

Cambridge Public Schools

Building Equity Bridges Project: Qualitative Focus Groups Report

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Consultant and Technical Advisor

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Author Note

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Quotations and Representation

When possible, direct and/or paraphrased quotations are used in this report from focus group participants. However, when statements are made in a focus group that might reveal information about individuals within the district, quotations are represented in this report as aggregate comments and/or create composite profiles to reduce identification of individual respondents.

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Executive Summary

This racial equity report of the Cambridge Public Schools is based on extensive data through qualitative interviewing gathered from August 2018-January 2019. Data gathered included interviews with Cambridge Public Schools administrators, leaders, faculty and staff, parents and caregivers, community professionals, and high school students. From January 2019-May 2019, many debrief sessions, sense making opportunities, and discussions about the report contributed to a more robust review of the data. A review of the literature on equity in education was also conducted.

This equity report is one of a number of inquiries being conducted by the Cambridge Public School District (CPSD) funded through the Nellie Mae Foundation's Building Equity Bridges Grant. In addition to these qualitative focus groups, professionals within CPSD held sense-making team meetings; engaged in critical participatory action research and youth participatory action research; oversaw surveys for families and students; developed a community map of equity work across the district; and partnered with organizers who represented diverse stakeholders in the district.

As expressed through focus groups and individual interviews, this report reviews root causes of inequity that are experienced within CPSD and articulated by various stakeholders; presents recommendations and suggestions; and provides a pathway forward to reducing disparities and increasing equity in the CPSD system.

Summary of findings

Meetings with various stakeholder groups revealed that individuals are deeply committed to education and educational equity in Cambridge. Many participants chose to live in Cambridge because of its diversity (e.g., racial, ethnic, economic) and because of its progressive and liberal climate. A number of participants had lived in Cambridge for many years, including participants who are current parents and who were alumni of the Cambridge Public Schools. A number of themes were common in these stakeholder groups: school culture, race and racism, experiences of teachers and staff related to racial diversity, culturally relevant curriculum, time and structures to engage in equity work, community and sense of belonging, voice and feedback, impact of relationships on student engagement, and discipline.

School culture. The culture of the school was a consistent driver in how individuals experienced equity. Some participants noted that “some schools do equity work better than others” and that “it really depends on the leadership of the building” if equity work is prioritized. As the focus groups and interviews sought to explore the root causes of inequity, embedded in comments about school culture were aspects related to sense of belonging; whether schools expressed a visible commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion; and whether building leaders, teachers, and professional staff had the training that was necessary to support a school culture that openly welcomed diversity.

Race and racism. In identifying “root causes of inequity,” focus group participants quickly named “race and racism” as a root cause. Parents and caregivers of children of color had a number of examples that their children – including in the early elementary grades – experienced related to racism at school, ranging from being called racially insensitive or offensive words by their classmates, being teased for religious or cultural clothing, or feeling like they are being disciplined harsher because they are students of color. Students in the high school pointed to

disparities in which students are in the College Preparatory (CP) classes and which are in Advanced Placement (AP) classes – CP classes are filled with students of color while AP classes only have a few students of color. In addition, students experienced disparities related to college guidance and counseling – their perceptions were that white students were often encouraged to apply to competitively ranked schools while many students of color were directed towards community colleges.

Experiences of teachers and staff related to racial diversity. One of the equity objectives articulated by CPSD is to “provide equity and access to increase opportunity and achievement” (Cambridge Public Schools, n.d.). Through the Dynamic Diversity Program, the district is paying attention to the recruitment and retention of teachers and staff of color. While the online presentation demonstrates an increase in percentages of applicants and hires of teachers of color, the lived experiences of seeing racially diverse teachers in the school still feels underrepresented. As cited in the WBUR *Edify* interview (Cambridge Public Schools, May 2018), Lora Marseille, a CRLS senior at the time of the *Edify* interview, stated she could only name two teachers of color though the report noted there were 40 teachers of color in the building. This highlights that, although the district is making progress in increasing the number of people of color, it is still possible to feel as if there are only a few.

According to teachers and staff, issues of support around diversity were a common theme. Notably, teachers and staff of color were looking for more support and connections with other teachers and staff of color. Many experience isolation in their buildings, and they articulated it would be helpful to have both a building and district-wide support structure for teachers and staff of color. As noted on the CPSD website, Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) were launched in May 2018. This opportunity can provide meaningful connections for teachers

and staff of color; however at the time of the qualitative interviews, these groups had not been in place long enough for teachers and staff of color to feel the impact. Teaching staff (both teachers of color and teachers who are white) also expressed that they are committed to and interested in learning how to create more culturally relevant classrooms; however, the structure of the day, which, as many stated, “we just seem to not have enough time to cover everything,” and the year do not always allow for them to go to meaningful professional development opportunities. Teachers and staff also noted that the increasing expectation that they are delivering culturally relevant content feels like an “add on” responsibility as opposed to one that is ingrained in the fabric of their roles as educators or embedded in the curricular content in Cambridge.

