

A landscape scan of equity, diversity, and inclusion strategies in Lower Merion School District

**LOWER MERION SCHOOL DISTRICT EQUITY, DIVERSITY, AND INCLUSION
CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT PROJECT RESEARCH BRIEF NO. 4**

January 2023



Project summary

Education Northwest is partnering with the Lower Merion School District (LMSD) to review the district’s practices and policies related to building and establishing an equitable and inclusive learning environment. From late 2020 to early 2021, LMSD leadership engaged the community in a collaborative process to identify three critical focus areas that will guide Education Northwest’s study.¹



Curriculum, instruction, and pedagogy



Professional learning



Staff diversity and hiring

This is the fourth in a series of research briefs that share the findings from the various focal areas of the equity review. **This research brief presents findings from Education Northwest’s scan of activities conducted by educators across all schools in LMSD.** To explore the schools’ efforts related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), we used the following questions to guide our work:

1. What strategies to promote equity are being used within each building in LMSD? In what ways have these strategies changed over time?
2. What building-level and district systems are crucial in supporting staff members in each building to implement equity efforts?
3. In what ways does the school communicate its commitment to DEI to its students and caregivers?
4. What additional efforts or supports are needed within each school to foster a supportive environment for all staff members and an equitable learning environment for all students?

¹ For more information about Lower Merion School District’s commitment to equity, please visit <https://www.lmsd.org/equity>

Culturally responsive data collection activities

At every phase of the study, Education Northwest sought insights and guidance from the LMSD community. In collaboration with LMSD, Education Northwest established a 12-member advisory group of parents, educators, counselors, school board members, and community leaders. The advisory group met regularly with Education Northwest to provide feedback on the study plan, inform data collection efforts, and develop recommendations for the district.

For this report, building on our findings from the prior three research briefs, Education Northwest conducted **interviews** with the principals and DEI leads at each LMSD school. In addition, we incorporated findings from **student and caregiver surveys** that were distributed to students in grades 4–5, students in grades 6–12, and caregivers for all students in the district. A total of 1,158 students in grades 4–5, 3,485 students in grades 6–12, and 1,043 caregivers completed the survey. Education Northwest shared initial findings with schools for a thorough review before including them in this report.

Key findings across all schools

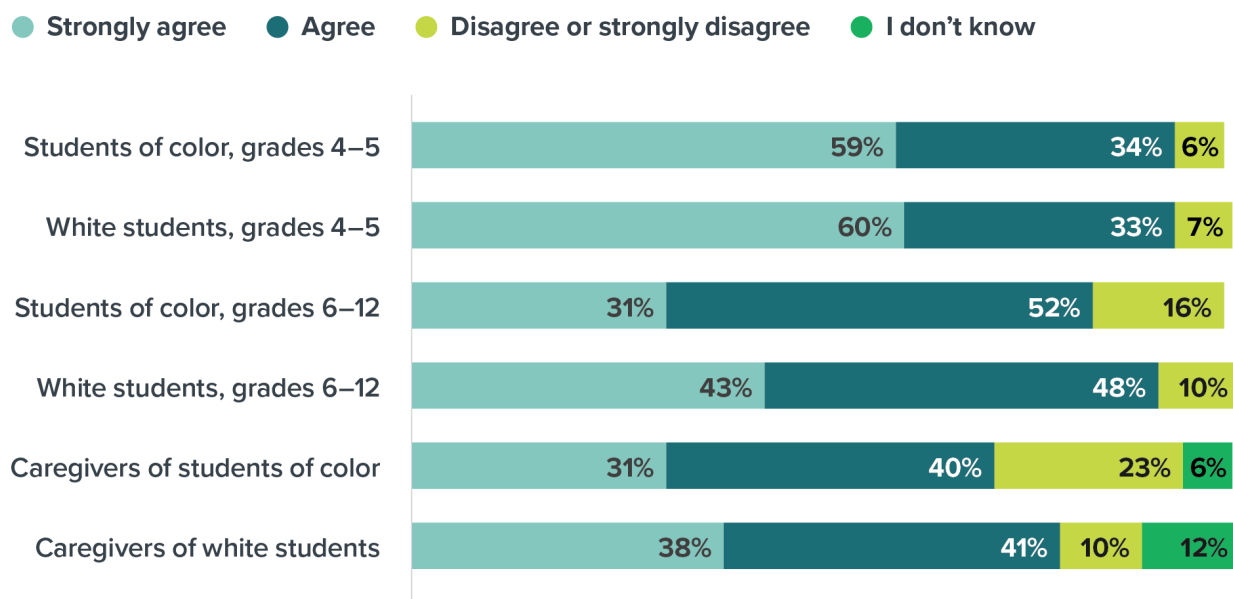
- Overall, representatives from all schools said that DEI practices have progressed in recent years due to professional learning, thoughtful conversations, and support from the district office.
- School representatives (9 of 11 schools) said they are hopeful that the new director of diversity and equity will support and elevate the work of DEI in the district.
- Most schools (9 of 11) described the importance of their DEI team or cultural proficiency committee in supporting DEI work. School-level DEI leads, while new, may help align DEI work across the school (4 of 11 schools) or expand representation on DEI teams (2 of 11 schools).
- Many schools (8 of 11) have student affinity groups that work to provide safe spaces for students of color to share their experiences and get support.
- Representatives from seven of 11 schools said district partnerships with DEI consultants, like Sage Wellness, provide important opportunities for staff professional development in restorative practices and other key areas. Additionally, schools benefit from individualized training provided directly to the school, including principal consultations and meetings with DEI teams. For instance, Sage Wellness has used example scenarios from school buildings to

generate powerful conversations among staff members, as well as supported staff members to develop a DEI action plan that includes feedback from families, educators, and administrators.

- There is energy in the district to learn about restorative practice, and administrators are excited to see the way it plays out as professional learning continues.

In surveys, we asked students in grades 4–12 and caregivers of students of all ages in the district to reflect on the inclusivity of the school environment. Most LMSD students and caregivers feel that the school environment reflects a variety of cultures, gender identities, and experiences (figure 1).

