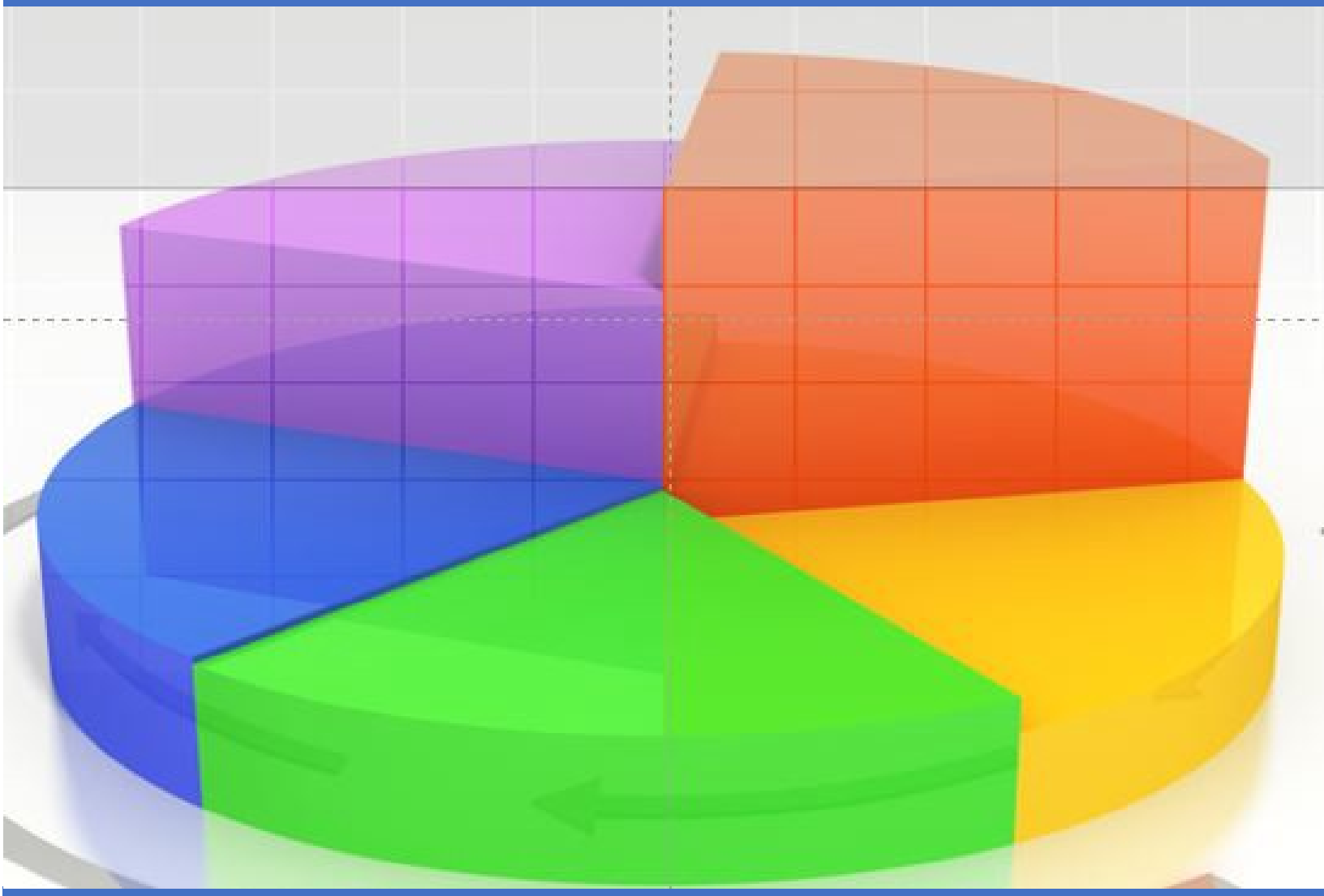
April 2021



Executive Summary

MSD Lawrence Township Equity Audit

LEADERVATION LEARNING

Summary of Findings, Discussion and Recommendations

WHAT IS EDUCATIONAL EQUITY?

"A state in which dimensions of privilege, skin color, and economic status are not predictive of, or correlated with, educational outcomes in any significant way, and where all learners are able to participate fully in quality learning experiences."

Lawrence Township is a great place to live and work. Nestled in the suburbs of Indianapolis, the landscape of lakes, trees, and open fields is inviting and serene. The schools, home to high school champion sports athletes, state-of-the-art vocational and technical training facilities, and academic honor students are a source of continual pride. Like many American communities, the remnants of an apartheid system of inequality and the ideological structure of white supremacy that supported it have yet to be fully confronted or accounted for. The equity audit conducted during the 2020/2021 school year examined the school system through the lens of equitable outcomes for children with the goal of providing data to support the needed changes to institutionalize educational equity in schools and sustain equitable outcomes for children. This brief report discusses and summarizes the major findings, themes, and observations of the researchers.