Culturally relevant curriculum. The issue of culturally responsive and reflective curriculum was a common theme across stakeholder groups. Parents and caregivers of children of color, particularly Black children, noted that there was very little in the curriculum that affirmed the identities of their families as Black. Parents noted, “When will we change the narrative that our story as Black people began when we were enslaved? When, in their Cambridge educational experience, are they going to learn about the richness of our history, our leadership, and our contributions to society?” Many participants noted that these decisions often align with school culture (i.e., if the school demonstrates a commitment to this work, then most teachers follow those expectations) and school leadership. Participants also noted that the decisions to provide culturally-responsive and relevant curriculum often falls on the individual teacher as opposed to a school wide expectation. Therefore, a child or family can “get lucky” by being in a particular teacher’s class who has committed to educating about cultural diversity or miss out if they get a teacher who does not commit to the work. Many participants noted that the Cambridge Public Schools as a system still buys into a very Eurocentric approach to content and

teaching; many core classes are still focused on the contributions of white authors, history, and text and treat racially diverse authors, history and text as an add-on to the curriculum.

Time and structures to engage in equity work. Time and structure were also common themes in the focus groups. For educators, they were unsure how they could commit a responsible amount of time to shape more equitable classrooms and school culture when they have existing pressures to meet the demands of other academic areas. The common feeling expressed was “If we focus on professional development around issues of equity, then what do we have to give up or re-prioritize?” Many professionals felt limited by the amount of time in the day, weeks in the year, and the existing demands on their teaching practices that equity work felt like an “add on” responsibility as opposed to an integral part of their work. That said, nearly all of the educators who participated in focus groups or individual interviews identified equity work as being important and a necessary driver in moving the district forward to best serve all students and families. Additional comments around use of time surfaced questions about whether time was used in the best way possible. For example, one suggestion made by an administrator was that summer scheduling of meetings could be more productive, especially given that the summer was a time to be able to do deeper work without the demands of the academic day. However, this time was not often used wisely and productively.

Teachers and staff noted that professional development focused on equity is not institutionalized at the district level. Some teachers and staff choose to engage; however it is possible to be a professional in the district and not engage in diversity-focused PD. Further, metrics related to diversity and equity are not part of the evaluation process and therefore there is not a district mandate for teachers and staff to have a level of proficiency or competency in areas of diversity, inclusion and equity.

Communication and advocacy. One issue that was unique to the parent and caregiver group was related to communication. In this area, parents and caregivers had very different experiences based on their school affiliation. Some parents and caregivers expressed that they felt there was little to no communication about issues of diversity, equity, or inclusion, particularly related to incidents at the school while others expressed that their school leaders were very effective in communicating when incidents happen. Though there were differences between school cultures related to communication, there were also different experiences within schools. Some comments included, “Oh, I get way too many emails from our school” while other parents/caregivers at the same school articulated, “Really? I don’t get any.”

Another area of communication in which parents and caregivers expressed frustration is in delivery of information for students with disabilities or those who are interested in pursuing educational testing. Some parents and caregivers stated that their leaders in their schools were very helpful while others felt they had to “fend for themselves” with little or no support. Many parents and caregivers of color identified that they felt the pressure to really advocate for their children at school because they did not think the schools had the success of their children as a priority. Some parents/caregivers shared the lengths they needed to go in order to advocate for their children, with some sharing they had to take time off from work to go to the school and proactively advocate for their children.

Community and sense of belonging. The theme of community was broadly expressed related to sense of belonging, developing networks of support, and open communication. For teachers and professionals of color, there is an increasing desire to find other teachers and professionals of color in the district to reduce feelings of isolation. Often, professionals of color feel as if they are the “only ones” in the building and therefore lack opportunities to share

identity-based affinity experiences. These feelings of isolation among professionals of color contribute to not feeling connected to a building or school and limit opportunities for broader perspectives and views about how others might be experiencing race or racialized relationships.

Families, particularly families of children of color, noted that the distance between their homes and their schools can be quite far, thereby creating a physical barrier to developing relationships and building community. Many expressed that, while they understood the purpose for why the district moved away from neighborhood schools, doing so also posed a challenge to building community, to relying on networks of support (e.g., picking up from school, after-school activities), and to engaging in opportunities for building relationships with others. Additionally, some parents and caregivers also felt disconnected to their schools because there were not many opportunities to engage in meeting other families and/or those opportunities were not easy to access (e.g., the school is on the other side of the city, activities took place at inconvenient times).