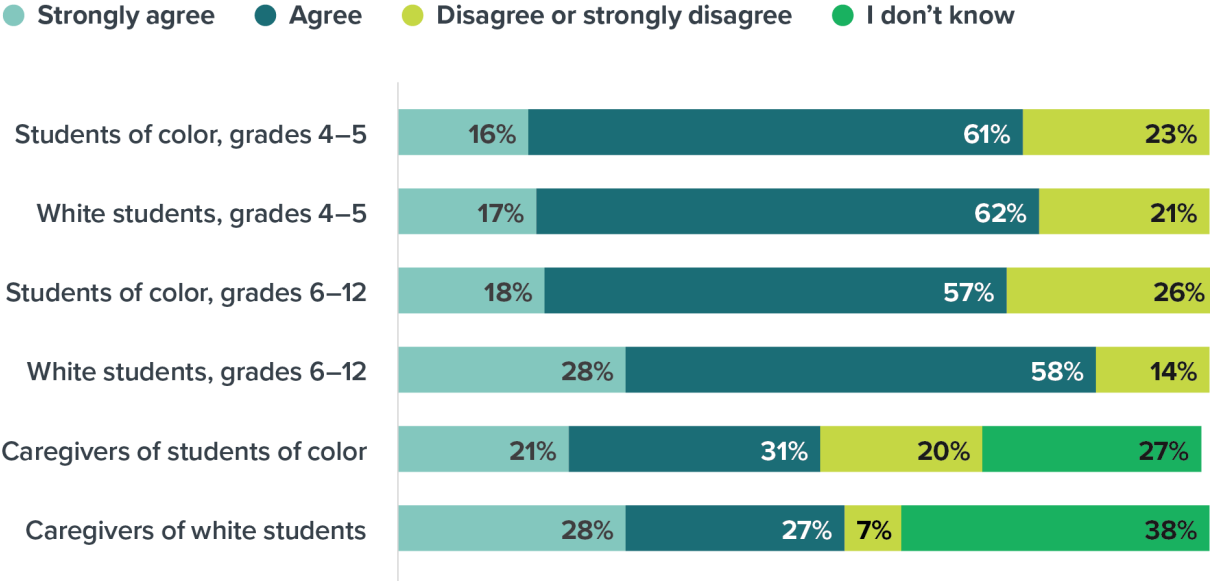
Figure 1. Most students and caregivers feel their school environment reflects a variety of cultures, gender identities, and student experiences



Source: Education Northwest analysis of LMSD student and educator survey (grade 4–5 student responses = 1,158; grade 6–12 student responses = 3,485; caregiver responses = 1,043).

Likewise, most students and caregivers agreed that their school library reflects different identities and cultures (figure 2).

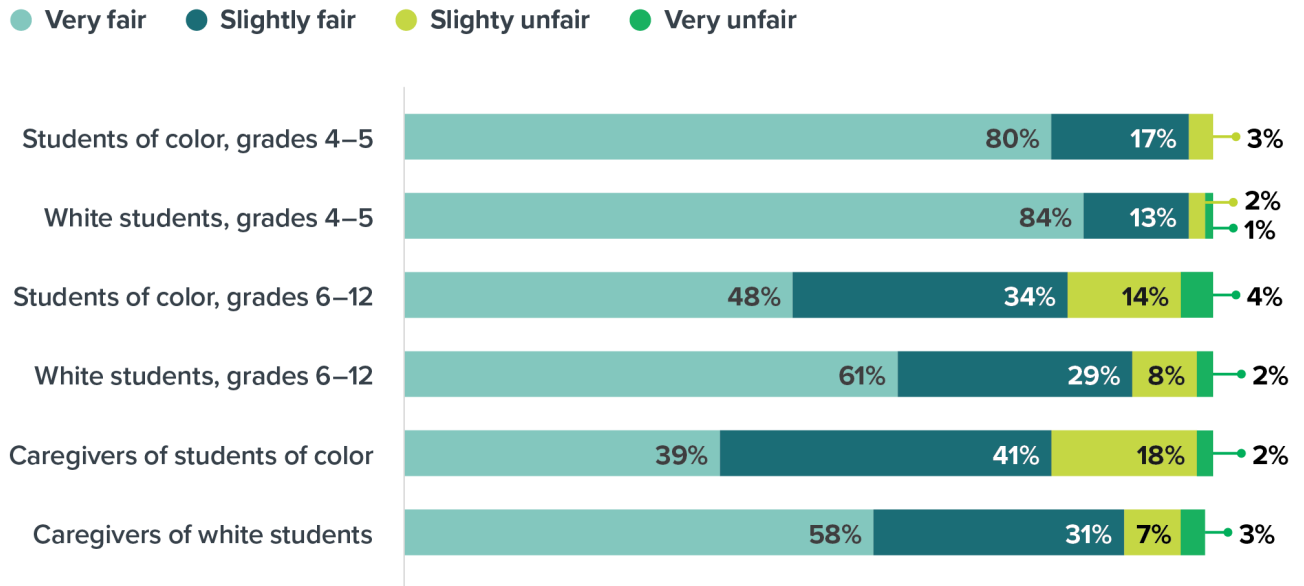
Figure 2. Most students and caregivers feel their school library reflects different identities and cultures



Source: Education Northwest analysis of LMSD student and educator survey (grade 4–5 student responses = 1,158; grade 6–12 student responses = 3,485; caregiver responses = 1,043).

In addition, we asked students and caregivers whether their school treats students from all backgrounds fairly. Most students and caregivers feel that schools treat students very or slightly fairly. However, more students of color in grades 6-12 and caregivers of students of color feel that schools treat students slightly unfairly.

Figure 3. Most students and caregivers feel their schools treat students from all backgrounds fairly



Source: Education Northwest analysis of LMSD student and educator survey (grade 4–5 student responses = 1,158; grade 6–12 student responses = 3,485; caregiver responses = 1,043).

Belmont Hills Elementary

Educators at Belmont Hills Elementary see equitable learning environments as places where everyone gets what they need, even if needs look different across learners. A learning environment can be equitable when staff members and students feel a sense of belonging, inclusion, and safety and feel represented in the school environment and materials. Educators are excited about the major wins they have seen recently in broad staff involvement—all grades, music teachers, instructional assistants, and others—in DEI efforts.

Bright spots

For students

- **Student interest inventory.** Students communicate their interests to educators to help them cater instruction to student interests.
- **Cultural diversity galleries.** Three places throughout the school with posters and photos that explore diverse leaders.
- **National Society for Black Engineers.** A science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) mentorship program for African American and multiracial students in collaboration with Harriton High School. High school students provide elementary students with mentoring and tutoring in science.