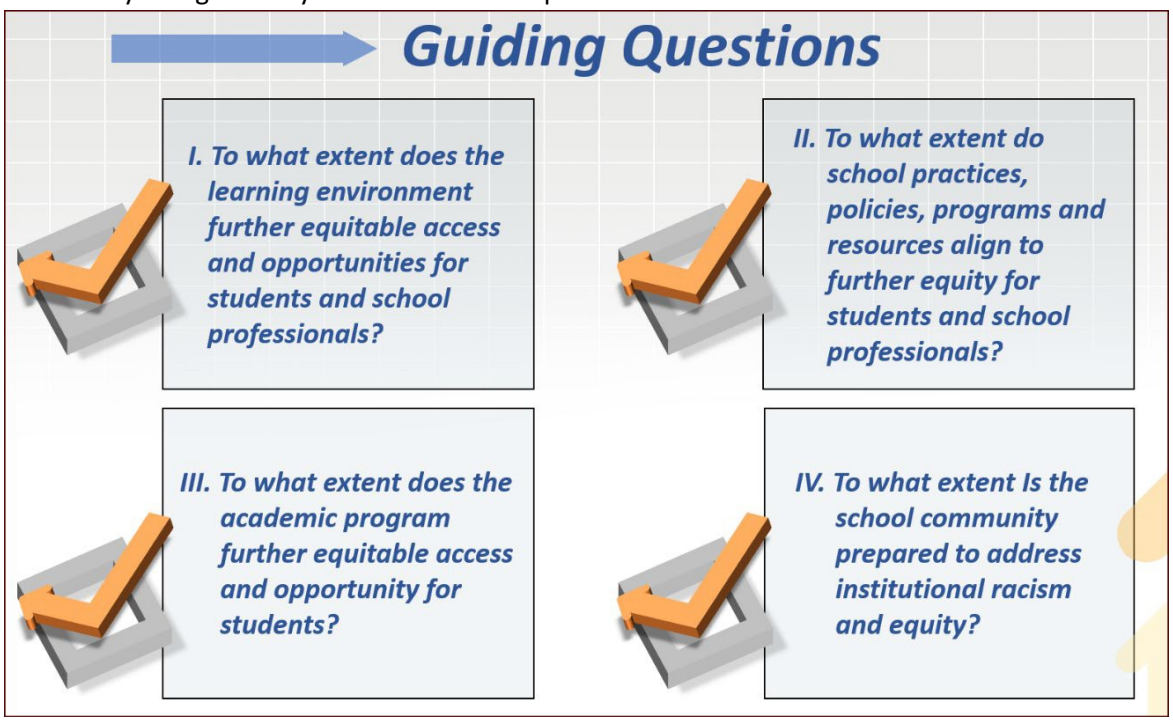
Methodology & Rationale

The researcher acknowledges there are a number of ways to examine equity. It was a deliberate decision to focus on racial equity, although other kinds of inequity emerged from the findings and are noted in this report. Racial inequity, however, has a long storied history of influencing academic, social, emotional, psychological, career and life outcomes for children of color, none of which provide advantage.

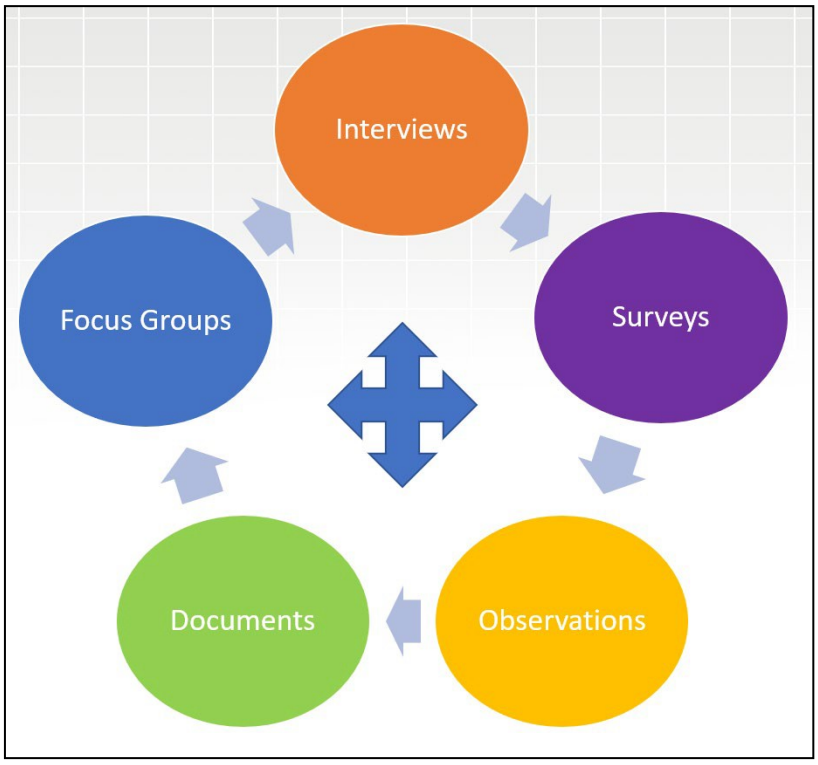
How Racial Inequality Affects Black, Hispanic and Native American Children

