- The perception about the effectiveness of professional resources and professional development needs to be explored. Collaboration between Novato district leadership and the staff at Hill would greatly improve the construction of professional development experiences that would improve the staff's capacity to meet the needs of their students, especially in the area of multi-lingual and math education.
- I recommend the strategic implementation and monitoring of current initiatives like Restorative Justice. Frameworks and strategies have been produced, but there is little evidence of impact.
- Math performance clearly sticks out as a concerning outlier when analyzing student performance data. I recommend that the school employ the same collaborative and efficacious approach that it has used to design action research and promote change in other areas.
- The school is engaged in a lot of exciting action research. I suggest that each program or policy be closely monitored in order to measure, analyze, and adjust practice based upon very specific achievement data and indicators.
- I highly recommend the development of a school public relations team, or integrate public relations into the focus of the school site leadership team.
- Focus heavily on the strategic implementation of the PLC process. Interviews revealed that the staff in general had a healthy perception of PLC, but I am concerned that they do not understand the process and the interdependence of the 4 PLC Questions. Meeting and PLC are not synonymous. Connecting with similar schools, even virtually, should improve individual and collective practice.

# Appendix A: Survey Questions

1. I believe that students should be given unlimited access to advanced academic opportunities.

5

4

3

2

1

Strongly agree

Strongly disagree

2. I believe that the teaching staff is most responsible for providing academic support.

5

4

3

2

1

Strongly agree

Strongly disagree

3. I feel that I receive proper training before being asked to implement changes to my practice.

5

4

3

2

1

Strongly agree

Strongly disagree

4. It is the school staff's obligation to advocate for change when serving underachieving students.

5

4

3

2

1

Strongly agree

Strongly disagree

5. Special education students deserve the same opportunities as regular education students.

5

4

3

2

1

Strongly agree

Strongly disagree

6. When students fail to meet academic expectations, the staff should organize interventions.

5

4

3

2

1

Strongly agree

Strongly disagree

7. We have a strong system of teacher training and development.

5

4

3

2

1

Strongly agree

Strongly disagree

8. If we feel strongly about a policy or innovative practice that is more beneficial for the student body; we should implement that policy, even if there is strong internal or external opposition.

5

4

3

2

1

Strongly agree

Strongly disagree

9. We should consistently review our performance data and strategically plan to provide more access to opportunity for underrepresented student groups.

5 4 3 2 1  
Strongly agree Strongly disagree

10. When a student fails to show adequate growth, we should first reflect on our practice.

5 4 3 2 1  
Strongly agree Strongly disagree

11. Our school invests in teacher development and resources that support student learning.

5 4 3 2 1  
Strongly agree Strongly disagree

12. Our faculty speaks with one voice and student learning dominates our professional dialogue.

5 4 3 2 1  
Strongly agree Strongly disagree

## Demographic Information:

I have been an educational professional for :

- 0-2 years
- 3-4 years
- 5-10 years
- 11-20 years
- 21+ years

Position:

- Classroom teacher
- Counselor
- Social Worker/Psychologist
- Instructional Aide
- Administrator