For staff

- **Supports for staff of color.** New teachers of color are matched with a mentor or buddy who the new hire can connect with throughout the year. An affinity group for staff of color provides an opportunity for staff members within the school to connect and provide mutual support.
- **Coffee and Conversations.** An opportunity for staff members and sometimes their families to connect around challenging concepts outside the school environment.
- **Anti-bias self-assessments.** Staff members use anti-bias self-assessments to look at their instruction and generate better understandings of strategies that work for students.

For families and communities

- **Newsletter to families.** Spotlights equity work being done at the school and by teachers independently, as well as suggestions for conversations to have with their children.

Source: Education Northwest analysis with the principal and DEI lead from Belmont Hills Elementary.

Systems and supports

Interviewees mentioned various techniques and supports in their school that promote equity practices. To start, a supportive building administration is critical. Belmont Hills interviewees said their school

administration is open to hearing input from staff members and thinking about how to leverage resources to make their suggestions happen. Grants of \$500-\$1,000 are provided by Interschool Council Mini Grant Program to support staff members' DEI ideas, projects, or activities.

Belmont Hills continues to develop staff expertise in restorative practices. Currently, all administrators are trained in restorative practices and are beginning to share what they learned with educators and support staff members. In addition, school leaders use social and emotional learning, achievement, and behavioral data to better understand individual student needs and examine equity gaps in student performance. A central component of Belmont Hills' approach to supporting students includes involving families through calls and emails.

School leaders provide opportunities for staff members to lead DEI efforts. One avenue is the cultural proficiency team, which strives to bolster the school's equity efforts. Interviewees said the school's cultural proficiency team is larger than ever and includes staff members from across the building. Another avenue is a staff-led book club. The book club features education texts examining social and emotional learning and cultural relevancy. Staff members meet monthly to discuss how to apply what they learned in practice.

Areas of recent growth

Belmont Hills leaders identified hiring as a focus for recent growth. Administrators are strategizing how to increase diversity within the school by hiring more staff members of color and male teachers. While interviewees spoke of broader staff involvement in DEI efforts, some staff members still hesitate to bring up issues they experience in their classrooms and to participate in equity efforts within the school.

School leaders are working to increase connections across staff members, students, and families. This includes developing new strategies to reach unconnected families. For example, the staff reaches out to caregivers about parent-teacher conferences in multiple ways with the goal of 100 percent participation. To support caregiver participation, the school offers flexible times to meet and continues to grow these strategies. Leaders would like to start yearly cultural potlucks where staff members, students, and families can come together, share food, and offer mutual support.

Cynwyd Elementary School

Educators at Cynwyd Elementary School see equitable learning environments as meeting students where they are. This means understanding that students come from different backgrounds, cultures, and home environments. A learning environment can be equitable when students from all backgrounds and home environments needs are met and feel safe and welcomed. Educators are excited to provide caregivers and families the opportunity to join equity conversations and to feel like they have a space in the district.

Bright spots

For students

- **RARE (Raising Advocacy by Realizing Excellence).** A mentorship program between high school students and students in 4th grade, explicitly focused on African American and multiracial students.
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For staff

- **Schoolwide blog.** Highlights current diversity, equity, and inclusion work.
 - **Curriculum homework reflections.** Allows staff members to look at their instruction, biases, and possible microaggressions and generate a better understanding of strategies that work for students.
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For families and communities

- **Dinners and picnics with families.** Opportunities for families to share their traditions and build community.
- **Newsletter to families.** Spotlights equity work being done at the school and by teachers independently, as well as suggestions for conversations to have with their children.

Source: Education Northwest analysis with the principal and DEI lead from Cynwyd Elementary School.

Systems and supports

Interviewees mentioned various systems and supports in their school that promote equity practices. A supportive building administration is key. The Cynwyd Elementary principal and DEI lead reflected on how their school administration supports staff members and “has their back.” School administrators have made strides in diversifying the staff by recruiting and retaining influential educators of color.

Cynwyd Elementary administrators strive to provide educators the space and time to learn about DEI efforts and develop strategies to implement. One avenue for DEI work at Cynwyd is the achievement team. This team includes the school psychologist, counselors, and reading and math specialists who examine academic, behavioral, and social and emotional data to understand what supports students need. One interviewee said the school administration includes the entire staff in DEI conversations, from educators to support staff members. The school believes that “everyone has a role to play in DEI implementation.”

Cynwyd Elementary is developing staff expertise in restorative practices. This starts with building relationships with students and making all students feel welcome in the classroom. Behavioral challenges are reframed to understand the students’ social and emotional needs.

School leaders seek to include families in the school community. Strategies include providing opportunities for caregivers to join school committees or connect with other families in the district. Additionally, school leaders organize an open house at the start of each school year. They pay particular attention to families that are new to the school by providing a tour and meet-and-greets with the school counselor, librarian, and other school personnel.

Areas of recent growth

Cynwyd Elementary leaders acknowledged that some educators feel more comfortable being vulnerable with their colleagues than others in spaces where equity is discussed. District partnerships with educational consultants have pushed educators to understand their biases and speak up when they see injustice. School leaders continue to build momentum behind equity efforts by using the cultural proficiency team to outline how current DEI work builds on previous efforts, highlighting areas where staff members do well and areas for growth.

Gladwyne Elementary School

Educators at Gladwyne Elementary School believe equitable learning environments are places where everyone gets what they need. Needs may look different across learners and must be understood when connecting with families and community members. Educators believe they can foster an equitable learning environment by making a conscious effort to make everyone feel included, confident, and welcome. Educators are excited about implementing what they learned through various staff-led professional development opportunities to make all students feel welcomed.

Bright spots

For students

- **National Society for Black Engineers.** A STEM mentorship program for African American and multiracial students in collaboration with Harriton High School. High school students provide elementary students with mentoring and tutoring in science.
- **RARE (Raising Advocacy by Realizing Excellence).** A mentorship program between high school students and students in 4th grade, explicitly focused on African American and multiracial students.
- **Pack Pride.** Monthly, at grade-level meetings to develop a sense of belonging, promote kindness, and reinforce the *Gladwyne Way*: Respect yourself, respect others, and respect your environment.