- Birth disparities and mental health problems in children and adolescents
- Face higher risks of parental unemployment and reside in families with significantly lower household net wealth relative to children who identify as white
- Disproportionately disciplined, suspended, arrested and incarcerated which undermines their socioemotional development and general developmental outcomes
- Perceived to be more "troublesome" than their children who identify as white
- Perceived to be less capable, motivated, or intellectual

The study was guided by four fundamental questions:



Data was collected from the district office, Lawrence Central, Lawrence North, and McKenzie Center High Schools. In addition, personal interviews were conducted with the district administration officials and board of education members. Focus groups were conducted with representatives of the various stakeholders.



The survey, focus group, and interview questions were aligned with the guiding questions.

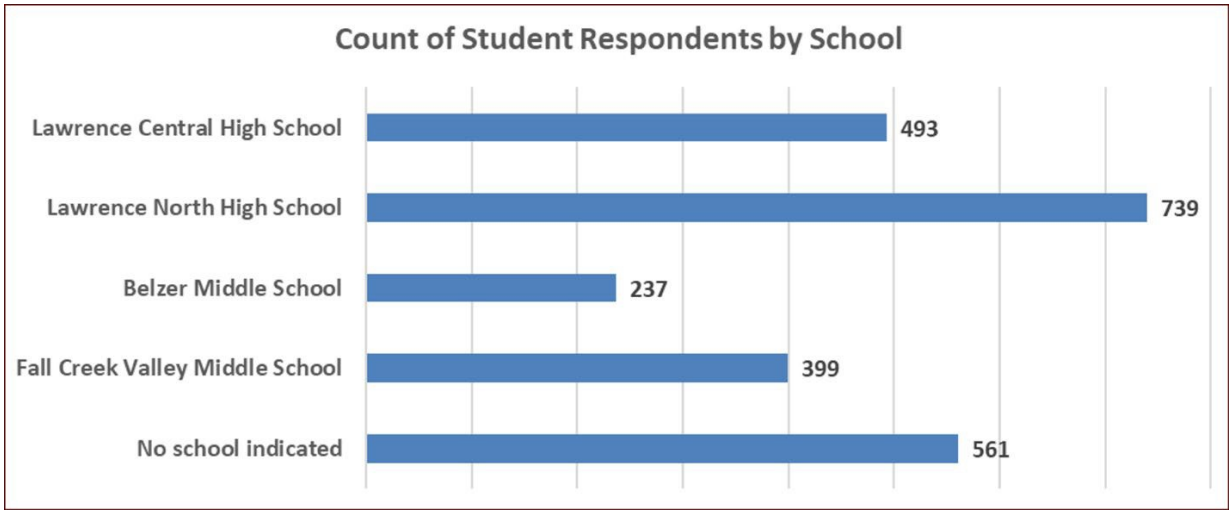
Survey Questions	Learning Environment & Access & Opportunity	Practices, Policies, Programs, & Resources	Academic Program	Addressing Racism	Respondent Topic of Choice
Student Survey Question #	5,6,7,8,9,10, 12,14,16	13,15,17	18,19,20	21	22
Parent Survey Question #	5,7,8	6,9,10,11, 12,13	14,15,16	17	18
Staff Survey Question #	8,10,11,14,16, 17,18,19,21,22	9,13,15	5,7,12	6,9,20	23

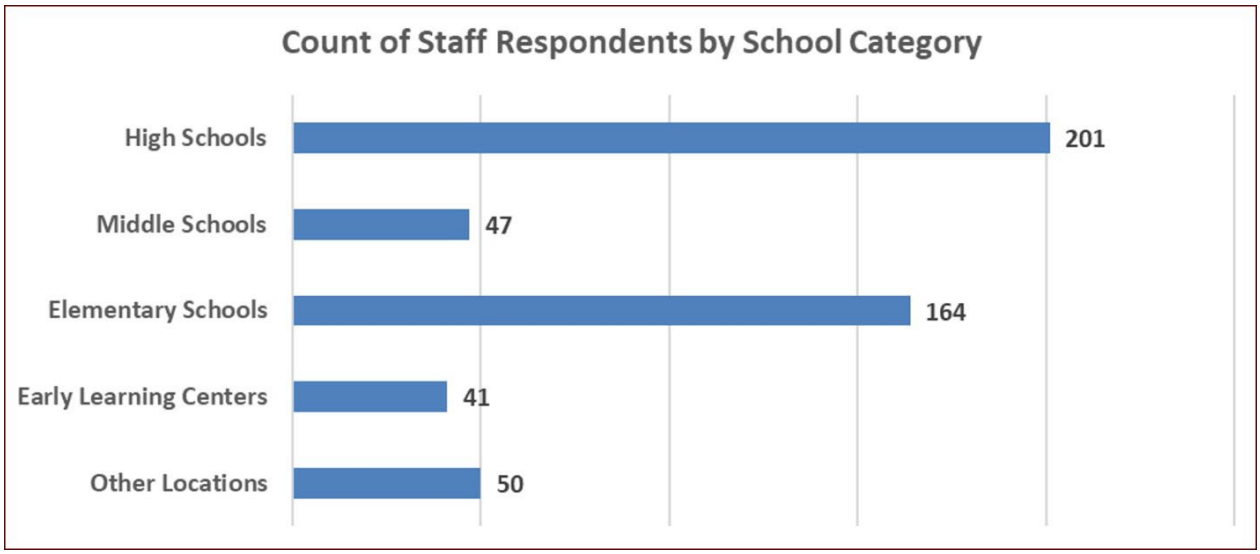
Focus group participants were varied and representative of stakeholders:

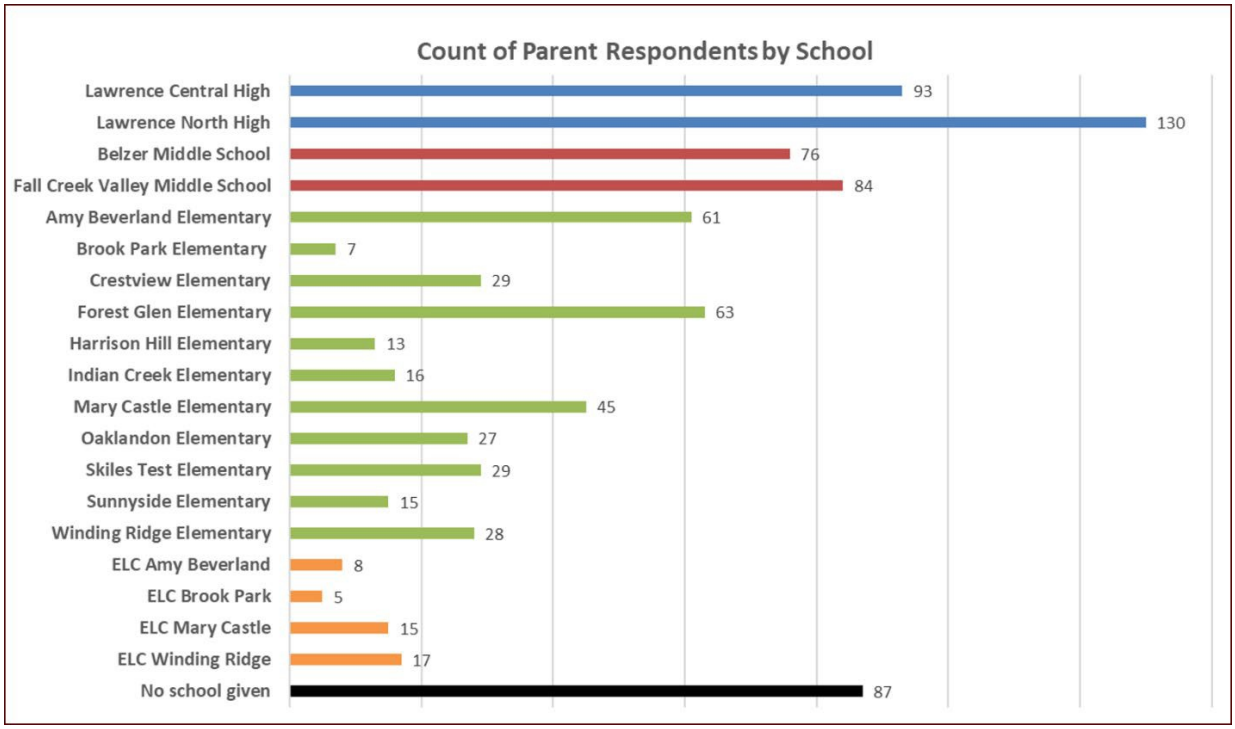
Category of Focus Group Participants	Total # of Participants	Female	Male
Parent Group #1: (English)	2	2	0
Parent Group #2 (English)	7	7	0
Parent Group #3: (Spanish Speaking)	10	7	3
Administrator Group	6	3	3
Certificated Staff	14	10	4
Classified Staff	10	10	0
School Board	5	3	2
Total	54	42	12

Individual Interviews

- Superintendent
- Chief Academic Officer
- Chief of Human Resources
- Director of Food and Nutrition Services
- Director of Transportation
- Director of Student Services




Count of Staff Respondents by School Category
High Schools
201
Middle Schools
47
Elementary Schools
164
Early Learning Centers
41
Other Locations
50


Count of Parent Respondents by School
Lawrence Central High
93
Lawrence North High
130
Belzer Middle School
76
Fall Creek Valley Middle School
84
Amy Beverland Elementary
61
Brook Park Elementary
7
Crestview Elementary
29
Forest Glen Elementary
63
Harrison Hill Elementary
13
Indian Creek Elementary
16
Mary Castle Elementary
45
Oaklandon Elementary
27
Skiles Test Elementary
29
Sunnyside Elementary
15
Winding Ridge Elementary
28
ELC Amy Beverland
8
ELC Brook Park
5
ELC Mary Castle
15
ELC Winding Ridge
17
No school given
87

Emerging Themes and Findings

Servant Leadership.

