



Superintendent Update

DERRY TOWNSHIP SD | AUGUST 2 2021

WHAT DOES EQUITY REALLY MEAN?

BY DR. WINSLOW

I've been involved in equity work for well over a decade and a half. It seems hard to believe that so much time has passed, and it's been good to reflect on the work and the journey. I first became interested in learning more about equitable practices when I looked around my classroom and began to notice a somewhat disturbing pattern. My honors classes seemed to be full of students who came from middle or upper-middle-class families, with parents who had a college education and stable, well-paying jobs. While my "low-level" classes seemed to be full of students who lived in the urban neighborhoods that bordered our district. Some didn't speak English very well, others had learning disabilities, the majority were from families in poverty, and many worked long hours outside of school to help support their families. Often these students were seen as behavior problems and as they entered

high school were tracked into academic sections that were more about behavior management than challenging and rigorous academics.

I have always believed in the power and importance of education while I felt the message we were sending to this particular group of students seemed to be, "Not for you. Education is important for everyone else, but for you, let's just get you through it." I had colleagues who challenged their college prep and honors students with rigorous writing assignments, long-term projects that evoked critical thinking, and primary texts to deconstruct the thinking of scholars of the past while simultaneously not assigning homework (after all, it won't get done) and delivering a litany of mindless worksheets to students in low-level sections. Granted, this was not Derry Township, however, this circumstance is what led me to delve deeper into equity work as it was this work that taught me that a child's address should not be the determining factor in their educational success.

When I came to Derry Township School District in 2012, we had a free and reduced lunch rate of about 14%. While not perfect, this statistic gives us some insight into how many of our students are coming from families in poverty. In the early 2000s, the rate of free and reduced lunch was only 4% in Derry Township. While I do not want to perpetuate stereotypes, research shows that students in poverty often come to school with less background knowledge in academics. They may know fewer of their letters, shapes, and numbers than students coming from more affluent backgrounds.

Additionally, students in poverty may have fewer resources in the home and fewer opportunities for things like travel. Today the rate of free and reduced lunch for Derry Township students is right around 24%. Many are surprised by this number, not suspecting that Hershey would have so much poverty.

Additionally, Derry Township has a very high rate of students with disabilities. This is not always correlated with students in poverty, but there is some intersectionality. Students with severe health concerns can put a strain on a family's finances, especially if one parent is needed to be "on-call" and thus needs to have flexibility within the day in the event their child has a medical need. Currently, over 10% of district students receive some type of special education services.

So where does equity come into play with these numbers? It is the heart to providing a true *Every Child, Every Day* educational experience. Equity has lately been interpreted as something that is going to mean a loss for one group if it is received by another. This is simply not the case, the equal opportunities that we want for our students are just that, equal opportunities. Opportunity isn't pie and it doesn't operate by laws of scarcity. In other words, more opportunity for someone else doesn't mean less opportunity for me.

The district definition of Equity is: *Putting systems in place to collaboratively ensure that every child has an equal chance for success through a commitment to practices of fairness and inclusion in our learning environment.*

- *Fairness, which means ensuring that personal and social circumstances do not prevent students from achieving their academic potential.*
- *Inclusion, which means setting a basic minimum standard for education that is shared by all students regardless of background, personal characteristics, or location.*

(Adapted from Equity in Education: What it Is and Why it Matters)

On July 15, 2021, Jeanne Spiller, co-author of the book *Yes We Can!* challenged an audience of over 100 teachers and administrators with the question, “Does ALL really mean ALL?” Spiller was reminding us that all students, even those receiving special education services are able to learn and achieve at high levels if we work together to make that learning happen.

While Hershey schools are highly successful under anyone’s definition, we have regularly seen a significant gap between the achievement levels of our students in special education versus those who are strictly in regular education. The same is also true for our students in poverty. When the state refers to “historically underperforming students,” these are the students they are referring to at Derry Township.

The following charts on page 4 and 5 illustrate those gaps in grade 5 English Language Arts and Mathematics PSSA results over a 3-year period of time.

These examples are indicative of all grade level results. It is simply not acceptable for these groups of students to be performing at such a different level than their grade-level peers.