For staff

- **Book club.** An opportunity for educators to learn about and discuss DEI-related educational strategies to apply in the classroom.

For families and communities

- **Parent café night.** Opportunities for students of color and their families to come together, share dinner, share opinions about DEI efforts, and connect families of color to each other.
- **Open house.** Occurs at the start of each school year and provides a space for school leaders to share priorities for the year.

Source: Education Northwest analysis with the principal and DEI lead from Gladwyne Elementary School.

Systems and supports

Interviewees said that having a network of support across the building is key to promoting equity practices in their school. Interviewees reflected that administrators and teachers at Gladwyne Elementary School support each other.

Non-administrative staff members lead DEI efforts. For example, the new DEI lead now facilitates the monthly cultural proficiency committee meetings focused on strengthening the school's equity efforts. Staff-led book clubs offer an opportunity for staff members to meet monthly to discuss new strategies related to social and emotional learning and cultural proficiency and how to apply these strategies to their own practice. The achievement team offers another avenue for staff-led equity efforts. This building-based team meets weekly to explore concerns about student progress, use data to understand why students experience academic problems, and offer suggestions for relevant support.

School leaders continue to support staff members in selecting culturally responsive curricula. Interviewees described how the school's classroom reading materials were reviewed to include more diverse stories across gender identity and race. Similarly, school leaders encouraged teachers to think about how to supplement their libraries with more equity and social justice materials.

Areas of recent growth

Gladwyne Elementary leaders identified hiring as a focus for recent growth in their school. Interviewees reflected that the district has become less diverse and said they would like to see more work to recruit and retain educators of color. The student population at Gladwyne Elementary is becoming more diverse, with a growing population of students who are emergent bilingual. Educators would like to learn more about establishing and nurturing culturally responsive relationships with families who are new to the district.

School leaders encourage staff members to have courageous conversations and "be comfortable with being uncomfortable." While some educators are hesitant to say the wrong thing or be vulnerable with colleagues, school leaders have seen trust grow.

Merion Elementary School

Educators at Merion Elementary School see equitable learning environments as places where all students are seen, heard, and valued and their cultural backgrounds are understood and appreciated. This means that teachers and students feel like they belong and are safe. Educators value the diverse community within Merion Elementary School—where up to 33 languages are spoken—and are excited to use data to learn more about supporting this diverse student body.

Bright spots

For students

- **Home language introductions.** Students have presented a different greeting each week. Students who belong to the heritage presented can introduce themselves in their home language.
- **Bryn Mawr Buddies.** Merion Elementary School formed a partnership with the Civic Engagement Office at Bryn Mawr College to provide volunteer opportunities for bilingual college students. The volunteers support emergent bilingual students at Merion Elementary in the classroom and to build cultural connections.

For staff

- **Book club.** An opportunity for educators to learn about and discuss DEI-related educational strategies to apply in the classroom. Each book is rooted in racial understanding.
- **Cultural Proficiency Minute.** Speakers are invited to all-staff meetings to discuss DEI topics.
- **Resource Digest.** A repository for educators with resources on various topics, including equity and choosing literature, to name a few.

For families and communities

- **Cultural Heritage Day.** Opportunities for families to share their traditions and build community.
- **Community ice cream social.** Spaces for administrators, educators, families, and community members to come together.

Source: Education Northwest analysis with the principal and DEI lead from Merion Elementary School.

Systems and supports

At Merion Elementary, educators have multiple avenues for contributing to their school's equity efforts. This includes the school's cultural proficiency team, which consists of 10 staff members who meet monthly to discuss the implementation of cultural proficiency initiatives in the school. In

addition, the school's achievement team, comprised of school specialists and counselors, examines academic, behavioral, and social and emotional data to understand disparities across race/ethnicity and identify the support students need.

School leaders are focused on building trust among the staff. Building-level professional development focuses on enhancing cultural proficiency and fostering connections. These learning opportunities allow educators to “get to know each other, understand each other's differences, and break down stereotypes and generalizations.”

Administrators support diverse representation in school library books. Interviewees described showcasing books in the library based on cultural heritage months. The school continues to add books that reflect diverse identities and experiences to its libraries.

Areas of recent growth

Merion school leaders acknowledge that some educators feel more comfortable being vulnerable with their colleagues than others in spaces where equity is discussed. School administrators and DEI leads carefully consider how to get the staff to accept DEI efforts and engage in the work in an authentic way. Likewise, school leaders strive for broader educator involvement and to address the remaining “hesitancy” and “pushback” from some. Educators would like to see more conversations around race, social justice, and community involvement happening at their school.

School leaders work to increase connections across staff members, students, and families. Interviewees described a history of community mistrust of the school and wide income gaps. They noted a need to “combat those stereotypes of our school.” School leaders continue to connect more families to the school community through events like Cultural Heritage Day and ice cream socials.

Penn Valley Elementary School

Educators at Penn Valley Elementary School see equitable learning environments as places where everyone feels welcome, meaningful, and included. Students should see themselves in the classroom environment and curriculum. Educators are excited about major wins they have seen recently around staff support and involvement in professional development focused on cultural proficiency.

Bright spots

For students

- **National Society for Black Engineers.** A STEM mentorship program for African American and multiracial students in collaboration with Harriton High School. High school students provide elementary students with mentoring and tutoring in science.
- **RARE (Raising Advocacy by Realizing Excellence).** A mentorship program between high school students and students in 4th grade, explicitly focused on African American and multiracial students.

For staff

- **Book club.** An opportunity for educators to learn about and discuss DEI-related educational strategies to apply in the classroom. Each book is rooted in trauma-informed classrooms, empathy, and understanding.
- **Supports for new staff members.** New teachers of color are matched with a mentor or buddy with whom the new hire can connect throughout the year.

For families and communities

- **Dinner meetings.** Opportunities for students of color and their families to come together, share dinner, and provide mutual support.
- **Homeroom ambassadors.** Rather than a “homeroom teacher,” ambassadors are educators tasked with connecting with the families of students in the homeroom classroom.

Source: Education Northwest analysis with the principal and DEI lead from Penn Valley Elementary School.