Every district leader spoke of their position and role relative to serving others. It is a theme that was also reflected in the district vision and mission statement (although it was noticeably missing from the belief statements submitted by the high schools). The significance of a leadership focus on serving others, particularly children, is fundamentally necessary to leading an initiative on equity. The role of every leader in the organization must be helping their stakeholders remain focused on how this work supports children – now and into their global future. Endeavoring to do this work without the belief and resolve that your purpose and mission is to serve children, would otherwise be a mere exercise without substantial action or sustainability.

Inclusive and Welcoming Practices.

From the moment parents enter the Welcome Center to enroll their children in school, they are greeted by staff who are welcoming and inclusive. All information needed to be initially successful in the system is provided at that entry point. Most parents also experience an inclusive and welcoming presence at school sites. They are pleased with the academic program and feel their children are successful within it.

At their respective sites, data from students, parents, and staff respondents reflect this truth. The majority of student respondents report feeling respected, encouraged, informed, and experience a sense of belonging. Staff respondents overwhelmingly report they can discuss issues of race or equity, voice their opinions as they choose, and believe they are respected and valued. Parent respondents reported feeling respected and informed.

Student Leadership Opportunities

It is understandable how the schools and community would celebrate student athletes when they are so successful in producing award winning teams and outstanding all-around athletes. (Congratulations on your most recent state championship accomplishment.) The high school non-athletes have raised their hands, however, and desire more leadership development and recognition.

It has been an unusual year for student recognition. Teaching remotely can be challenging and student responses reflected this. It will be vital going forward that all kinds of students receive appropriate recognition for their unique skills and talents. Although some students perceive that athletes receive a disproportionate amount of recognition, the school data reflected a fairly equitable distribution of awards amongst students of all racial, ethnic, and ability backgrounds. The exception was between genders where black females received more than twice the number of awards as black males – 61 to 25. Other racial groups were awarded relatively evenly between males and females.

A. Strong Principal Leadership.

Parents spoke consistently of their respect and admiration for on-site school leadership. Principals, on the front line of community interaction, are swift to resolve all issues, including those that involve discrimination or bias. They are welcoming and friendly. They create an environment where teachers experience belonging. Principals are creating practices that foster emotional safety so that important equity conversations can follow. Many have already begun some type of equity work on-site. To that end, staff report that time is a limited resource for such endeavors. While summer training opportunities provide access to equity training, staff with young children find the compensation inadequate when they require day care.

Recommendation:
Frame the equity work within the context of existing instructional and curricular practices. The same level of creativity, flexibility, strategic planning, and innovative thinking derived to implement other important initiatives is recommended for implementing equity work.

B. Hiring, Recruitment and Retention of Diverse Staff is a Priority.

Most leaders are keenly aware of the need for staff to be representative of the populations they serve. Human resources provides questions and suggestions for principals to use when conducting hiring. They are also active in the recruitment of diverse staff from anywhere in the world, including Puerto Rico.

Recommendation 1:
There is an alternative licensing program that supports the transition of instructional assistants to licensed teachers. It is conducted on-site. However, Spanish language parents were unaware of the program. Expand the promotion and access of the program to parents and community members.

Recommendation 2:
Collect data that will support the retention of diverse hires. There is an active initiative to recruit and hire diverse candidates, but the information that is lacking is the extent to which the district is able to retain and promote them. Needed is data on disciplinary actions taken against staff inclusive of racial identification and the number of staff who are dismissed or resign inclusive of racial identification. It is one matter to recruit diverse candidates. It is another matter entirely to ensure the environment is conducive to retaining them.

C. ESL Learners and Shifting Demographics

The linguistic needs of the community are in flux as second language learners continue to transition into the community. Schools are working to serve these students and families better – not always feeling adequately prepared to do so equitably. Both English and Spanish speaking students have benefitted from the dual language programs in elementary schools. Bilingual skills for children are appealing to parents and support the requirements for the IB diploma at the high school.

Also, parents feel communication is frequent and consistent at the elementary level, though less so at the secondary level. Bilingual parents were particularly adamant that more communication in Spanish be provided to them about resources and other information. Although there is a text-based communication system for parents, ESL parents do not necessarily feel a part of the loop. They want more information on resources, extracurricular activities, college choices and materials for their children.

