

## OCS Equity Task Force Gaining Momentum

- Todd Wirt

*“Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced.”*

— **James Baldwin**

Over the last year, the Equity Task Force has been facilitated by a highly recommended organization. The facilitators brought an unbiased approach to their work with our group. One of the first steps that the Equity Task Force took together was to be trained in a Leading for Racial Equity workshop. While our group has not exclusively focused on race, we have intentionally focused on race largely due to the fact that many of our district outcomes, including student achievement and discipline, have continued to be predictable by race. We have gaps in academic performance between our students of color and their white peers. In addition disproportionate number students of color are being suspended. While we have made small incremental improvements in these areas, it is our desire to eliminate these inequities. Through our training we spent time learning from each other regarding the history of racial inequity in our country and in our local community. We worked together to learn a common framework through which we would use in order to guide our work moving forward.

After our training we spent months together analyzing current efforts in Orange County Schools as well as hearing stories and examples of racial inequity in our school system and our community. This work was difficult to specifically report out to the public in detail because members of the task force were sharing very personal experiences as students, parents, and staff members in our school system and community. While this work required an investment in time and personal energy, it was necessary to build relational trust amongst the group and to identify the direction we must move as a group. The group over time realized that there are no “quick fixes” to this work. Rather our success requires a long-term commitment to adaptive change.

During the spring of 2018, the group made several decisions that have accelerated the pace of our work. There is a strong desire amongst the group to now begin creating products of our work and recommendations for the Board of Education to consider. The group agreed that two members of the Equity Task Force should serve as co-chairs to drive the work moving forward without the assistance of an outside facilitator. We are grateful to have Kay Singer, former OCS Board of Education member, and Sherita Cobb, our current Director of Student Support Services serving as our co-chairs.

We have set a meeting schedule over the coming months in order to accomplish two immediate goals:

1. Create a draft Equity Policy to be considered by the OCS Board of Education
2. Advise the rewrite of the OCS Student Code of Conduct to include restorative practices

There are school systems across the country that make strong statements regarding their values and desires for equity in policy. The group is currently analyzing a number of policies, and working together to draft a policy that would capture the values of the community and align to the OCS Strategic Plan. As a system, we have also contracted with Engaging Schools, a company that has assisted school systems across the country to redesign codes of conduct and training staff in order to address inequities in discipline practices. The Equity Task Force will serve as an advisory group to the code of conduct work.

I believe it is imperative that our community understand that Orange County Schools has not been in a “holding pattern” with regards to equity work over the past year. We have taken a number of steps to change inequitable outcomes in our student achievement and opportunities.

- The Academically or Intellectually Gifted (AIG) Plan was totally rewritten in order to include additional pathways for identification for AIG services. We are also completing year one of a full implementation of a talent nurturing program at kindergarten and first grade with the goal of identifying students of color who historically have been underrepresented in our AIG program.
- We have increased access to upper level math courses in our middle schools. Simultaneously, we have revamped our recruiting and identification efforts for Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) courses at the high school level.
- We have begun implementation of MTSS (Multitier System of Support), which is an approach to consistent school improvement. This system provides structure for an organization and a school to continually seek to review data, hypothesizes causes for defined areas of concern, determine possible solutions and evaluate effectiveness. Ninety-five elementary staff members, and sixty-three secondary staff members have been trained in the 17-18 school year. The first year of the MTSS training has focused on effective school practices for all students in the core instructional classroom. All employees trained in MTSS have also had an initial Leading for Racial Equity training.
- We have used targeted strategies in order to recruit a workforce that is an equitable representation of our community. These efforts include:
  - University partnerships with Historically Black Colleges and Universities
  - Teacher Assistant Academy in order to grow our own educators from within our community
  - Future Teachers program where we are awarding high school seniors that commit to teaching with an early contract for employment in Orange County Schools.

Together as a community, we can be a leader in providing equitable outcomes for all students and staff in Orange County Schools.