Voice and feedback. Students, in particular, were invested in these pathways for feedback as it relates to their teachers and new hires. Students in the focus groups articulated a growing frustration with their desire to learn but were faced with experiences with teachers who “did not challenge them” or who “did not seem to even like teaching anymore.” Students believed that their voices were an important component in selecting teachers (or providing feedback about teachers). They also stated that being a part of the process for hiring teachers could give candidates a better understanding of what it meant to be a student in the district, and the ways in which they hope their teachers engage them. When asked how they currently give feedback, students mentioned that they are not even aware of any processes that would allow them to give feedback about their experiences with teachers or school leaders.

For parents and caregivers, they affirmed that it was difficult to give feedback about teachers and building leaders. There does not appear to be a structured process – outside of the open invitation to connect with teachers or building leaders – that would facilitate this feedback process. Some parents and caregivers also rooted their hesitation to give feedback in cultural values, believing that it is not their role to “complain or make waves” even when something is not going right with their child. Others in the focus groups believed that it was their right to give feedback and that doing so was the “only way things would be different for my child.” The willingness to give feedback was also rooted in aspects of privilege – participants in the focus groups expressed that white/wealthy parents and caregivers had more agency in the district and their voices were heard more whereas people of color/low income parents and caregivers did not have the same access to privilege.

Both stakeholder groups – parents/caregivers and students – agreed that giving feedback at the end of the school year via a survey was not productive nor helpful. Rather, they would like to see more regular and consistent pathways for feedback, particularly feedback about their experiences at schools, through surveys, listening sessions, or meetings with building leaders.

Impact of relationships on student engagement. Parent, caregivers, and students offered comment on the ways in which engagement or lack of engagement occurred in the classroom settings. One root cause of engagement is related to relationships and attention to relationships. While stakeholders commented that course content is one important way of engaging learners (e.g., content in which learners can see their identities represented in positive ways), engagement in classes and in school programs was a product of relationships, perceptions of student ability, and positive interactions in the classroom.

One of the key areas in which student engagement and relationship was emphasized was in the city's Out of School Time programs. In a focus group of practitioners and leaders involved in after-school and out of school time programs, many affirmed that their success with students was largely because of their ability to develop meaningful relationships with students. One practitioner noted, "As OST programs, we have time and liberty and space that some in-school teachers don't have time to do in terms of building relationships."

Conversations related to student engagement at the high school were also focused on relationships and engagement. Students affirmed that, "we really appreciate teachers who don't tell you the answer, but instead they help you problem solve and give you the tools to make it happen." Students in the focus group resisted any beliefs that they just want to get by in high school. Many who participated in the group were seeking challenge and support in their classroom settings and wanted opportunities to develop their critical thinking and problem solving in ways that were appropriate. One sentiment that was affirmed in the group was that, "They have high expectations of us at CRLS, but I don't think they are doing things to help me achieve them."

Students were also quick to identify that there were some populations of students who were encouraged to push themselves academically and for whom the school was proactive in college guidance or counseling. And, there were other populations of students who had to seek out help, find support, and be advocates for themselves. While these tended to be along academic leveling (e.g., AP, Honors, CP), these levels also represent distinct racialized groupings with more white students in AP and Honors courses and more students of color in College Prep courses.

One area that students recommended needed to be strengthened in CRLS (although this theme did come up a few times with other parent/caregiver groups) was the preparation of the adults (i.e., faculty, staff, school leaders, parents/caregivers) in the community to talk about difficult issues.

Related to student learning, both teachers/professionals as well as students at CRLS noted that there is a school culture they have noticed related to “hanging out in the hallways.” They noted that, “It’s easy to see that it’s Black and Brown students in the hallways during classes. And, when you ask them why they are there, they say that ‘class was boring’ or ‘they aren’t engaged’ or the ‘teacher won’t even notice I’m gone anyway’.”

Discipline. Students in the CRLS focus group identified discipline as a significant issue in their lives. Many expressed frustration with two major ways in which discipline was enacted: 1) that discipline approaches did not always work, and 2) that discipline was often used instead of mental health support.

Students expressed frustration with the common situation when “half the class really wants to learn and the other half of the class is not engaged at all.” They mentioned that the teachers seem to be out of strategies when trying to deal with this dynamic in class, resorting to “well, they just try to teach whoever is there to show up to learn.” Students also identified the practice of sending disruptive students outside of the classroom, but that oftentimes students are disruptive because they do not understand the material or feel behind in a class; therefore, the act of sending a student out only compounds this issue. The students did not offer a suggestion for how to best handle this, other than that it is a problem in the classroom.

Students in CRLS noted that sometimes discipline issues are just a symptom of a bigger mental health issue that their peer might be facing. They noted there is a significant need for

mental health support in the schools and that the addition of greater mental health support might curb some of the behaviors that are interpreted as disciplinary.