Systems and supports

Interviewees spoke of various systems and supports in their schools that promote equity practices. For example, the cultural proficiency team includes professional staff members, support staff members, and parents. The team focuses on providing staff members with tools to promote equity in their classrooms, including how to have discussions with students, questions about essential diversity and inclusion work, and supporting those who may be less comfortable having

conversations around equity. In addition, the data team at Penn Valley examines data on student social and emotional learning and achievement rates and family feedback from the Safe Schools Family Friendly survey. To increase community involvement, Penn Valley offers the option to meet families virtually. As a result, 100 percent of families at the school have participated in parent-teacher conferences.

Areas of recent growth

Penn Valley school leaders acknowledged that some educators feel more comfortable being vulnerable with their colleagues than others in spaces where equity is discussed. School administrators and DEI leads are working to address some staff members' lingering reluctance to have difficult conversations around race, equity, and inclusion. While there is "hesitancy in not wanting to say the wrong thing," school leaders continue to encourage staff members to have courageous conversations, ask questions, and engage in the classroom.

School leaders are working to increase connections across staff members, students, and families. Educators would like to hold more events with community members and emphasize the importance of holding events that are accessible to all families. This means ensuring that families have transportation and that the event time and location accommodate families who have not connected with the school previously.

Penn Wynne Elementary School

Educators at Penn Wynne Elementary School see equitable learning environments as places where students feel like they belong. This means that the school meets their needs as a learner and provides students with what they need to grow academically and as a whole child. Educators are excited to see school staff members participating in DEI work in different ways. Staff members are starting to “put themselves out there” more and participate in conversations, reflection, and learning.

Bright spots

For students

- **Penguin Colonies.** Provide an opportunity for groups of students across grades K–4 to meet once a trimester, play games, get to know each other, and leverage the older students as leaders. Students stay with their “colony” throughout their time in elementary school.
- **RARE (Raising Advocacy by Realizing Excellence).** A mentorship program between high school students and students in 4th grade, explicitly focused on African American and multiracial students.
- **Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports.** Students receive collective rewards for following behaviors and expectations and building connections across students.

For staff

- **Book club.** An opportunity for educators to learn about and discuss DEI-related educational strategies to apply in the classroom. Each book connects to culturally relevant pedagogy.
- **Equity Action Group.** Members focus on advocacy for particular populations of students and teachers, such as emergent bilingual students or learning support students.
- **Courageous Conversations.** An opportunity for staff members to engage around equity work and discuss challenges. The volunteer group has 35 participating staff members.

For families and communities

- **Taste of Penn Wynne.** A potluck among families to share culture, hobbies, and family traditions.

Source: Education Northwest analysis with the principal and DEI lead from Penn Wynne Elementary School.

Systems and supports

Interviewees said that a supportive building administration is key to promoting equity practices. Penn Wynne DEI lead said their school administrators are open to being vulnerable, engaging in the work, and asking questions to support their understanding of all cultures. Further, school administrators support educator-led equity efforts and promote schoolwide awareness of why equity is essential.

In addition, school leaders reflect on the importance of building relationships among administrators, educators, and staff members. The collaborative environment allows for constructive criticism rather than “gotcha” moments. Administrators emphasize the importance of building trust and ensuring educators embrace the work rather than focusing on accountability. Groups such as Courageous Conversations and the Equity Action Group provide space for staff members to engage, break down barriers, and build relationships. Staff members know that they can rely on each other and have support from the administration.

School leaders prioritize hiring more diverse staff members across gender identity, race, and ethnicity. At Penn Wynne, staff members are encouraged to “be their authentic self.” School leaders are strategizing ways to bring in more educators of color, especially as grade 5 educators transitioned to the middle schools.

The Cultural Proficiency for Kids lessons that are taught across the district were developed at Penn Wynne Elementary. These lessons that focus on cultural proficiency and are taught in each grade level throughout the year. In addition, the library strives to use a cultural lens. Guest authors of diverse identities come to the library to discuss their books with students. School leaders engage families with questions about cultural proficiency lessons or activities. Openness is key. Administrators and staff members build relationships with the community by greeting them regularly, having conversations about their questions, and supporting students holistically.

Areas of recent growth

Penn Wynne leaders identified community connections as an area of recent growth. The student body at Penn Wynne is becoming more diverse, with a growing population of emergent bilingual students. Educators would like to learn more about connecting with families who are new to the district and developing culturally responsive relationships with them.

School leaders would like to see more collaboration across the community. This includes more scheduled time with leaders within the school and beyond to collaborate and bounce ideas off each other. Rather than focusing on day-to-day issues, educators would like opportunities to think in the long term. While Penn Wynne leaders noted significant staff involvement in school equity efforts, leaders continue to address remaining hesitancy—“pockets of people” who are resistant and do professional development just to “check boxes.”

Bala Cynwyd Middle School

Educators at Bala Cynwyd Middle School described equitable learning environments as places where students, teachers, and parents feel welcome, secure, safe, and that they belong. Importantly, parents and families should know how to navigate a school and who to talk to if they have a concern. Fostering a sense of belonging is central to creating an equitable learning environment at Bala Cynwyd Middle School. Specifically, students need to be “heard, listened to, and valued.” It is important that teachers authentically build trust with their students and shift from “colorblindness” to celebrating differences. Educators are excited about implementing what they learned from various professional development opportunities—including with Sage Wellness, a staff-led book club, and REACH—to make all students feel welcomed.

Bright spots

For students

- **Affinity groups.** As a relatively new school, many opportunities were developing for students, including the All Gender & Sexualities Alliance club.
- **REACH.** Middle school students mentor grade 5 students to prepare them for the transition to middle school so students have an existing connection at their new school. This program is particularly geared toward underrepresented students.
- **Student learning objectives.** With a focus on one DEI-based learning objective. The introduction of this goal was supported with shared resources and access to pre-written goals.

For staff

- **Book club.** An opportunity for educators to learn about and discuss DEI-related educational strategies to apply in the classroom.
- **Rally Lesson.** Monthly lessons for teachers to implement classroom strategies related to school culture, DEI, mindset, and social and emotional learning provided by the DEI team.

For families and communities

- **Webpage.** Families can learn about DEI practices via the school website.

Source: Education Northwest analysis with the principal and DEI lead from Bala Cynwyd Middle School.