There was also concern expressed by the second language parents about the way their children are treated when riding the bus.

Recommendation 1:
Work with transportation closely to determine the root of concerns expressed by the ESL parents. Be certain to close the feedback loop with your ESL parents. Then monitor and evaluate progress going forward.

Recommendation 2:
Continue language acquisition learning at the middle school level.

Recommendation 3:
Ask the ESL parents the best way to provide that information to them more frequently and consistently. The answers may surprise you but will provide valuable insight into their preferred venue for communication and a frequency that will meet their needs.

Recommendation 4:
Continue to recruit and hire additional Spanish speaking personnel.

D. Discipline.

The data requested on discipline was sparse, inconsistent (Infractions for one year vs. OSS numbers the following year, very little data for the current year of either, etc.), making it difficult to analyze longitudinally. In speaking with the secondary assistant principals (seven), we learned that the discrete data needed to track ongoing disciplinary goals and outcomes such as which teachers were referring students, how often, for what actions, and by racial identification, etc. was not easily accessed at the site level and required a special request to the district data coordinator for data warehouse reports. The administrators typically receive an annual report from the data warehouse, but weekly monitoring for the purpose of intervention or prevention is technologically challenging. This hindered ongoing regular analysis of the efficacy of disciplinary actions.

There was also confusion around the definition of terms. Each of the AP's we talked with defined the terms and expectations differently. The discipline referrals are made in the ABAI system electronically with the teacher determining whether the behavior is an infraction or behavior concern. We requested written definitions on these terms that teachers use, and none were available. Therefore, sometimes what one teacher might define as a behavior concern would actually be an infraction and vice versa. The assistant principal views the data electronically and determines how they will define it and whether it rises to the level of documentation that will be part of the student's disciplinary record. The assistant principals shared they have no way of easily tracking student discipline information on a weekly or monthly basis as reports are generally shared annually.

Restorative justice is a term that is used loosely and differently by each administrator but there is no formal system with facilitated discussions that involve the community.

Only 62% of parents report student management policies and expectations as fair, although 81% of students reported they were treated fairly. It is not entirely clear why this is occurring but merits further clarification. During our visit, there were limited number of in-person students in attendance (some classes had as few as five students) and disciplinary actions were almost non-existent due to virtual on-line learning. It is theorized that the disconnect may lie in parent communication from the school when infractions occur or the lack of a consistent practice of restorative justice processes in which parents are integrally involved.

It was also brought to our attention that gun violence impacts secondary school students as least once a year (sometimes with fatal results) yet there lacks a proactive approach for prevention. Preventative work in this area might be discussed during SEL.

The LEAP Center is the In School Suspension room that supports students continuing to work academically when they need temporary removal from the school environment. When students enter, the administrative assistant pulls the student file and reviews the academic work necessary for them to complete. Students work on academic work in the morning and social skills, character building or meditative work in the afternoon. Typically, there are one to two students with ten to twelve at the most in attendance. Students may be referred for LEAP with either a behavior concern or behavior infraction. They may be referred for something as serious as physical violence or as innocuous as refusing to participate in class. The assistant estimates that behavior concerns make up between 30 – 40% of referrals. Lack of respect and insubordination are also common reasons provided for referrals to LEAP. Information on the racial diversity of students referred is not documented or tracked.

Recommendation 1:
New discipline data collection system needed or regular, consistent distribution of discipline data feed to schools with automation. AP's need to review data weekly to make interventive steps and decisions that support teachers and students.

Recommendation 2:
Consider instituting a restorative justice program in which parents and community members are integral to resolving conflicts and connecting students to how their actions impact communities as a whole.

Recommendation 3:
Define terms: Behavioral concern and behavioral infraction. Make an infograph with examples of each behavior. Train all incoming and current staff on term definitions and appropriate disciplinary steps for each. Include necessary intervention steps teachers should take prior to entering data in the system.

Recommendation 4:
Track data inclusive of racial identification for students referred to LEAP. Establish clear guidelines on which behaviors are acceptable for referrals to LEAP and which require classroom exclusion. Define insubordination and lack of respect. They may be perceived differently based on cultural backgrounds.

E. Access to Resources.

Numerous resources available are at the elementary level. Parents feel less informed about services and resources at the secondary level. In particular, secondary parents would like to see the mentoring services provided at the elementary level extended to the secondary level.

Close the gap in high school between those students who have a clear college and career plan for themselves and those who are yet undecided.

Recommendation:
College and career readiness can begin at elementary school. Help children identify their gifts, interests, and potential at an early age. Expose them to a wide variety of career choices. Begin college visits in elementary school physically or virtually. Invite parents to join you as part of the support system. Ask McKenzie Center students to perform, feed, or demonstrate their skills and programs at the elementary level. Have teachers display their college memorabilia. Discuss the alma maters of famous celebrities and role models. Start children considering career and college options at an early age and help parents plan years in advance how to support them through the attainment of honors diplomas.