Themes related to recommendations

The recommendations provided in the full report were provided, in large part, by the participants in the focus group. While the majority of the focus group time and individual interviews was spent surfacing and discussing the root causes of inequity, participants were asked to provide recommendations to address both the root causes of inequity and the daily experiences related to inequity. Themes related to feedback included the following:

- Provide training to adults in the CPSD community to recognize and address issues of inequity, particularly racial inequities. Training must occur in ways that are minimally disruptive to the classroom setting; that support the work of teachers and staff; and that are related to a return on investment via changes in teaching approaches or strengthened relationships or improved curriculum.
- Provide curricular opportunities that address issues of race, racial diversity, and asset-based approaches within the classroom and within the school district. A concern raised by the participants was the overwhelming deficit approach to learning about Black and African Americans in the curriculum.
- Address the racial disparities that students experience, particularly in the high school but also across the district, related to access to curriculum that challenges learners. At the high school, students experience a biased and racially-segregated system, visible when observing the racial makeup of classes at the College Preparatory (CP) level and the Advanced Placement/Honors level.

- Develop pathways for timely feedback and information sharing, particularly related to 1) teacher and staff hiring and selection where students could be invited to participate in interviews of potential candidates; 2) teacher and staff evaluation that seeks input from students, parents/caregivers, and families
- Provide greater support for emotional and mental health at all levels. Students at the high school reported not having access to enough counselors or adults who can support their emotional health. Students at the high school identified that greater support for mental and emotional health might contribute to a reduction in discipline approaches in the classroom. Parents and caregivers of elementary and middle school students stressed that students need adults in the building to connect with and talk to when they are struggling.
- Teachers and staff of color experience isolation in CPSD. The district should better understand this experience and provide structural support for teachers and staff of color who provide culturally relevant teaching in our schools, who provide cultural connections to families and children of color, and who tend to teach from a more culturally responsive approach. It should be a priority for the district to recruit, retain, and develop professionals of color in CPSD.

“We are Cambridge.”

A common theme that surfaced in interviews is the belief that one of the things that holds Cambridge back in addressing equity is that “we talk a good game about equity and justice and other things, but that it doesn’t always work out that way.” Participants also noted that previous efforts to address equity and inequity lacked voices of families who are most impacted by inequity and that “white and middle/upper class families tend to be most organized and heard in this space.” In addition, participants noted that engaging in equity work also requires a great deal

of vulnerability – a willingness and ability to be criticized, to be wrong, and to be part of a larger solution.

Conclusion

Taken together, these issues of school culture, race and racism, experiences of teachers and staff related to racial diversity, culturally relevant curriculum, training and development, communication and advocacy, community and sense of belonging, voice and feedback, impact of relationships on student engagement, and discipline were major themes in the focus groups. While some of the issues were more prevalent with different stakeholders, the groups largely expressed similarities in these topics. As they answered the prompt, “What are some of the root causes of inequity in the Cambridge Public School system?”, the participants provided us with examples of their lived experiences within the Cambridge Public School system. Their narratives extend our understandings of the data and help to provide context for how inequities are experienced at the individual level.

Cambridge Public Schools**Building Equity Bridges Project: Qualitative Focus Groups Report****Liza A. Talusan, Ph.D.****Consultant and Technical Advisor****Introduction****Equity in Education**

An analysis of the United States public education reveals a system wrought with structural inequity (Dover, 2009). As Dover (2009) stated, “societal inequities are magnified by hegemonic and Eurocentric classroom practices that reproduce and reinforce the cultural and educational traditions of white, middle-class communities at the expense of nondominant cultures’ educational traditions” (p. 507). The effect of these inequities on student outcomes is so profound that school systems, scholars, and practitioners have adopted practices that explore systemic inequities (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 2006; Lee, 2005; Love, 2004). Beyond individual responsibilities and opportunities such as professional development, teacher training, anti-racism workshops, anti-bias training, transformational change must also happen at the systems level in order to address historic inequities.

Race in the classroom

Particularly related to representation, existing literature shows the importance of providing culturally relevant content and the benefits to not only students of color but also to students who are white. Bishop (1990) leans on the importance of representation in our classrooms: “When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the

images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society in which they are a part. Our classrooms need to be places where all children from all cultures that make up the salad bowl of American society can find their mirrors” (p. 2).

Diversity of teachers

The disconnect is clear; in 2016, people of color comprised 51% of students in the United States K-12 public school system but only 18% of faculty (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, 2016). Hiring, supporting, and retaining faculty of color (FOC) to teach in the K-12 system is not only essential to move more students of color (SOC) into and through higher education, but diversifying the faculty also “disrupts educational inequities” (Goings, Brandehoff, & Bianco, 2018, p. 50). In public schools taught by predominantly white faculty, SOC experience low academic expectations (Gleen and Glock, 2018), high rates of suspension (Cagle, 2017), and disproportionate placement in special education (Hibel, Farkas, & Morgan, 2010). Because of FOC’s deep commitment to students and recognition that they provide students from underrepresented populations with positive images reflective of their own identities (Levin, Harberier, Walker, & Jackson-Boothby, 2014), hope for attracting and retaining a diverse faculty exists. Further, Carver-Thomas (2018) noted that in order to develop holistic, evidence-based strategies for recruiting and retaining more teachers of color, decision makers should examine why it is that the teacher workforce is not currently as diverse as it could be (Carver-Thomas, 2018). In particular, many believe the prestige of Cambridge, its proximity to some of the nation’s top universities and education programs, and its progressive identity would be more welcoming to faculty of color; however, the district needs to

better understand why faculty of color are not choosing Cambridge or, rather, leaving after only a few years.

