

# The playing field isn't uneven, it's broken — here's how to fix it

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When the bell rings at the end of the day at Hillsdale High School in San Mateo, students walk outside to vastly different worlds depending on their family's income. Many students walk home to houses worth \$2 million or more.

Other students may have to wait until 9 p.m. when they can enter someone else's apartment where their family rents floor space for the night. They unfold a blanket and sleep until 7 a.m., when they have to be out. Or they may live in a small apartment with another family working together to pay rent in one of the least affordable places to live in the country. The wealth gap in San Mateo is creating an ever-widening opportunity gap for students in our community.

The solution is to level the playing field for these kids by achieving equity in opportunities and support. Equity is not just a concept, it's an action. Equity means recognizing that our students don't all start from the same place, and providing the support they need to have the same opportunities.

At Hillsdale High School, an innovative, home-grown program called Empowerment Through Action, in conjunction with Hillsdale Smaller Learning Communities, is working to achieve equity. ETA accepts students who were identified in eighth grade as being at risk of not graduating high school but possess the potential and leadership skills to thrive in our community. The ETA program surrounds them with supportive services and opportunities to belong and excel.

The results are clear: 97% of ETA students graduate high school, compared to 82% for similar students across the district. Suspension rates have fallen by 50%, and more than 70% of ETA students reported feeling more confident and learning positive ways to respond to stress.

ETA students meet weekly in small groups to discuss personal, social and emotional challenges with mentors trained in helping people process trauma. Mentors include Hillsdale High School teachers and staff, and community volunteers. ETA also provides after-school tutors in key subjects at a dedicated study lounge on campus. In addition, ETA provides opportunities for students to participate in sports and activities that they normally cannot access due to the cost. ETA is pursuing partnerships with the city of San Mateo, the electricians' union (IBEW 617), the Hillsdale Shopping Center and other local employers to facilitate summer employment and apprenticeships.

## **The playing field isn't uneven, it's broken — here's how to fix it** continued

ETA's funding comes from a combination of public and private grants. The program has been so successful that last year, the Hillsdale Foundation incorporated it as an independent 501(c)3 so it could expand and scale.

ETA students from the 2024 graduating class recently shared their perspectives on what the program has done for them. "Whenever I'm having a bad day, I know I can count on my group leader to help me through it," says an ETA sophomore with a special talent for art. A graduating senior this year, says, "ETA gave me a place where I could get my homework done in peace because usually at home there is a lot of noise and distraction."

When the bell rings at the end of the school day, our collective responsibility for students living on the margins in San Mateo does not end. Providing equity in opportunities and support for students is the responsibility of the parent, teacher and coach; it is also the shared responsibility of neighbors, churches, local businesses, labor unions and city leaders.

In 2025, Empowerment Through Action and the San Mateo County Economic Development Association dare to dream of a day when we are able to close the opportunity gap for all students in San Mateo County.

To learn about ETA and how we are transforming this vision into reality, please visit [etahhs.org](http://etahhs.org). We invite you to join us.

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