

# TRANSFORMING SCHOOL CULTURE

## School Equity Audit

**Pleasant Valley Elementary School**

**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.

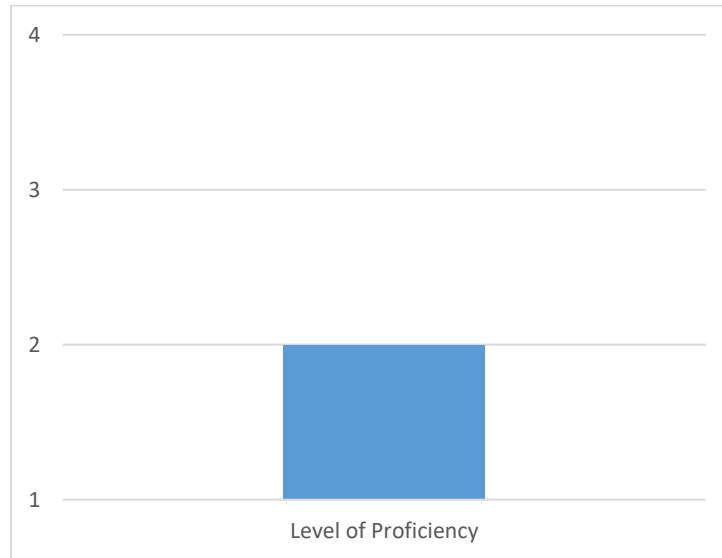
The formal culture will be rated on a four-point rubric for five different indicators, based upon data collected in various forms. The informal culture will be analyzed based upon a staff survey given to all professional staff members (see appendix A) and formal interviews conducted with a representative 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 2 Limited Development or Partial Implementation

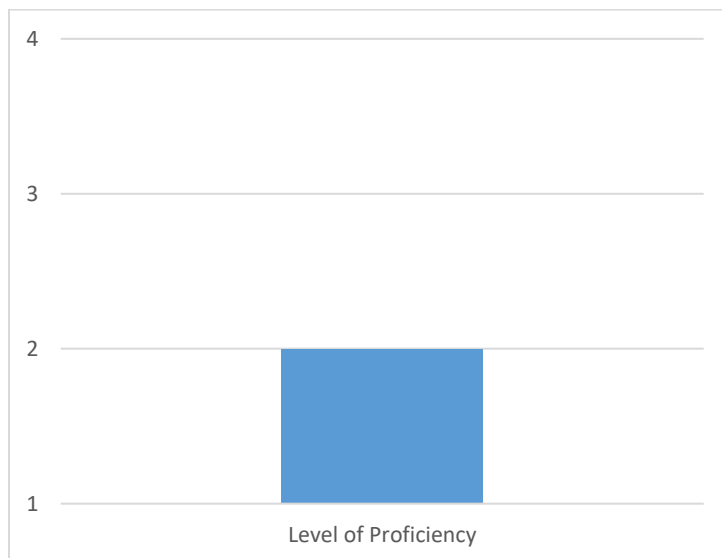


- School and district have invested in initiatives like Ethnic Studies curriculum and resolution, Equity Imperative, Anti-Racist Resolution, and Restorative Justice. Evidence of implementation or impact of any of these initiatives could not be found.
- School website contains a “Non-Discrimination” clause.
- Staff interviews reveal philosophical consensus and agreement on the idea of equity and inclusion, but most felt that the school did not practically apply the belief and that achievement is easily predicated along racial and socio-economic lines.
- School walkthrough revealed that culturally-responsive and diverse symbolism are almost non-existent outside of token recognition of non-Western European cultures and cultural experiences.
- Staff interviews revealed that the staff agrees that the school, students, and community are “privileged” and some do not see the necessity of disrupting privilege with dialogue about equity and inclusion.