Leadership in education

Leadership for equity refers to “bold, courageous actions and behaviors on the part of school leaders to ensure that inequities are addressed openly and directly” (López, Magdaleno, & Reis, 2006, p. 15). At the leadership level, professionals should be concerned with the elimination of inequities that “include, or result in, the achievement gap, disparities in disciplinary practices, inappropriate referrals and placements in special education, and school practices that hinder the success of groups of students” (López, Magdaleno, & Reis, 2006, p. 16). The role of the educational leader is to manage many interests and ideas in the service of many stakeholders (e.g., children, students, parents and caregivers, teachers and staff, community). Educational leaders are often faced with decisions that impact relationships, that both push and pull on real or perceived power, and that may have the effect of privileging one group at the expense of another. Blount (2013) stated, “As long as there have been schools, educational leaders have taken risks and made sacrifices to give their students opportunities that might otherwise have been beyond their reach” (p. 7) and that “educational leadership is messy, challenging work ... as they seek to ameliorate conditions that any systematic oppression may present to them” (p. 8). And yet, equity work requires risk, challenge, and conflict as its end goal is to provide opportunities for individuals and communities to be successful.

Communication and the Home-School Connection

Parents’ involvement in their children’s education has been suggested as a way of increasing school effectiveness worldwide (Lewis, Kim and Bey, 2011). Studies have shown that parental involvement improves children’s academic achievement (Hill and Craft, 2003) and

reduces disruptive behaviors (Domina, 2005). The practices of teachers and schools to involve parents and caregivers also influences their level of involvement (Barton, Drake, Perez, Louis, & George, 2004; Seitsinger, Felner, Brand, & Burns, 2008). When teachers demonstrate positive attitudes toward parent and caregiver involvement and purposefully and intentionally reach out to parents and caregivers, positive relationships and a deeper sense of community develop between parent/caregiver and teachers (Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005). Teachers can help parents and caregivers to actively participate in the classroom by engaging in conferences, phone calls, written notices, and newsletters about activities within schools. Teachers can also strengthen the home-school communication pathway by through homework folders or “take home” folders with their children.

Cambridge Public Schools

Stated commitment to equity

The Cambridge Public Schools has a commitment to equity that is clearly stated, as evidenced by public facing documents such as the website, which addresses structural changes to create greater equity; racial justice and inclusive practices; educator diversity; and resources for where individuals can access support (Cambridge Public Schools, n.d.). The website offers resources in Spanish and in English. What stands out in the Cambridge website is the commitment to name racial equity as a key driver in school experiences: “CPS understands that communities of color have experienced centuries of systemic oppression and may need more as a result of these forces. Achieving racial equity requires proactive and continuous work to dismantle systemic oppression and white privilege in our schools. CPS is committed to altering systemic power dynamics and structures in order to hear and elevate underrepresented voices and to recognize and eliminate bias” (Cambridge Public Schools, n.d.).

The Building Equity Bridges project, of which this qualitative report is a part, furthers the commitment to racial equity through its purpose: “The Building Equity Bridges project is dedicated to authentically engaging those affected by entrenched systems of oppression such as racism, to build collective understanding of the lived experiences of our young people, families, and staff, and develop recommendations towards removing barriers to college and career success” (Cambridge Public Schools, n.d.).

Methodology

Informed by the guidelines from the Building Equity Bridges grant, the purpose of the focus groups was to bring together diverse stakeholder groups to listen, learn, and investigate our most pressing challenges. As part of this work, the Technical Assistance Provider, in partnership with the Grant Coordinator, collaborated with district staff, families, students, educators, and other community stakeholders to bring the following principles to life, as outlined in the CEA Equity Grant from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation memo (January 11, 2018):

- Document and elevate the voices and expertise of families, students, educators, and community stakeholders. Root causes of inequity can be found at multiple levels, from systems to schools to classrooms -- and stakeholders at any level have essential information about all levels.
- Proactively cultivate trust -- especially among people from marginalized communities -- so that students and educators are willing to share their authentic lived experiences within an inequitable system.
- Share power so that the stakeholders who are most impacted have agency to steer this work. We believe students, families, and educators must be engaged as “partners” in the

“collective investigation of a problem”-- not simply as research subjects whose experiences will be studied by others.

- Proactively engage families, students and educators from marginalized groups. Their voices and expertise are particularly important for this work, since they are often “living with the failures of [our] systems... [and] creating adaptive solutions to them.”