F. Accountability

Accountability is a consistent theme articulated across administration, leadership, and staff and that is particularly evident in pedagogical practices. The culturally responsive teaching approach is perceived as inconsistent with pedagogical expectations and curricular standards required at the building level. The current materials and resources are perceived as inadequate to successfully incorporate cultural content. Standards-based targets are the core focus of classroom practices and perceived as leaving little room for the integration of cultural content or equity focused work.

The secondary school formative assessment system has had a rough start this year due to the global pandemic, virtual learning environment and the introduction of a new formative assessment system, Illuminate. Due to the disruption of professional development in the new program, it was difficult, if not impossible to access comparative data on prior formative assessments or attain longitudinal data that aligned with the new system. Staff report that they find the new system is difficult to navigate without more advanced on-site training, a decisive platform and availability for more subject areas. Secondary teachers are currently devising their own assessments within each department.

Recommendation 1:
Professional development in Illuminate.

Recommendation 2:
Integrate meaningful pedagogical connections between course content and students' cultures, languages, and life experiences. (Culturally responsive teaching.) Help students learn and practice how to respectfully discuss people differences. This is a valuable life skill.

G. Social and Emotional Well Being

Some staff and parents are concerned that pursuing the equity work is ill timed during the course of a pandemic. They would ask that the counseling team be proactive in reaching out to students who are at home and when they return to school.

SEL is scheduled to be delivered every Friday morning at the secondary level, but it varies with each teacher and has been often preempted by other pressing concerns that arise. The focus recently has been on additionally supporting the adults through the pandemic. There is no formal curriculum and topics are selected at the teacher's discretion or sometimes used for class preparation. Topics have been as varied as checking in to see how everyone is feeling to gauging where people are in terms of their assignments.

Recommendation:
Formalize a specific curriculum, topics, or strategies for social and emotional well-being, ensuring that all students have access to the same quality of resources and strategies that promote positive mental health.

H. Racialized Language in Informal Settings

Students (21%), staff (45%), and parent (25%) respondents report hearing racialized or discriminatory talk that is offensive. 31% of staff respondents and 28% of student respondents have personally experienced racial or gender discrimination at school. Those numbers suggest that racialized language and/or racial epithets, may be negatively impacting the learning environment and creating a culture that normalizes crude language or behaviors. It is interesting to note that the highest number of respondents reporting this are staff. The reported frequent use of crude verbal vernacular amongst the students (i.e. "n****r") in casual banter, jokes, and verbal jabbing is likely related to the frequency and common use in music, media and informal cultural settings. It is typically unsettling, however, in formal or professional settings.

Racialized language in the form of jokes and insensitive or disparaging remarks are reported by both staff and students with 37% of staff and 21% of students reporting observed usage. And yet 79% of students and 81% of staff state that students from all ethnic and racial groups are respected.
This seemingly contradictory data suggests that inappropriate racialized language has become so normalized that it is part of the school culture.

Lawrence Township will also need to redefine what a diverse multicultural, multiracial, multigenerational, multigendered, professional learning environment looks and sounds like. As the students venture intocareers that will take them onto a global stage, they must understand the rules of engagement in a global environment. The playful exchange of racial slurs, epithets, and gender-based jokes is not acceptable in a professional environment. It will not be easy to shift the culture but that is what is required to fully prepare them for the world of work. Call it "code switching" or "culture shifting", or any term relative to school pride but raise the expectations for the kind of language used between peers – even when used in jest or online.

Recommendation 1:

It's time to define exactly the kind of school culture the schools envision. The playful exchange of racial slurs, epithets, and jokes may be creating the kind of culture that is inclusive most of the time but offensive, unprofessional or confusing at other times. What are the idealized norms for how people should conduct themselves at school? To be clear, this is not about centering one culture over another. It is about creating an environment where all stakeholders feel comfortable and emotionally safe. Revisit your vision statement unpacking the term "global community," rethinking the role educational equity plays in the school vision, and reimagining the language, behaviors and expectations of all stakeholders in this diverse universe. This is also a fine time to talk about race with all stakeholders. Black and Hispanic students and all staff need to understand the historical context of the "n" word and its use. It will not be easy; the word is used casually in media outlets. But this word and others are degrading to many and should not be normalized in schools. All students can understand the value of "code switching" in professional settings. Have honest conversations with students about "code switching" – modifying of one's speech, behavior, appearance to adapt to different sociocultural norms. Continue to engage and inspire all stakeholders in continued discussions on the benefits and challenges of creating a more equitable and inclusive school community. Be open and honest about the challenges you will face in doing so, but inspiring in your resolve to do so with the support of all stakeholders. The sociocultural norms at school require a high level of respect for people of all ethnicities, racial and gender identities, and cultural values. These norms may differ from the ones students exercise at their homes or in their communities. It may require that they "code switch" at school. To be clear, this is not advocacy that students abandon their authentic cultural selves. Students need to be comfortable in their own skin. But within a global, multicultural community, skin comes in many colors and as such, norms that help everyone respect the dignity of all kinds of people. The jokes, terminology, and behaviors within one's familial community may be offensive and inappropriate within school or work communities. It is important to be flexible enough to adapt so everyone feels respected. This too, is a valuable life skill.