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 stakeholders 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

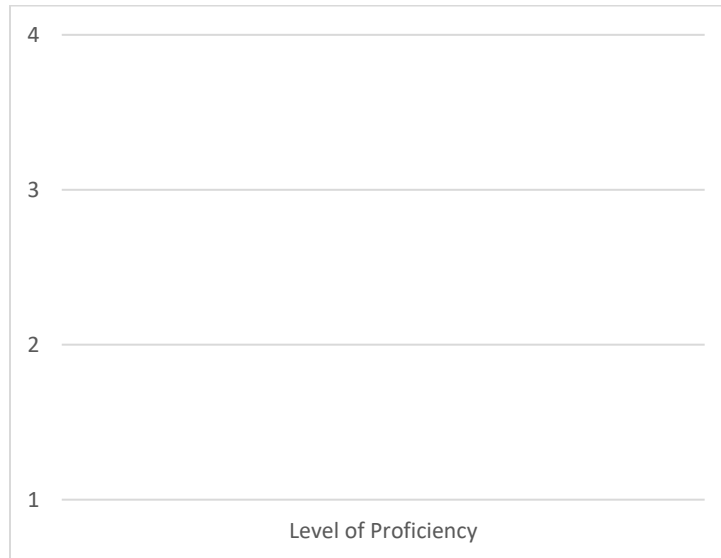


- A review of the school website, and other publically accessible platforms does not provide access to equity data or any plan of improvement linked to the collection and analysis of equity data.
- Student performance data, as reported by the state of California, revealed a gap of 3% - 5% in proficiency in reading when comparing Latino students to white students at Pleasant Valley between 2016-2019. This gap is far below the norm in the district and state.
- Student performance data, as reported by the state of California, revealed a gap of at least 20% in both math and reading when comparing students based upon parental income at Pleasant Valley between 2016 – 2019.
- Student performance data, as reported by the state of California, revealed that students with disabilities consistently achieve proficiency at least 25% lower than students without disabilities in both math and reading between 2016-2019.
- The statistical reality of achievement disparities at Pleasant Valley was not communicated during any of the formal interviews.

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 1 Little to No Development and Implementation



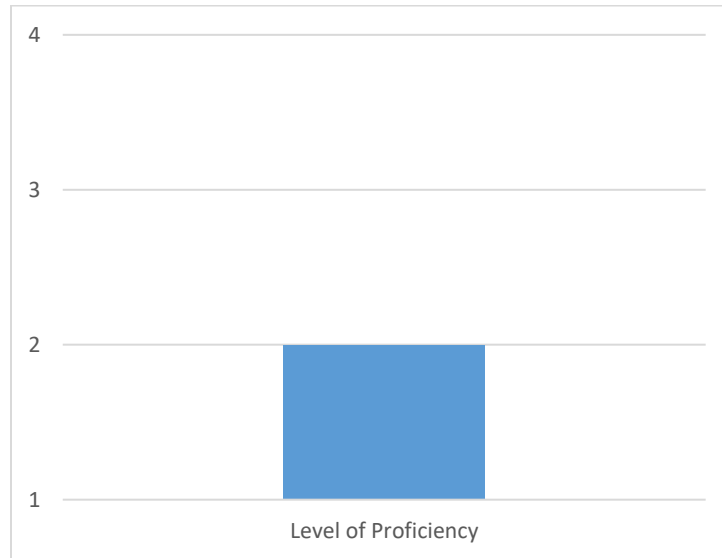
- Interviews revealed that many teachers have high expectations of student performance. It was also clear that many felt it was the administration’s job to make students adhere to those expectations instead of adjusting practice to stimulate intrinsic motivation in disengaged students.
- Interviews revealed that many staff members feel that Pleasant Valley’s comparative performance on state assessments, when compared to other schools in Novato (significantly higher) can produce a culture of complacency and satisfaction and make uncomfortable or challenging conversations more difficult. This reality provides a shield for some and justifies avoiding conversations about equity and inclusion.
- Interviews revealed that some of the political and social ideas of some of their colleagues that are anti-diversity and inclusion makes activities of self-reflection and cognitive dissonance difficult.
- Most staff members described Pleasant Valley as a “family environment” and feared that uncomfortable conversations about equity and inclusion might threaten the close-knit climate.



