

EQUITY AUDIT

MADISON METROPOLITAN SCHOOL DISTRICT



SUMMARY REPORT

PREPARED BY WISCONSIN'S EQUITY AND INCLUSION LABORATORY
& THE ORGANIZATIONAL DISPARITIES LABORATORY

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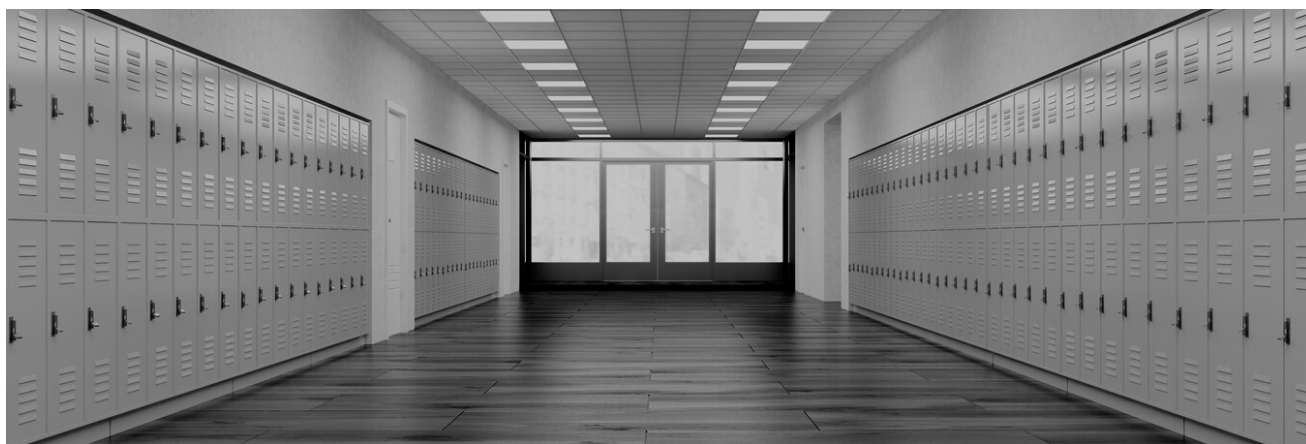


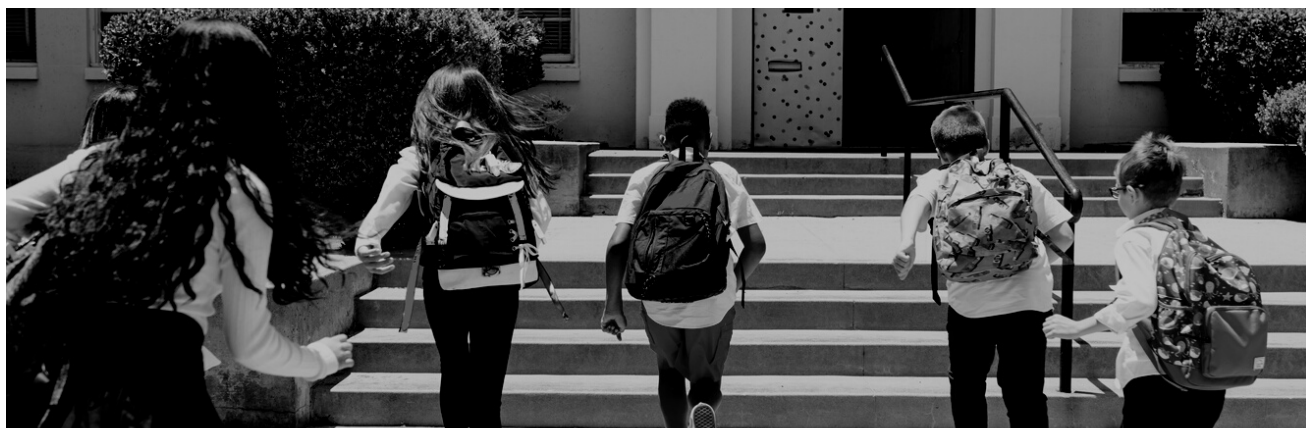
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ABOUT THE EQUITY AUDIT

The goal of this Equity Audit was to evaluate Madison Metropolitan School District's (MMSD) efforts towards diversity, equity, and inclusion.