Recommendation 4:

Be proactive in preventing racialized language exchanged online. Provide student training on being a good digital citizen including appropriate language online. Ensure they understand legal implications and how their online language can follow them.

I. Gender Bias

Another culture shift for Lawrence Township is the deliberate elevation of female voices. Somehow, they feel excluded from decision-making, unheard, and lacking equitable power and control with their male peers. When students and staff discuss discrimination, they sometimes talk about being treated differently because of their gender.

Recommendation 1:

Ensure everyone has an equitable voice on the leadership team. Follow up on suggestions and recommendations – keeping a written record of those made during meetings.

Recommendation 2:
Ensure a distributive leadership model that distributes power amongst a range of new diverse, voices – emerging staff, veteran staff, LGBTQ, female, male, students. Let them design their way into the future crafting the path for a more inclusive and equitable culture. Ensure they have equitable access to department head positions and support new leaders as they rise to the occasion, for they will.

Recommendation 3:
Have school leadership meet one-on-one with female staff to discuss any concerns about discrimination. Commit to listening more openly about concerns and establish a written path to resolve issues of perceived gender bias.

J. Parents and Community are Ready to Do the Work

The parents and staff urge the district to move forward in equity work. 72% gave a thumbs up for exploring and confronting the vestiges of institutional racism. They are concerned about their children's future and believe it is an initiative that is long overdue. Many parents appreciate the diverse demographics in the district and feel this will enable their child to thrive in the real world. It should be noted there is a fraction of parents who do not feel this way about student diversity in general, particularly if they perceive their child is receiving less services, support, or resources as a result.

One concern is ensuring that equity work is sustainable and institutionalized. Staff and parents want action as well as discussion. They want leaders to reinforce a growth mindset for adult learners and take adequate time to embed the practices in their regular work.

The school leadership and the parents are overwhelmingly ready to tackle institutional racism and educational equity. Most of the staff stand behind this work as well, however, a significant number of them perceive they have yet to engage in any formal training opportunities in this area within the last three years. They may not feel efficacious in dismantling inequitable practices or engaging in critical conversations.

Equity work had begun with students in Lawrence Township. Numerous students discussed their identity in relation to white privilege. It is apparent students have learned some common vocabularyand understanding around equity, cultural competency, and topics of social justice.

Recommendation 1:
Keep up the cycle of continuous improvement and institutionalize the learning by adapting and adopting new policies, practices and expectations along the way. Continue conversations on race, equity and bias as appropriate. For most staff respondents it feels completely natural, and it should. It just is not reported as happening consistently enough for it to feel as if it is integral to the school culture.

Recommendation 2:
Start schoolwide, regular dialogues or book studies. Introduce multiple areas of study or book clubs so learning is differentiated. Embed time within each content area meeting to discuss recent learning on equity. Provide time during staff meetings for people to share learning. Some of the staff has led previous staff development training in this area and at least one is pursuing a doctorate in this area. Utilize their expertise and skills as you coalesce tostrengthen your learning community and communities of practice that are culturally responsive, culturally competent, and equity-focused for the sake of students.

Recommendation 3:
Be creative in designing ways for parents of all racial and ethnic identities to interact, network, and experience their common interests.

Recommendation 4:
Professional development on critical conversations, empathetic speaking and listening and/or facilitation of conversations on race.

Recommendation 5:
Partner with sister schools in formulating communities of practice on equity, book studies, and/or action research in equity, institutional racism, cultural competency, culturally responsive practices, etc. When staff and/or leadership is comfortable, open the doors to the parent community as well for rich discussions and exercises. They are likely not sure what to expect from educators engaging in this work but would be open to seeing it modeled positively and particularly understand how this work benefits all students.

Staff and Parents Identified What They Saw as Barriers to the Equity Work

- Fear: Afraid of the unknown and how others might respond.
- Lack of Knowledge: Some staff, students, and parents whose ideologies are inconsistent with principles of racial equity, educational parity, and honoring cultural backgrounds will be opposed.
- Uncomfortable conversations: Uncomfortable with being uncomfortable.
- Racism – parents, staff & students: Challenging because the ideologies of racism are still embraced by some current parents, staff, and students.
- COVID19.

Conclusion

Equity work and cultural competency is a journey. It will take time to unpack and dismantle generations of practices that have served a slice of the population very well. Do not become discouraged at the seemingly insurmountable work involved in doing so. Take it one step at a time and maintain a relentless focus on children. MSD LT is already well on its way!