Systems and supports

Interviewees shared a host of strategies and systems that help them work toward an equitable learning environment. The cultural proficiency team consists of close to 20 staff members who, with support from the DEI liaison, provide resources and lessons related to the school's DEI goals that educators can implement in the classroom. Interviewees noted how critical it is that educators do this work with authenticity and take opportunities to listen to students.

In addition to the cultural proficiency team, educators at Bala Cynwyd receive resources and training on restorative practices. Interviewees said that training in restorative practices will help eliminate discipline disparities. Almost one-third of the staff has participated in restorative practices training. Ultimately, the school aims to provide the training to all staff members.

One additional strategy is a DEI book club facilitated by staff members. The book club features education texts examining social and emotional learning and cultural relevancy. All educators are invited to attend the book club discussions, but attendance is not mandatory.

Areas of recent growth

Bala Cynwyd school leaders identified reestablishing relationships as a recent area of growth at the school. With the opening of a new middle school in 2022-23, Bala Cynwyd's grade structure and student demographics shifted. The staff and students are building relationships and defining their DEI objectives. According to one interviewee, "everything revolves around equity ... it is very much a commitment."

One area of future work includes increasing outreach to families, especially creating a welcoming space for students and families who do not speak English. Currently, the cultural proficiency team is working to provide students and families access to resources, including on topics of students' gender identity.

The interviewees shared that they feel fully supported by the district ("We receive 100 percent support from the district"). Still, staff members said it may be worthwhile for the district to have more input from educators: "The district should take advantage of teachers' leadership capabilities and bring them into decision-making."

Black Rock Middle School

Educators at Black Rock Middle School believe that a culturally sustaining environment fosters a strong sense of belonging. According to interviewees, it is the responsibility of the school to ensure belonging among all students and staff members. Moreover, school members should feel not only welcome but also “celebrated and valued.” Black Rock Middle School opened in September 2022 and educators are excited to create opportunities for student belonging through clubs, activities, and other areas of interest to them at the new middle school.

Bright spots

For students

- **Affinity groups.** Student groups were being developed, including those for African American/Black students, LGBTQ students, and Jewish students.
- **Student council.** Students worked together to develop inclusive activities that can bring the community together.
- **Updated curricula.** Cultural books were included that reflect the students’ experiences and identities, specifically ones they found interesting.

For staff

- **Equity goal-setting.** Teachers set equity goals to be evaluated.

Source: Education Northwest analysis with the principal and DEI lead from Black Rock Middle School.

Systems and supports

The DEI lead shared that administrator support is critical to developing a culturally sustaining environment at Black Rock Middle School. The administration protects the staff’s time for professional development and training, sets the tone for the school mission toward equity, and provides encouragement to “be brave and do what is right.”

Interviewees described the cultural proficiency team, composed of 17 staff members, as a support for all educators at Black Rock Middle School. The team shares resources and facilitates discussions on equity, data, and restorative practices. Also, the teacher education team shares resources related to equity with teachers. The interviewees feel that the DEI liaison role gives credence to the school’s stated commitment to equity.

Educators also engage in data analysis to “explore equity gaps” and identify areas of needed support for students. Teachers share reports or visuals by grade level to provide a “quick update on student progress” and to “develop resources for identified students.” One staff member triangulates data with other schools. Data is also analyzed when hiring educators. According to one interviewee, “We need students to see themselves in the teacher group.”

Equity is embedded in the fabric of Black Rock Middle School, woven into “curriculum, instruction, decorations, celebrations, and organization goal setting.” As a new building, school leaders and educators are working on developing a welcoming school environment. Classroom decorations contain inclusive messages and reflect multiple cultures. Equity is also embedded in teacher evaluations. Educators developed equity-specific goals to hold equity “in a place of accountability within goal setting.” According to one interviewee, “everyone has a role to play” when working to create a more equitable learning environment.

Building a sense of belonging among families is important to creating a culturally sustaining environment. Thus, teachers are encouraged to reach out to families to update them on the school DEI activities, share examples of projects related to equity, invite them to school events, and nurture authentic relationships.

Areas of recent growth

The interviewees acknowledged that some educators feel more comfortable being vulnerable with their colleagues than others in spaces where equity is discussed. According to one interviewee, educators are “breaking out of their shells and starting conversations” that may be uncomfortable or unfamiliar, which is a sign of receptiveness. As the newest middle school in the district, school administrators and educators are being intentional about building strong relationships among the staff.

Welsh Valley Middle School

According to staff members at Welsh Valley Middle School, an equitable learning environment starts with adults' commitment to finding ways to support all learners. According to one interviewee, educators should have an “awareness that every student is coming with a unique background or experience” and an understanding that DEI “is not only about race.” In addition to being aware of differences, teachers must build authentic relationships with their students and colleagues when creating an equitable learning environment (“we need to build up a level of trust that is coming from an authentic place”). Lastly, uplifting student voices and diverse representation are also components of an equitable learning environment at Welsh Valley Middle School. It is important that students’ “voice is heard, they’re seen, represented in curriculum, walls of buildings, and staff.”

All administrators and educators at Welsh Valley Middle School are trained in restorative practices. Educators are excited about developing a common language, expectations, and community around restorative practices.

Bright spots

For students

- **Student-led affinity group.** The All Genders and Sexualities Alliance has been in place for four years.
- **Student affinity group.** EMPOWER seeks to build scholarly identity. Activities include UPenn Student Leadership Conferences and the Haverford Diversity Conference.
- **Best Buddies.** Support for students with learning differences. A fairly large proportion of neuro-atypical students partner with other students to play games, complete art projects, and do other activities. The group aims to connect students to bolster awareness of different types of learning.

For staff

- **Book club.** Faculty-led book club for discussing topics related to DEI.
- **Community circles.** Training on culturally responsive teaching. Teachers developed measurable professional growth models related to DEI.
- **Coordinator for student interventions.** An instructional coach who provides resources around culturally responsive teaching and how educators can implement practices.
- **DEI committee resources.** A DEI leadership team created different resources for teachers via Canva and a Google Doc.

For families and communities

- **Community forum.** Announcements, visuals, and other resources focus on cultural months. The forum includes meetings among teams to address student needs; family voice and partnership are included.

Source: Education Northwest analysis with the principal and DEI lead from Welsh Valley Middle School.