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

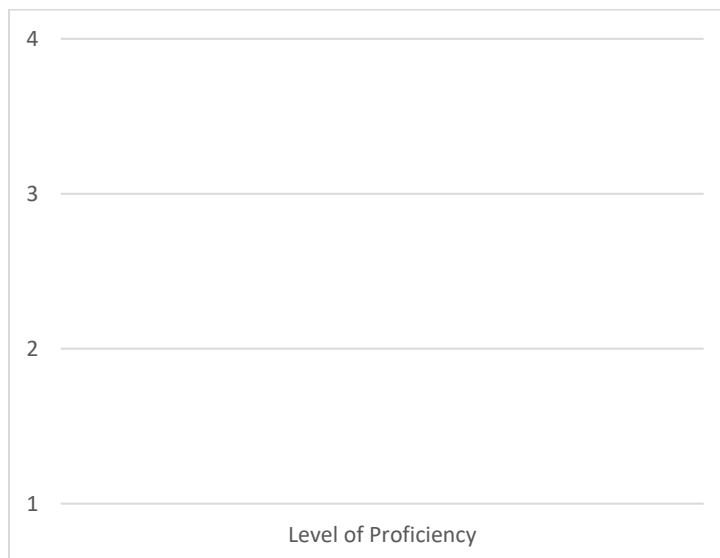


- School and district have invested in initiatives like Ethnic Studies curriculum and resolution, Equity Imperative, Anti-Racist Resolution, and Restorative Justice. Evidence of implementation or impact of any of these initiatives could not be found.
- Staff interviews and surveys revealed that Pleasant Valley staff feels that school and district professional development does not adequately prepare them to improve their practice as it relates to equity and diversity. Many described feeling greatly unprepared to adequately respond to the diverse cultures and language needs of many of their students.
- Interviews revealed that the Pleasant Valley staff has a strong grasp on curriculum and instructional practices. Many voiced concerns that professional development or activities outside of curriculum and pedagogy might be viewed as “beneath” the Pleasant Valley staff and might not be embraced as essential due to the school’s historic performance on state standardized tests.

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
School community engages in action research in their attempt to promote equity and inclusion	<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

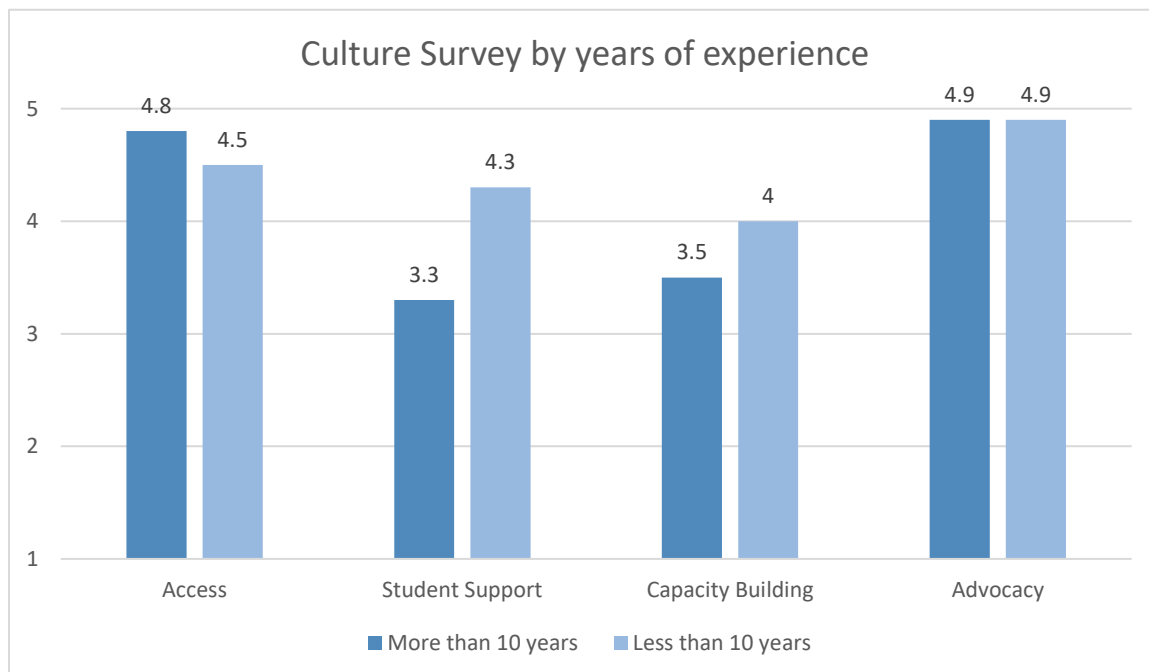
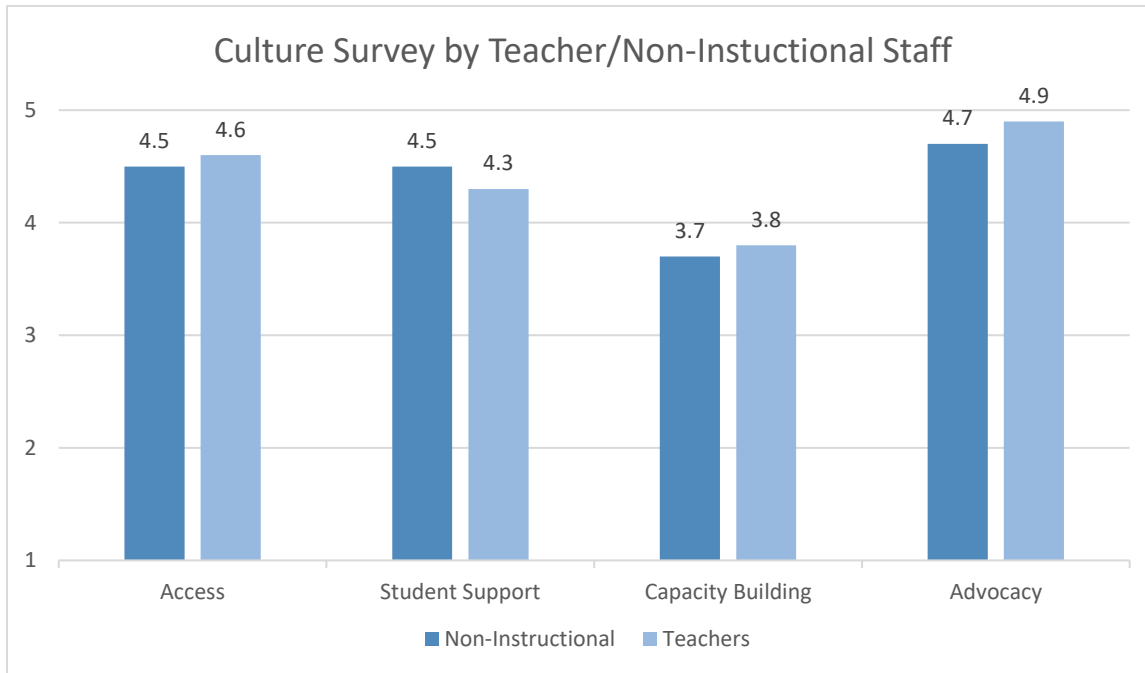
Rating: Level 1 Little to No Development and Implementation