To evaluate these efforts, self-guided video-based interviews were conducted with approximately 380 individuals across MMSD. Interview participants varied by location (e.g. South Side) and relationship to the school district (e.g., students, families, teachers, building leaders, and administrators). Interview questions were tailored to each stakeholder group, but all the questions related to the participants experiences with the MMSD and their perspectives on MMSD's diversity, equity and inclusion efforts.

A team of researchers thematically analyzed these data to gain a better understanding of the MMSD's efforts toward DEI. The researchers used an inductive data analysis strategy, entailing sorting interview responses into themes and then discussing and recalibrating those themes with the findings of other researchers in an iterative process. This analytical approach centers the voices of interview participants and allows for their voices to guide the analysis.

These themes were translated into high-level summaries representing the perceptions of each stakeholder group - students, families, teachers, building leaders, and administrators.

AN IMPORTANT NOTE:

At the time in which data were collected, the ongoing global COVID-19 pandemic continued to disrupt traditional modes of educational delivery. This disruption forced the MMSD to pivot to other forms of operation (e.g., virtual, hybrid, synchronous, asynchronous). Simultaneously, racial, social, and political unrest across the United States - and within the city of Madison, Wisconsin - re-ignited conversations and actions related to race in the United States. Finally, the new MMSD superintendent and leadership team began their transitions within MMSD as the previously described “dual pandemics” were already underway.

These contextual timestamps matter. It should be assumed that stakeholders who agreed to participate in this evaluation’s interviews were contending with the socio-political dual pandemics in ways that cannot - and should not - be disentangled from their perspectives of and experiences in MMSD. This analysis results from a one-point-in-time snapshot of participants’ experiences (i.e., not longitudinal to understand participants’ evolving perspectives of and experiences in MMSD).



SUMMARY OF PRIMARY INTERVIEW THEMES

High-level summaries representing the perceptions of each stakeholder group - students, families, teachers, building leaders, and administrators.



MMSD STUDENTS

DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION IN CURRICULUM AND CLASSROOMS

Students regularly complimented the class curriculum as diverse, equitable, and inclusive. On many occasions, students described learning about the histories of different racial and ethnic groups as well as perspectives on current racial events in society. Students attributed this to the efforts of teachers who were deeply invested in supporting the learning of diverse groups in their classroom. Specifically, students highlighted the effective methods teachers used in their classroom rules to make sure minoritized individuals felt safe within the classroom.

TEACHER REPRESENTATION

Student responses show an inconsistency of hiring and retaining racially diverse teachers. While some students highlighted and praised the diverse representation of students at their school, others noted only seeing diversity in support staff and rarely if ever among teachers.

DIVERSE SUPPORT PROGRAMS/ORGANIZATIONS FOR STUDENTS

Many students highlighted the Black Student Union (BSU), Gay/Straight Alliance (GSU) and many other identity-based organizations as valuable and safe spaces to discuss race, gender sexuality, and other school-related issues. Students also credited these organizations as being essential to the sense of belonging they feel at their school. In addition, students mentioned the need for MMSD to maximize these organizations through increasing their support and promotion to students. It is worth noting; however, that some students described having minimal awareness of these organizations or the organizations are not present at their school.

LACK OF LISTENING, LACK OF FEEDBACK OPPORTUNITIES

Students also described feeling as though the school district does not listen to their needs and that there are few opportunities to provide feedback to district leaders. Specifically, some students noted that district leaders infrequently seek out perspectives from identity-based clubs. To be heard, they feel forced to provide feedback to teachers and leaders directly or utilize their voices via walkouts. In addition, students highlighted what they felt was negligence on the part of the school district from rarely, if ever, listening to what students describe as serious issues happening in their schools.



FAMILIES

PERCEPTIONS OF DEI EFFORTS AT THE SCHOOL LEVEL

Overall, families spoke highly of their child(ren)'s school and the Madison Metropolitan School District's strides toward inclusivity. The curriculum, support for gender identity expression, and the general culture of MMSD were seen as engaging and inclusive. Additionally, diversity-related programming offered by the district/school (e.g., AVID/TOPS, Black Girl Magic, Gay/Straight Alliance) provided an avenue of inclusion for students.