The purpose of this project was to explore inequity in the Cambridge Public Schools and the individual and community experiences related to inequity. Therefore, the research questions that guided this study were as follows:

- What are some of the areas of inequity that you have noticed or experienced?
- What makes those areas of inequity important to you?
- What do you believe are the root causes of inequity in the Cambridge Public Schools?
- What recommendations or suggestions would you make to address these root causes of inequity?

Frameworks

This report was informed by the theories and concepts of critical theory (Beyer, 2001) in education and critical race theory (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) state three tenets of critical race theory in education: that (1) race continues to be a significant factor in determining inequity in the United States; (2) U.S. society is based on property rights, and (3) the intersection of race and property creates an analytic tool through which we can understand social (and, consequently, school) inequity (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 48). Through the lens of this framework, the experiences of Cambridge residents, students, parents and caregivers, and leaders provides a pathway for understanding some of the deep frustrations and root causes of inequity in the district as linked to school and schooling.

Critical theory, as Beyer (2001) stated, is “precisely in understanding the normative dimensions of education and how they are intertwined with social, structural, and ideological processes and realities that critical theory plays a key role” (p. 154). Attention is drawn to not only understandings of equity and inequity but also the need for a more comprehensive approach to integrating justice and equity approaches in all aspects of education. For example, the American Educational Research Association (AERA) has identified social justice as a new anchor for the entire profession, servant leadership as a new metaphor to educational leadership and school leadership, and equity for all as a driving approach to systemic change (Brown, 2004).

Data collection and timeline

The equity-based focus group model oversampled for historically marginalized communities as a way to disrupt current pathways that have privileged dominant groups and to amplify the experiences of marginalized communities in Cambridge. Focus groups were not held in the elementary schools due to the age of the students and the sensitivity of the subject matter; however, we acknowledge that children do experience inequity in the elementary school levels. Parents/caregivers, teachers, staff, and administrators provided the elementary student perspective. Students at the high school level did participate in focus groups. In addition, professionals affiliated with the Out of School time, school and district leaders, teachers and staff, alumni, and professionals with school leadership experience were also sampled.

From an existing memo from the PAR Support Team to the Steering Committee (5/28/17), the PAR team noted, “There is a deep history of racial distrust within the CPS community. Perhaps more than any other singular goal, generating processes that allow us to overcome distrust and work across difference will be key to our success” (Cambridge Public Schools, n.d.). Therefore, with intention, the recruitment process was designed to reach out to groups and individuals who are often left out existing structures of feedback: “By centering the

voices of people of color, immigrants, students with disabilities, students from low-income families, and children and youth from other marginalized groups in this work, and taking the time to reflect deeply on who is at the table and how we create spaces to ask these questions, we are beginning to create a different process that we hope will yield different results, to the benefit of our children and families” (Cambridge Public Schools, n.d.).

Participants and organizers

Recruitment for the focus groups relied heavily on cooperation and collaboration with Family Organizers, Youth Organizers, and Member Organizers. Beginning in August 2018, a recruitment process was initiated by the Grant Coordinator. All three organizer groups (i.e., Family Organizers, Youth Organizers, Member Organizers) were thoughtfully recruited through email communication as well as through personal invitations. Organizers participated in group trainings to increase familiarity with the project, to address any questions they might have about the focus groups, and to anticipate questions or concerns that participants might have in participating in these groups.

There were thirteen (13) Family Organizers who assisted with this recruitment for the focus groups. The Family Organizers are a mix of Cambridge Public Schools family liaisons, individuals from community programs, and parents. About 75% of the family organizers identify as people of color. Most of the family organizers are native English speakers, but there were also organizers who spoke Bengali, Haitian Creole, and Spanish. Eleven (11) of the family organizers are women and two (2) are men. Also supporting recruitment for the focus groups were three (3) Youth Organizers who are current CRLS students: two (2) identified as people of color; one (1) identified as White. Of the Youth Organizers, two (2) identify as women and one (1) identified as a man.

Focus groups began in November 2018, and the following were held between November 2018 – January 2019:

- Faculty and staff
- Faculty and staff of color
- Principals and School Leaders
- Community and Out of School Time (OST) Professionals
- Families (mixed group)
- Families with Children of color
- Families who identify as American-born Black
- Families who identify as new immigrants
- Youth focus group (high school)
- School Committee

Recruitment was built around ensuring that identity groups who have historically been unrepresented were engaged in these focus groups. Through working with organizers, participants identified key demographic information that allowed the research team to create groupings. In efforts to increase trust between the focus group participants and the research team, further demographic information was not collected. This decision was affirmed within the focus groups as many populations, at the beginning of the group, asked for clarification about how their identities would be kept anonymous. Some participants asked to not have any of their quotes used directly. One inference is that anonymity and confidentiality was important for participants to be able to share openly and honestly with the research team. In addition, due to the specificity of the focus groups and the number of participants who identified within a

particular group, disclosing further demographic information would challenge the ability to limit identifiable information.