- A review of documents and artifacts provided for this assessment, along with publically published documents, did not reveal any school driven experimentation developed specifically to promote equitable achievement at Pleasant Valley.
- District has agreed to diversity initiatives and programs (i.e. Restorative Justice), but I could not find evidence of strategic implementation or any data or evidence directly linked to implementation.
- Interviews revealed that Pleasant Valley staff members are generally concerned about student equity, but not could articulate any systemic effort to produce equity besides systems available to all students.
- Interviews revealed that the most frequent response to school needs and improvement linked directly to more parent involvement (of underperforming students) and student apathy. These descriptors reveal a general external perception of school improvement and can make action research and instructional innovation and experimentation more challenging to implement.

## 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 schools, but many teachers expressed that those opportunities should come with conditions of readiness.

Interviews revealed a universal concern for student social and emotional issues for the students of poverty at Pleasant Valley, especially during a pandemic. Many felt that these obstacles prevented some students from being able to take advantage of rigorous opportunities.

Though many interviewees stated a general philosophical agreement with expanding opportunities, few were aware of the current state of equity in their school. It was also revealed that openly dialoguing about touchy topics like race, language, and poverty are barriers to equity planning. Many stated that they avoid uncomfortable conversations to preserve a “family atmosphere” among teachers.

Covid 19 concerns and student physical absence from school for more than a year seems to cause hesitation in universal commitment to expanding 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 they have not invested in the systems to plan, implement, and monitor growth towards this end.

Maintaining a positive climate and a healthy school culture are not mutually exclusive, schools can achieve both. Although, on the path of growth to becoming a healthy school culture, there will be a few “climate” bumps in the road. The most important conversations are sometimes the hardest, but when we all have the same goal (All Means All) we’ll get over the tough conversations. It will also accelerate unified implementation of school improvement decisions when everyone knows that topics will not be avoided. This is an important theme in this audit, and if acknowledged and addressed, can help your team unify.