However, parents mentioned that inclusivity efforts could be improved related to students with disabilities, specifically neurodiverse, physical, and emotional disabilities.

FEEDBACK ON MMSD DEI PRACTICES

Although some parents commended the new Superintendent's efforts toward diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), many felt that MMSD communications regarding DEI leadership was lacking tangible action or a plan to improve. Additionally, families emphasized that a crucial factor in the lack of progress on DEI efforts was the disparity in funds and resource allocation by the administration.

Altogether, families find their child(ren)'s school and district climate to be strong in inclusion and engaging. However, they also felt that concrete steps toward greater diversity and equity have yet to be taken.

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATION

The majority of families did not participate in the Parent Teacher Association (PTA), and some noted its racial composition and lack of diversity. Parents expressed continued frustration with not being able to enter the school and communicate face-to-face with teachers and staff and described how this served as a barrier to feeling a sense of belonging for families from diverse and different backgrounds. Families did note, however, that this is largely attributable to the growing COVID-19 pandemic and no fault of the administration.

Positively, many parents cited the weekly newsletter and emails from administration as a primary source of information and praised that it was sent out in multiple languages.

TEACHER REPRESENTATION

Nearly all the parents responded that they were unaware of any efforts by MMUSD to recruit and retain teachers from different backgrounds. Moreover, parents underscored the dearth of teachers of color and shared that even if their child(ren) had a teacher of color, retention remained an issue.





TEACHERS

IN-SCHOOL INCLUSION EFFORTS

Most teachers shared that their school strove to foster a sense of belonging primarily through (1) visual student representation (e.g. murals or posters in hallways, curriculum) or (2) after-school programs and organizations such as the Black Student Union (BSU) or the Gay/Straight Alliance (GSA).

Overall, teachers noted that MMSD has increased academic engagement, and students have shown improvement. They noted that DEI is being talked about more frequently and expulsions/suspensions of Black and Hispanic students have decreased.

Teachers also noted a school-wide greater emphasis on African-American students than other historically minoritized racial/ethnic groups of students.

LACK OF REPRESENTATION IN TEACHING STAFF

Despite these efforts to increase visual representation, teachers indicated that teacher representation, in terms of race/ethnicity, has been and continues to remain an issue.

Teachers with tenure in the district have observed some improvements in the schools since their hiring. However, most teachers described that they are unaware of any efforts to recruit or retain teachers from diverse backgrounds.

Problematically, teachers of color also described having to retire early or leave due to a lack of inclusion and a supportive environment.

LIMITED OPPORTUNITIES TO PROVIDE FEEDBACK

While a few teachers expressed that there were no opportunities for feedback; a majority of teachers highlighted the importance of their School Based Leadership Team (SBLT) meetings or staff meetings as a space to share concerns, experiences, and feedback related to diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts.

Teachers mentioned a clear disconnect between teacher needs and leadership strategies, specifically noting that they felt the administration did not understand or listen to their needs as teachers.

MMSD DEI EFFORTS

A significant portion of the teacher population emphasized that there has been a lot of "lip service" related to DEI but no real action has been taken. Others pointed out that while there has been a push for change and highlighting diversity due to the current "dual pandemics" (i.e., COVID and murders committed by police), no clear strategy or plan to improve has been presented.

Further, they noted that leadership has failed to equitably allocate resources and funds to schools across the Madison district.

TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Teachers spoke of a variety of professional development and training opportunities related to DEI. Some mentioned anti-racist, restorative justice, trauma-informed education, and culturally relevant pedagogy training programs provided by the school. Some teachers also relied on bi-weekly affinity group meetings as a way to build community and learn about others backgrounds and experiences. Some have also formed book clubs after participating in professional development training to continue their learning while reading culturally relevant books.

While many spoke positively of these trainings, many teachers also shared how training opportunities and affinity groups inadvertently segregate teachers. Teachers shared that this segregation contributes to White teachers and teachers of color being further separated and prevents additional opportunities to learn from each other's strengths.





BUILDING LEADERSHIP

EFFORTS TO INSTITUTE CHANGE

Overall, some building leaders feel as if they are doing their best with implementing diversity, equity, and inclusion policies within their buildings. At the building level, leaders are implementing programs and evaluating how they are making changes in their own buildings. There is a feeling that they are not receiving enough district level support, however, to help guide them in implementing the necessary changes in their buildings.