In selecting participants, it was critical to remember that “the intent of focus groups is not to infer but to understand, not to generalize but to determine the range, not to make statements about population but to provide insights about how people perceive a situation” (Kreuger, 1998). Therefore, instead of collecting demographic data, the research team relied on self-reported and self-disclosed demographic data in the context of the focus group. The research process followed the general recommendations by Marczak and Sewell (1991): “As a general rule, numbers and percentages are not appropriate for focus group research and should not be included in report. Reporting should be descriptive and present the meaning of the data as opposed to a summary of data.” Data from the focus groups was examined and reported at three levels, including 1) the raw data, 2) descriptive statements, and 3) interpretation (Kreuger, 1988).

The focus groups for faculty and staff, faculty and staff of color, out of school time professionals, and families were audio recorded and transcribed. For student groups and school committee, information was recorded via note taking by the facilitator and/or by a note taker.

Interviews

In addition to focus groups, individual interviews with district leaders were conducted by the lead researcher. For district leaders, individual interviews were conducted 1:1 via phone. These were audio recorded with consent. Individual interviews allowed for more in-depth conversations about specific areas of expertise and a specific focus on district-wide issues. Individuals were asked about the major areas of inequity that they see or experience through their roles in the district as well as key recommendations that they would make. This perspective is valuable given their positions and ability to provide feedback broadly related to the district as a whole as well as

their observations within and between schools. In addition, these leaders were able to provide perspective related to the systemic challenges that they face in providing greater equity in the district.

Of note, while confidentiality and anonymity were emphasized as a condition of the interview, many district leaders responded with, “Oh I’m not worried about that. I talk about these issues publicly and a lot, so whatever I’m saying is not new to people. Everything I am saying to you, I have already said before.” This statement, echoed by a number of district leaders, emphasizes that issues of inequity are known and brought up in the context of the district leadership and that these issues are pervasive regardless of how often they are mentioned in meetings. In addition, there were some participants who expressed worry that they would be identified in the process. When asked why they experienced worry, they responded with, “I feel too vulnerable putting this out there.”

Focus groups

Focus group times and locations were organized by the Grant Coordinator with thoughtful input from Family Organizers and additional staff. Efforts were made to hold focus groups in different parts of the city to create greater equity in access. Organizers (i.e., Family, Youth, and Member) were responsible for assisting with and, in some cases, leading recruitment efforts. As a way to increase participation, organizers were asked to reach out to participants from communities who tend, from an equity perspective, to be left out or excluded from feedback or decision making in the district.

As a way to increase access to the focus groups, the Grant Coordinator arranged for child care, translation services, as well as dinner/snacks during the focus group sessions with advanced notice. Approximate running time for each focus group was 90 minutes, with 15-20 minutes to

eat dinner or snacks; 10 minutes to explain the purpose of the grant and the focus groups; and 60 minutes for facilitated discussion. Beginning instructions outlined the purpose of the grant, emphasized expectations related to privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity of the participants, and the expectations that stories would not be shared outside of the focus group by others in the group. Sixty (60) minutes were spent in dialogue answering the questions related to inequity. Five to ten minutes were spent seeking recommendations and suggestions for how to address racial inequities in the district. The last five (5) minutes of each focus group was reserved for a check-in about the participants' experiences in the focus group. Many, though not all, focus groups were audio recorded due to issues of confidentiality and consent. Member checking occurred on January 31, 2019 for thematic accuracy, feedback, and input from organizers.

When possible, direct and/or paraphrased quotations are used in this report from focus group participants. However, when statements are made in a focus group that might reveal information about individuals within the district, quotations are represented in this report as aggregate comments and/or create composite profiles to reduce identification of individual respondents.

Commendations

The Cambridge Public School system has taken a comprehensive approach in the Building Equity Bridges grant. There was intentionality in examining this equity work with multiple stakeholders and through key meetings throughout the year. In addition, the work with D.E.E.P. and sense-making teams has created both a process for examining equity as well as an outcomes-driven approach. The leadership in the Cambridge Public Schools as well as in the city in engaging in equity work is evident through multi-level participation, the ability to articulate

the scope of the project, and participation in equity related meetings is admirable and necessary to build on this work.

Though the purpose of the focus groups was to amplify issues of inequity, participants also offered that CPSD was, overall, a good district in which to learn. As evidenced in the focus groups, there is a deep commitment to improvement in the district. There is a clear understanding that addressing issues of race and racism are essential to moving this work forward. Participants in the focus groups who identified as alumni of CPSD articulated that they chose to raise their children in Cambridge because of the strong schools and community, the diversity within the city, and the resources that the district has to provide a quality education. Parents of children with disabilities, though they expressed frustration in navigating a complicated process, acknowledged that the district is committed to educating all students and that there are resources to do this.