# 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 and many expressed deep concern about how the school and district can respond adequately.

Grave concerns about the student's social and emotional needs were articulated by all stakeholders interviewed. The interviewees expressed a universal level of gratitude for their PTA being able to provide additional support in hiring professional staff for this area

Student intervention and RTI efforts were universally cited as a concern. The dominant area of concern was for English Learners.

Interviews revealed some concern about deficit thinking among staff members about students as it relates to race, poverty, and English mastery.

## Recommendations:

I recommend a renewed commitment to the PLC at Work process. Review the construction of collaborative teams and invest in time, training, and resources to get consensus on universal learning targets, formative assessment, and a system response to student academic or behavioral support needs. Without a framework, support will be random, suggestive, and largely ineffective.

**Courageous Conversations About Race** by Glenn Singleton will provide a basis for addressing different theories (both conscious and subconscious) about race and other constructs of deficit thinking. Developing the ability to get comfortable with these topics, for the benefit of students, will be very helpful in improving school culture.

# Capacity Building

## Key Findings:

The survey revealed a significant gap in perceptions about capacity building and professional support, with non-instructional staff viewing this area more favorably than instructional staff members.

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 believes is important to consider for training and professional development.

School leadership and non-instructional staff were much more passionate about their concerns about staff capacity to meet the needs of all students. All interviewees described the staff as highly capable, but “privileged”, which hinders their collective ability to enthusiastically consider the inconvenience of change in practice.

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 Pleasant Valley can improve. I recommend a structured and focused dialogue between the Pleasant Valley 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 Pleasant Valley to the next level of performance.



# Advocacy

## Key Findings:

The survey results reveal no significant gap in perception between teachers and non-instructional staff.

Interviews revealed that teachers, of all experience levels, tend to view monitoring of professional practice as “distrust” or “meddling.” The phrases “I wish that they would just trust the teachers, we are the experts” was a dominant theme in interviews. The lack of strategic improvement goals and efforts can intensify this type of vague and hyperbolic language. Monitoring feels like oppression if there are no universal achievement targets.

Interviews revealed that most staff members believe that they are robust child advocates, but they could not pinpoint any specific act of advocacy academically. There was very little evidence of responsive experimentation or action research directly correlated with the analysis of a systemic gap in achievement.

The presence and contribution of a strong PTA is evident. The school is fortunate to have a parent organization contribute to their efforts in a concrete fashion.

## Recommendations:

The development of a strategic, data-driven, continuous school improvement protocol is essential to improve in this area. The staff at Pleasant Valley seems to value collective student proficiency over differentiated analysis of student progress. Without a consistent connection of evidence of student learning and a connection to school improvement and monitoring progress, the staff will not know if they are improving or not, particularly for traditionally underserved students.

## Summary

The school culture at Pleasant Valley is generally positive and highly impactful. The students generally perform above the district and state norm on standardized academic assessments. Student and teacher relationships appear to be strong and the school enjoys an active and engaged parent community. The fact that students with disabilities and students of poverty perform at much lower levels of proficiency than other Pleasant Valley students is a cause for concern. 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:

- Understanding and utilizing strategies to build consensus, both publicly and privately, when there are philosophical differences about the direction of the school.
- Confronting the idea of "privilege" and critically analyzing the school's concrete commitment to equity and inclusion are essential in the school's journey towards egalitarianism. The perceptions about the meaning and reality of equity vary greatly among staff members.
- The perception about the effectiveness of professional resources and professional development needs to be explored. The survey area with the biggest disparity was in this area. An open dialogue between central office and Pleasant Valley staff members will get down to the root of the problem to separate legitimate concerns from immature power struggles.
- The development of a powerful guiding coalition of teachers and administrators, that organizes evidence of performance, makes short-term and long-term achievement goals, and aligns resources, and monitors and reports progress is essential to improve achievement gaps that have been stagnant for years.
- 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.
- Cultural proficiency and responsiveness can improve relatively quickly if made a school wide priority. The school environment, curriculum, and instructional material do not reflect the diversity of the student population. Awareness and a strategic and intentional focus in this area is usually sufficient to improve this area.
- 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.

# 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