RECRUITING AND RETAINING A DIVERSE STAFF

Building leaders feel that there is not a unified understanding of DEI efforts from the district in recruiting and retaining minoritized groups into leadership positions. District leaders who do not identify with a racially minoritized community noted they are unaware of opportunities for support and recruitment of minoritized groups. And several building leaders noted the pool of candidates is not diverse enough, limiting their ability to increase staff representation in their buildings.

LACK OF OPPORTUNITIES TO PROVIDE FEEDBACK

Building leaders discussed minimal to no opportunities to provide feedback to district level administrators. The opportunities for feedback feel limited to meetings or direct challenging of district level policies which, they feel, result in minimal change.

DEI PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES ARE LACKING

Many of the district leaders mentioned affinity groups as the main district level DEI initiative. In addition to the affinity groups, the National Equity Project and the Wisconsin Urban Leadership Institute were mentioned as an important professional development opportunity dedicated to DEI. But due to the pandemic, these programs are still not widely implemented and the building leaders have felt the lack of these DEI professional development opportunities.





DISTRICT ADMINISTRATORS

INCREASED REPRESENTATION IN ADMINISTRATIVE POSITIONS

All district administrators interviewed mentioned an increase in the number of individuals of color in administrative positions. Administrators shared that individuals of color occupying these roles offer new perspectives, cultures, and backgrounds that reflect and relate to the current MMSD student population. Most district administrators explained that these leadership changes to the district are important, and position MMSD to be a positive model of diverse representation (at least in terms of racial representation); one that could be celebrated and emulated within the city, county, state, and possibly even the country.

Some district administrators noted an emphasis on the racial composition of leaders (usually described as Black or African American). This raised the concern from at least some district administrators that there is a focus on racial diversity, but not an all-inclusive focus on other identities (e.g., individuals who identify as LGBTQ+). This concern suggests, at least in part, that for some it remains unclear why there is an emphasized priority on addressing racial diversity over other historically marginalized populations.

PERSONNEL CHANGES AND STAFF CONNECTEDNESS

Most district administrators acknowledged that the district has undergone significant personnel changes, while simultaneously navigating the COVID-19 pandemic. Several stakeholders highlighted the pandemic in their answers, recognizing that some of their reflections and recommendations might have been influenced by its ongoing effects.

These changes prompted many district administrators to recognize the need for professional development opportunities for staff to become better connected with colleagues within one's school, functional area, and the district. While nearly all district administrators described wanting to have professional development opportunities provided by the district; there were different ideas on the kinds of opportunities desired, the format and/or delivery strategy for these opportunities, and the times these programs should be offered to maximize accessibility.

DEI STRATEGY

There appeared to be a lack of shared understanding of what DEI is, what the terms mean, and how efforts related to DEI are being operationalized within the district. Without specific definitions of what DEI is within the MMSD context, and what the district's specific goals regarding DEI are, district administrators are attempting to make sense of it all on their own. This is resulting in confusion, as people feel that they lack a shared understanding and cohesion with the larger district.

Relatedly, there was disagreement whether a DEI-focused strategic plan exists. Some lauded the district's strategic plan. A majority were unaware that a plan existed. This raises questions about the existence of a plan and, if so, who has access. The absence of this kind of document contributes to district administrators not knowing district priorities or initiatives and how decisions are made.

DISTRICT ADMINISTRATORS CONTINUED...

District administrators genuinely appear to want to help move the district forward. They want to be a part of the change process, and not just to critique the current administration. However, most simply do not understand how they fit within the complex and ever-changing composition of the district. They want to provide feedback that will help to move the district forward but also do not know what – if any at all – feedback mechanisms are in place. Further, some are concerned that if they provide feedback, the feedback might be used against them in retribution and they, too, may be relieved of their positions.



EXISTING STRENGTHS & RECOMMENDATIONS

EXISTING DEI-RELATED STRENGTHS

1 STAKEHOLDERS ACROSS MMSD ACKNOWLEDGE THE GOAL OF INCREASING DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION

Stakeholders, including students, families, teachers, building leaders, and administrators, feel as if the MMSD is on the right track in focusing on DEI efforts. They recognize that achieving the goal of increasing DEI will not be easy and will take time and commitment. Some also acknowledge that the challenges currently faced by the MMSD are related to the change process, recognizing that change takes time.