Systems and supports

Welsh Valley Middle School has systems in place to support staff learning and professional growth in DEI. Staff members find the cultural proficiency team “very valuable” and a critical resource for accessing DEI materials including “example goals, books, ideas, and supportive collaboration.” The team includes 15 staff members who meet monthly to develop action plans.

Welsh Valley Middle School uses goal-setting as an important strategy for working toward an equitable learning environment. Staff members receive assistance from restorative circle opportunities to develop a growth goal that is personal to their own DEI journey. As one interviewee described, “There is a spectrum of understanding of culturally responsive teaching, and we’re sensitive to people coming at this from different places.” The building will evaluate staff growth toward achieving these goals by comparing data from the start of the year to the end on teachers’ understanding of culturally responsive teaching, interest in learning more, belief in the importance of culturally responsive teaching, and confidence in applying culturally responsive teaching.

During common planning time, professional learning communities are encouraged to engage in data reflection and implement continuous cycles of formative assessment. Educators are asked to look at achievement data from the state as well as seasonal benchmark data. Then, educators are asked to think about how they might adjust their instruction based on the data.

A building-level data team includes a reading specialist and math specialist who work to curate data to review building trends and make recommendations for student services, analyze discipline referrals, and develop attendance improvement plans for those struggling with attending regularly.

Areas of recent growth

There is a strong belief that the Welsh Valley community has made great strides in building trust back up between educators and students and their families. As stated by one interviewee, “There was fear of making a misstep or being judged. But I think it’s improved in a more positive way.” Staff members build trust with families by articulating to caregivers what they are doing in the school and “how we are holding ourselves accountable.”

Harriton High School

According to Harriton High School interviewees, equity in schools means all students have the resources to learn at high levels, especially students from historically underserved communities. A culturally sustaining learning environment can be fostered by embedding equity in the culture, practices, and habits. Importantly, there is no universal approach to equity; instead, any approach will be composed of “multiple tenets.” Educators are excited about continuing conversations around DEI in their professional learning communities and to begin implementing what they learned about equitable practices from these communities.

Bright spots

For students

- **Mentorship opportunities.** Students engaged in STEM student groups can mentor elementary students.
 - **POWER Program (Partnering for Opportunity, Wisdom, Esteem and Responsibility).** Students gain awareness of the support services available to prepare them for college, a career, and civic participation beyond high school. The program is geared toward African American students.
 - **Specialized courses.** Specialized courses include African American History and Black Excellence.
-

For staff

- **Professional learning communities.** Spaces where educators can discuss DEI efforts.
-

For families and communities

- **Parent involvement and input.** The school seeks parent involvement and input by hosting parent meetings in multiple spaces, including in school, churches, and online platforms.

Source: Education Northwest analysis with the principal and DEI lead from Harriton High School.

Systems and supports

Staff members at Harriton High School shared multiple sources of support available to them as they work toward a more equitable learning environment. The cultural proficiency committee, chaired by the DEI liaison, has provided numerous resources related to DEI. The committee meets once a month to discuss resources and how staff members are incorporating material in their instruction. According to one interviewee, the teacher group at Harriton High School provides a “natural support space” for the staff.

The DEI lead identified school administration as a support that the staff can count on. Their support comes in multiple forms, including sharing materials and resources, offering encouragement and assurance, and protecting time for learning and training. The administrators share common language for equity in schools and have operationalized the common strategies in a digestible one-pager overview that students, staff members, and families can access. While school administration supports teachers in doing DEI work, administrators don't want staff members to feel "absolved of their responsibility of being professional and saying the right things." Ultimately, teachers "should do the work," gain a knowledge base, and be great in front of kids.

Educators also discussed the value of networks in learning about equity in education. Teachers shared books, resources, podcasts, and other resources with one another. "It was a grassroots team," said one interviewee. Administrators also discussed the value of sharing resources with other administrators: "There are people in our district that are interested in DEI work. We're pushing each other, sharing resources with each other. We geek out on different things that we see on TikTok and share it with each other, which is always funny."

One staff member said that representation is key to nurturing an equitable learning environment. Visibility of multiple cultures and lived experiences is important to expanding the school's understanding of intersectionality. Relatedly, staff members are encouraged to incorporate current events into classroom discussion to increase awareness of different cultures and societies. Community engagement and family involvement are also important for developing a culturally sustaining learning environment. According to one interviewee, "Schools are an extension of the community," thus there should be intentional outreach to community members.

Areas of recent growth

One recent area of growth at Harriton High School was a noticeable increase in interest among staff members to learn about their students' backgrounds and integrate equity into their classroom instruction. Interviewees noted that teachers who do connect with their students "realize how important it is to try to identify and relate." One way to increase teacher's self-efficacy is to "build capacity" via discussions with colleagues and training on DEI.

One unique area of growth came out of the recent COVID-19 pandemic and teachers' efforts to create a more equitable grading rubric. Educators who taught physics developed a standards-based approach to grading students by ensuring that they have the same standards across grades. Staff members are considering how to implement these changes to grading across multiple subjects.

Lower Merion High School

Staff members at Lower Merion High School described an equitable learning environment as one where students feel welcomed, have a sense of belonging, and feel empowered and where teachers build rapport with students by being authentic. When educators are their authentic selves, they build relationships and connections with students that can be leveraged to celebrate differences with others. Student voice is also critical to creating an equitable learning environment. It is important that schools provide spaces for students with diverse perspectives to feel empowered. Educators are excited about continuing to train teachers in restorative practices and developing a common language and expectations across the building.

Bright spots

For students

- **Principal Advisory Council.** Gives students an opportunity to offer their insights while giving the principal an opportunity to ask questions about initiatives. The council usually includes 10–12 students but this year included 67. The council brought students into community circles where they discussed issues.
- **Student affinity group.** The Becton Scholars program is an affinity group for African American student and a class students participate in during the school day with a focus on building scholarly identity.
- **Field trips.** Students working on equity are provided the opportunities to explore equity work outside of school (for instance, students were able to attend a youth leadership conference). This signals to students that the school is invested in this work.
- **Embrace Day.** A full day for students in the school to engage with their own wellness (e.g., basketball, yoga) and cultural opportunities (e.g., salsa class).

For staff

- **Weekly updates.** The faculty and staff receive regular updates, including sections on looking ahead, seeds of wisdom, and DEI. Recent updates focused on resources and supports for teachers to support students developing their English language skills.
- **Newsletters.** Three a year that include DEI activities. Each department chair is actively involved with this effort.