To highlight the point further, a years to parity analysis indicates -16.19 years for these students receiving special

education services to “catch up” to their peers. For those who are wondering if you are reading it correctly, it is a negative number, which means “never.” Before we get lost in the overwhelming nature of these numbers, it is important to remember what Jim Collins tells us in *Good to Great*. Great organizations confront their brutal facts, but they never lose hope. (Collins, 2001)

What are we doing to close these gaps?

The 2020 school year was actually the first year that I had been really excited about administering the PSSA exams. Normally I have a lot to say about standardized tests that isn’t terribly flattering...however, I truly believe that with excellent teaching practices and confronting the spaces where we have been inequitable, that the tests will take care of themselves. The 2019-2020 school year was the first that we had all the pieces in place to move from a space of remediation (the “old way” of thinking about how to fill in learning gaps for students) to one of acceleration (an updated way of working to ensure students are both getting foundational knowledge as well as the opportunity to do grade-level work). In the learning acceleration model, a child stays in the regular education classroom for full instruction while receiving additional instruction on foundational concepts at a different time.

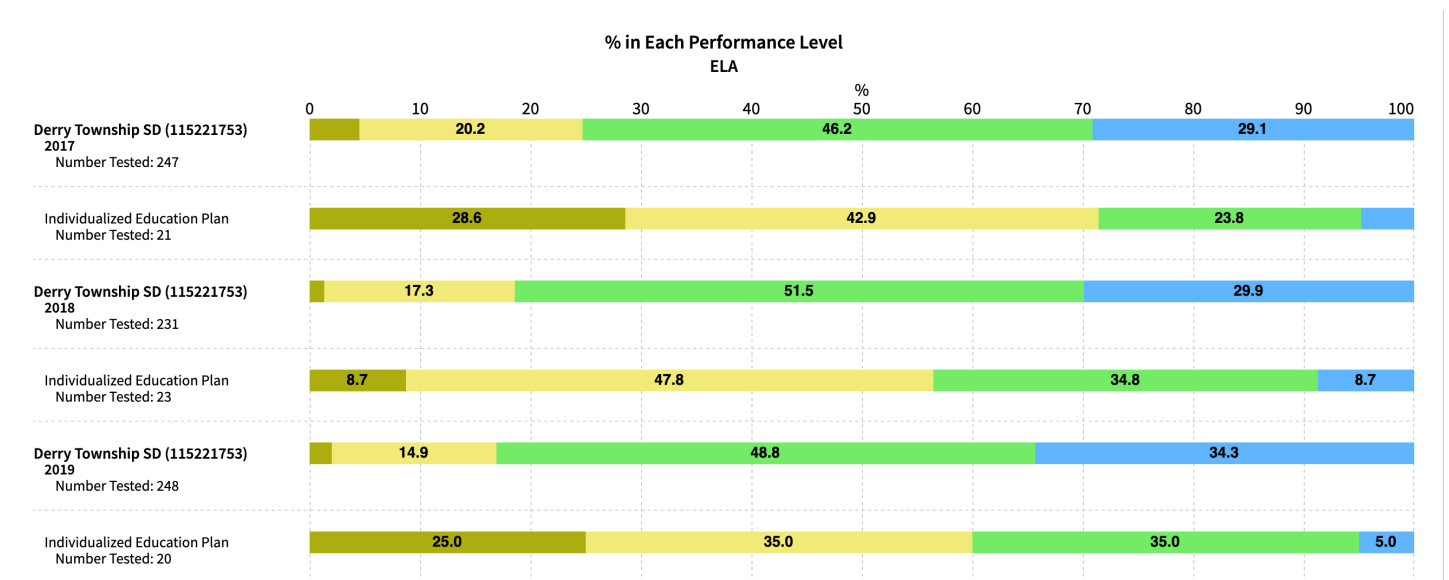
These are structures that it took time to build into our master schedule, but once there were showing a great deal of promise. (I do fear that a year of COVID instruction may have set us back a bit, but it is why our best practice structures are so very important to have in place). Jeanne Spiller was here on July 15th to remind us and further our learning on how Professional Learning Communities support this work by tapping into the varied gifts and talents of our teachers to help ALL students meet the identified learning targets in the regular education classroom.

She reminded us that rigorous work is for all students. If we ask ourselves the question, “Is the goal for this student to be a fully functioning, independent and contributing member of the community upon graduation?” and the answer is, “Yes” then that child had better be participating in high-level and rigorous course work, and that is what Equity means.