2 MANY STAKEHOLDERS RECOGNIZE SOME PROGRESS

Students, families, teachers, building leaders, and administrators all recognized that some progress has been made towards increasing DEI in the MMSD. In particular, stakeholders spoke of DEI found in the curriculum as a point of progress, including readings, representation in the classrooms and newsletters provided in multiple languages.

3 A MAJORITY OF STAKEHOLDERS WANT TO BE MORE INVOLVED IN THE DEI CHANGE PROCESS

An overwhelming majority of students, families, teachers, building leaders, and administrators want to take a more active role in advancing DEI efforts and the DEI change process. Despite their desire to be involved, they do not always understand how they can play a role.



RECOMMENDATIONS/ OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

1 DEVELOP AND DISSEMINATE A DEI STRATEGIC PLAN

Interviews revealed a lack of consensus on whether a strategic plan for DEI exists. This suggests that some in the district may not have been informed of new plans or initiatives or may not know how to access the information. Widely disseminating the plan would help all stakeholders to be more cohesively informed about the direction of the MMSD's DEI efforts.

2 CREATE SYSTEMS OF REWARD AND ACCOUNTABILITY FOR MMSD DEI EFFORTS

Developing and implementing a strategic plan is an important step. Praising and holding individuals accountable for their efforts toward DEI are equally important tools for translating the plan into action. Creating additional mechanisms for both praise and accountability can further engage staff in the process of improving DEI.

3 GENERATE A STRATEGY FOR HIRING AND RETAINING TEACHERS OF COLOR

Stakeholders praised the MMSD for the increase of people of color in administrator positions. However, there remains a lack of racial diversity of teachers of color, and a failure to retain the teachers of color who are hired. Generating a strategy to increase the number of teachers of color entering and staying in the classrooms is necessary. The strategy can include opportunities for professional development, but that alone will not address the continued absence of teachers of color in the classroom. One approach could include developing a partnership to recruit teachers (and teachers in training) from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).

4 ENGAGE FAMILIES IN DEI EFFORTS

Parents and families of students in MMSD are eager to get more involved but are often unclear or how to do so or feel there are few opportunities available beyond involvement with the PTA. Parents of color, specifically, note the lack of racial diversity on the PTA as a barrier to participation. Devising alternative and creative ways to include families, outside of the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) can generate tremendous gains in advancing DEI in schools.

5 REVIEW AND STANDARDIZE DEI CURRICULUM ACROSS THE MMSD

Teachers and building leaders acknowledged efforts to advance DEI at their respective schools, but often felt that they lacked direction from the district on how to most effectively do so. Thus, DEI-related changes are happening more swiftly and visibly at some schools and lack uniformity across the district. A district-wide review of the curriculum, its reform, and implementation is needed. In implementing this charge, consider the classroom and school environment (e.g., bulletin boards, pictures, flags) as a complement to the formal curriculum.

6 EMPHASIZE AND INCLUDE THE MMSD'S EXPANSIVE DIVERSITY

Some stakeholders feel that there is currently an increased focus on racial diversity, while other equally underrepresented identities are not considered. Do not discontinue the focus on racial diversity. Rather, be sure to consider and focus on advancing all forms of diversity, including disability, Latinx, Asian, LGBTQ+, and Indigenous populations among others.

7 PROVIDE TRANSPARENT, ACCESSIBLE, AND SAFE OPPORTUNITIES FOR FEEDBACK

Students, families, teachers, building leaders, and administrators described the lack of opportunities to provide feedback to MMSD leaders. Providing opportunities for feedback is an important aspect of ensuring that DEI initiatives reflect and align with the needs of an organization's shareholders. Opportunities to provide feedback can help stakeholders feel heard and provide useful feedback and ideas to decision-makers. However, ensuring that stakeholders feel that they can share feedback without fear of retribution is a critical consideration.





PREPARED BY:

This report was prepared collaboratively by Wisconsin's Equity and Inclusion Laboratory at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the Organizational Disparities Laboratory at Michigan State University.



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