For families and communities

- **Home & School Association meetings.** The school is actively working to expand parental involvement. One idea the team is exploring is parent camps for teachers to get more engagement.

Source: Education Northwest analysis with the principal and DEI lead from Lower Merion High School.

Systems and supports

The cultural proficiency team at Lower Merion High School supports staff members and students. The team includes representatives from each department who meet once a month to curate resources to share. These resources filter down to department meetings, then down to educator professional learning communities. As noted by one interviewee, the DEI coordinator and team have “lots of willingness and desire to support and help.”

Staff members also participated in community circles for restorative practices, which will help “build a safe space for students to explore experiences and values.”

One staff member said that their engagement in the Achievement Imperative Task Force, the action arm of the Committee to Address Race in Education (CARE) committee, provided them with opportunities to “identify key activities, pilot them, then if it was a good fit, ‘graduate’ the action to a district office.”

Areas of recent growth

Lower Merion High School is moving toward greater teacher support for restorative practices and DEI. Increasing the number of educators trained in restorative practices may provide more “community building and common language across the building.” Staff members are excited for this to happen. Like many educators, staff members at Lower Merion fear engaging in DEI work because of the possibility of making a “misstep” and having other educators “jump down their throats.” Creating a space for educators to move at a comfortable pace may be key for educators who are reluctant to engage in this area.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were provided by principals and DEI leads from LMSD schools.

District alignment of DEI approach

As the district invests in the director of diversity and equity position and the DEI leads at each school, participants said they hope to see more coordination in the district's approach to DEI.

Interviewees see this as an opportunity to support more staff participation in equity efforts at their school and create a districtwide vision for equity practices. For example, interviewees said it would be helpful if the district developed a vision for DEI efforts across schools.

Suggestions included:

- DEI professional development “year at a glance” that can inform school-based learning and differentiated professional learning
- Districtwide DEI equity lens or framework aligned to the Equity 101 Policy to serve as both a guide for practice and accountability at the school level
- Use of equity goals in all teacher evaluations across all grade levels
- Social justice lesson plans

A few participants said that while alignment is important, authenticity is also key. For example, one educator was hesitant to ask every educator in the school to put a reference to DEI in their email signature because engagement in DEI work needs to be authentic for every person and meet them where they are. Allowing educators to engage in differentiated ways with DEI can support the work.

Support for family and community relationships

Overall, schools were working toward better family and community relationships, particularly focused on rebuilding trust with historically marginalized communities. Schools could use more support, resources, and strategies to connect in meaningful ways with all families (e.g., how to encourage families to participate in events like family nights.) In particular, schools recognize that their student populations are becoming more diverse, with a growing population of emergent bilingual students. Schools would like to learn more about developing culturally responsive relationships with families

who are new to the district. One DEI lead wished that each school would have a community liaison with at least part of an FTE dedicated to this work.

Leaders often said that the CARE committee played an important role in connecting them to the community, but it was not enough. A few school leaders would like to see more districtwide outreach to families that can support their efforts to be more action oriented. For example, one leader suggested families could have a tool to provide feedback and suggestions to the district and their school.

DEI professional development supports

Educators said they would like more opportunities from the district around DEI professional development beyond the two-hour Professional Responsibility Profiles (PRPs). While some schools use their five-hour collaboration time to do book reviews related generally to equity (e.g., *Teaching with the HEART in Mind*), interviewees suggested continuing to support administrators and staff in having hard conversations around race, equity, and inclusion.

Suggestions included:

- Continuing to support learning around restorative practices.
- Aligning professional development at the district level to steps that can be taken at the school level.²
- Differentiated learning opportunities for educators.
- Dedicating time to learning and professional development. As one educator said, “We need to rethink how we can restructure the day to accommodate learning and professional development. Relying on in-service days can make PD feel disjointed and disrupts the flow.”

² One interviewee suggested that the structure of professional development be similar to the strategies put forward in the Foundations professional development that some elementary staff have received (<https://www.wilsonlanguage.com/programs/foundations/>).

Curriculum review and supports

Educators noted recent improvements in the diversity of cultures represented in writing material developed by the curriculum office. According to one interviewee, “ongoing efforts in collaboration with amplifying student voice and giving students an opportunity to provide feedback” have created a more equitable curriculum. Some educators had suggestions for further supporting this work:

- Additional support from the district in choosing curriculum, potentially expanding on the district curriculum office effort to recruit/nominate teachers to provide input on curriculum
- Hire a coordinator for student interventions: an instructional coach to provide resources around culturally responsive teaching and how educators can implement practices
- Time and space for curriculum review

Educator leadership

A few participants suggested more opportunities for leadership at the school and educator level to share best practices and drive change. A few participants said the district needs to take advantage of teachers’ leadership capabilities and bring them into decision-making. This would help build trust between schools and the district. Sharing between schools can also support this diffused leadership. As one participant said, “I’d like to see and hear what other schools are doing, their successes and failures.” The recent hiring of a DEI director and nomination of DEI leads at each school may support building trust and mutual support across school buildings.

Workforce diversity

Educators would like a more diverse workforce within their schools. According to interviewees, school administration is key to prioritizing hiring more diverse staff members and strategizing ways to recruit and retain more educators of color. A few interviewees recommended that school leaders tap into their professional networks to recruit more staff members. Others reflected on the success of DEI screening questions in hiring staff members who have an aptitude for equity work. Some schools have taken an active effort to retain staff members of color. For example, educators of color are matched with a mentor the new hire can connect with throughout the year. Building-level affinity groups for staff of color provide an opportunity to connect and provide mutual support.

Sharing equity work

School leaders strive for broad staff involvement in DEI efforts. Some schools in the district facilitate staff involvement and leadership in equity efforts by providing opportunities for educators to engage, break down barriers, and build relationships beyond cultural proficiency teams. For example, one school described a Courageous Conversations group, which offers space for staff members to engage around equity work and discuss challenges they experience in the classroom. Others offer an equity action group, where members focus on advocacy for particular populations of students and teachers, such as emergent bilingual students or students who need learning supports. Educators reflected on the importance of including everyone in conversations around DEI—from administrators to educators to support staff members.

For questions about this research brief, please reach out to the Education Northwest study author.

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