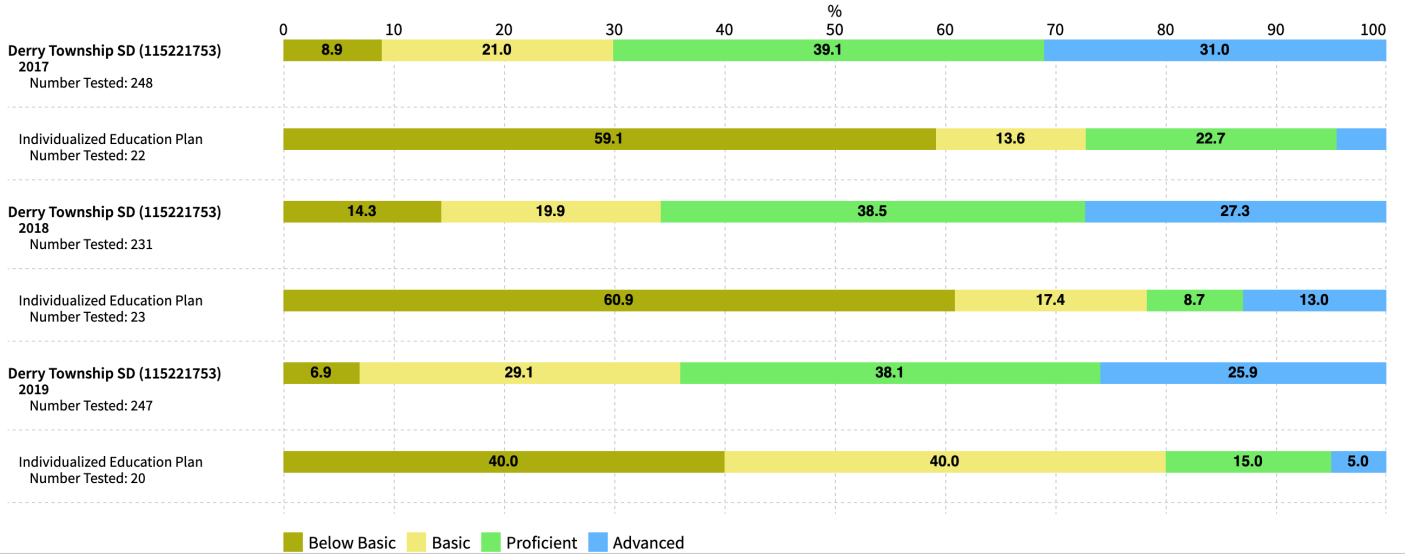
Sources:

Collins, J. (2001). Good to Great. HarperCollins.
 Frizellie, H., Schmidt, J. A., & Spiller, J. (2016). Yes We Can! Solution Tree Press.

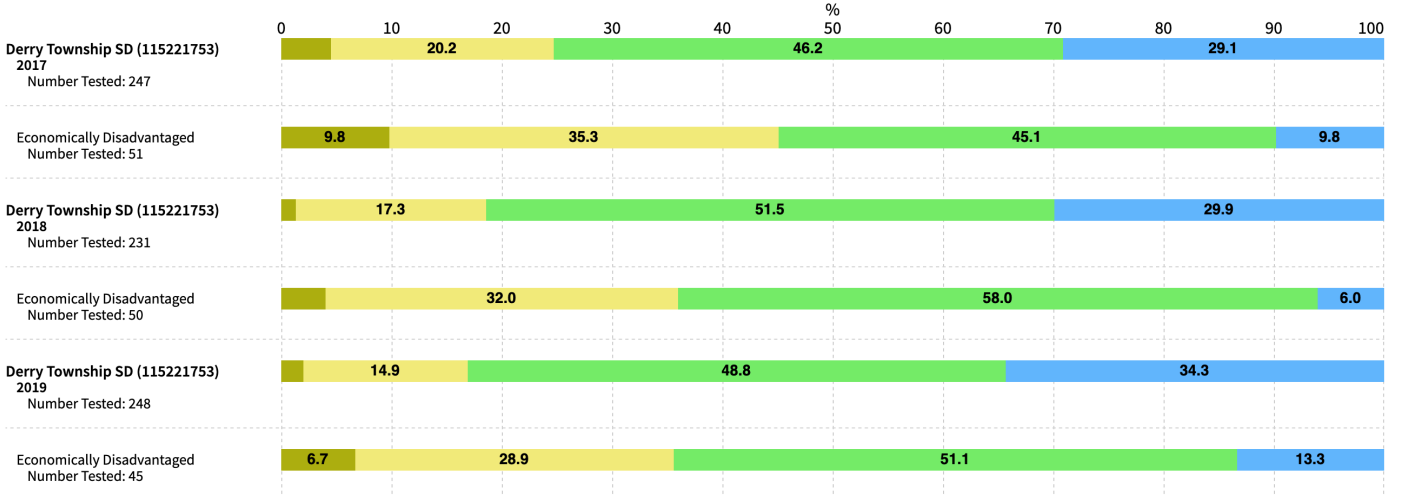
Gaps in grade 5 English Language Arts and Mathematics PSSA results over a 3-year period



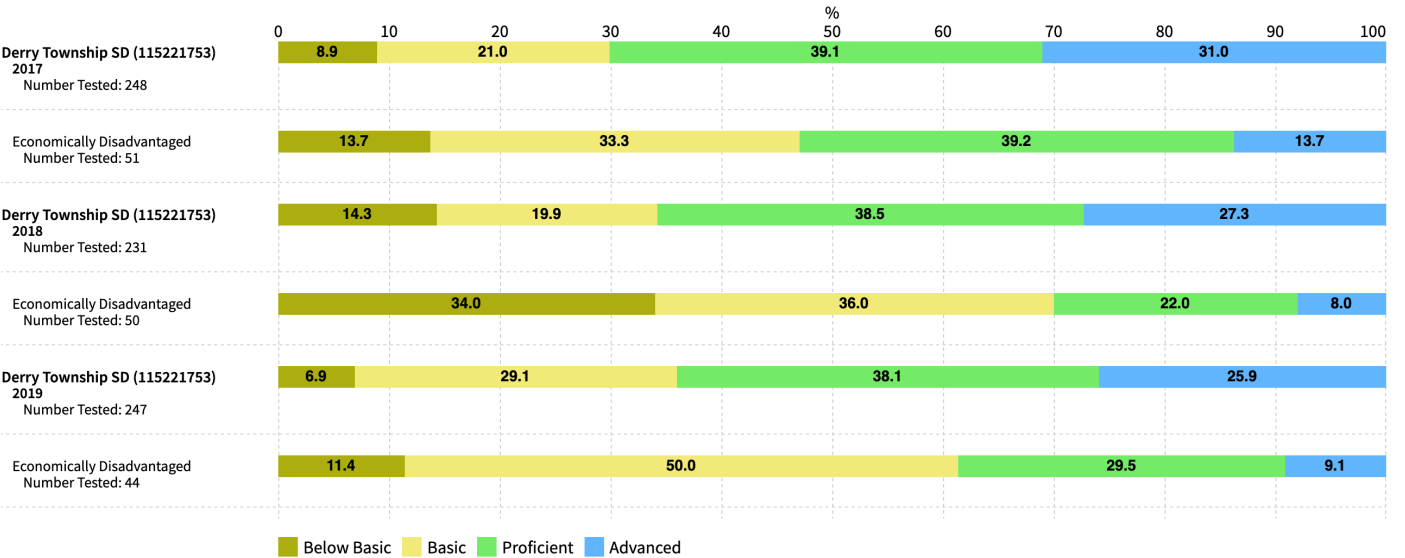
Mathematics



% in Each Performance Level
ELA



Mathematics



WHAT ARE WE READING AND LISTENING TO?



Frizellie, H., Schmidt, J. A., & Spiller, J. (2016). Yes We Can! In this outstanding book, the authors lay out how Professional Learning Communities need to incorporate special education teachers and how the collaboration between teachers is the key to supporting students with complex learning needs. The book outlines how to use the 3 Big Ideas and 4 Critical questions of PLC to ensure that all students are achieving high levels of academic success.

It Was Said by Jon Meacham. In this documentary podcast series, historian Jon Meacham takes one speech per episode and with expert analysis examines the historical context of the speech, the goals of the person giving the speech and how and why the words still resonate with us today.