For those participants who had been a part of diversity-related focus groups, there was a frustration that these types of initiatives did not often follow through. For example, participants were wondering how this current Building Equity Bridges Project was any different from previous efforts. As a commendation, it is clear that this process is a much more comprehensive one than previous single-focused initiatives. The level of accountability to the Nellie Mae grant, the collaboration of CPSD and Cambridge Educators Association, along with participation from the school committee and out of school leaders was highlighted as different from previous efforts.

One recent example of a complicated process that included decision making through an equity-based lens was the implementation of 1:1 device access in the high school. This process towards the 1:1 program in the high school helped to amplify issues of equity and how equity-

based decision processes can be made. While some may have felt limited by the 1:1 program (e.g., families who wanted their student to use their home or personal computer), and the decision-making moved beyond the technology department, a number of decisions were made through an equity-based lens. This example helps to amplify the challenges with equity-based work as this work does not always mean consensus nor that everyone gets resources equally; rather, equity-based work requires that people and communities get what they need to access success.

Findings

Meetings with various stakeholder groups revealed that individuals are deeply committed to education and educational equity in Cambridge. Many participants chose to live in Cambridge because of its diversity (e.g., racial, economic) and because of its progressive and liberal climate. A number of participants had lived in Cambridge for many years, including participants who are current parents and who were alumni of the Cambridge Public Schools. A number of these were common in these stakeholder groups: school culture, race and racism, teachers and racial diversity, curriculum, training and development, communication, community, pathways for feedback, engagement in the classroom, and discipline.

School culture. The culture of the school was a consistent driver in how individuals experienced equity. Some participants noted that “some schools do equity work better than others” and that “it really depends on the leadership of the building” if equity work is prioritized. Embedded in comments about school culture were aspects related to sense of belonging; whether schools expressed a visible commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion; and whether building leaders, teachers, and professional staff had the training that was necessary to support a school culture that openly welcomed diversity.

One professional noted that a helpful approach in improving school culture would be to really embrace that “all of our students are Cambridge students, but that they are learning in different buildings” to really get a sense of where equity issues show up. This professional stated, for example, if we really “embraced that each student is a Cambridge student, then we would want to put in place things that make them successful, no matter which building they are learning in.” This professional believed this approach would help to strengthen school culture, knowing that there is an overarching commitment to all Cambridge students, and that we are “all in this together.” In practice, there would be opportunities to collaborate, to get a better sense of what is happening in other schools, and to come together as a school community supporting the common goals of learning in Cambridge.

For the older student group, one of the common themes around school culture was the culture of learning and the culture of the classroom. Many students articulated frustrations that there are teachers who do not seem to care about teaching anymore and/or that there are some teachers who “only want to teach content but really don’t seem to care about us as students or as people.” When asked what type of teacher they believe would be a successful teacher at CRLS, students answered, “teachers who really like to do their job” and “teachers who challenge you – not just give you the answer – but let you struggle and try to figure out the answer yourself” and “teachers who really keep the class engaged in learning.”

A common thread that came up in these focus groups was a take on “This is Cambridge; we are supposed to be good at this stuff.” As individuals in the student focus group noted, “We should be good at talking about equity, but honestly, we just talk around these issues. We never actually address anything head on. It sometimes feels like, when a situation happens at school,

that the school is more interested in marketing that we had an assembly or an X-block about it than actually solving the real problems that caused the incident in the first place.”

Race and racism. In identifying “root causes of inequity,” focus group participants quickly named “race and racism” as a root cause. Parents and caregivers of children of color had a number of examples that their children – including in the early elementary grades –experienced related to racism at school, ranging from being called racially insensitive or offensive words by their classmates, being teased for religious or cultural clothing, or feeling like they are being disciplined harsher because they are students of color. Students in the high school pointed to disparities in which students are in the College Preparatory (CP) classes and which are in Advanced Placement (AP) classes – CP classes are filled with students of color while AP classes only have a few students of color. In addition, students experienced disparities related to college guidance and counseling – their perceptions were that white students were often encouraged to apply to competitively ranked schools while many students of color were directed towards community colleges.

Parents and caregivers of younger children in the district also noted that there were distinct issues of race and racism in their schools. And, many noted that they have these conversations with their young children about racism in their schools. For example, a parent mentioned that their child stated, “the teacher never calls on the kids who are Black in our class.” The parent of a Black boy shared, “I hate that I have to give my child particular advice about being Black at school. I have to tell him to not draw attention to himself. I have to tell him to not make any waves, not make any noise, and not give them any reason to notice you. I hate that. I hate that I even have to tell him that. It’s not fair, but I think that’s the only way he’s going to get through this school.” Another parent followed up with, “And, that then creates a paper trail. So,

if your child is written up or notes are written about your child in elementary school, then that paper trail continues up through with them. It's like, they can't ever get a chance to break out of it." Parents and caregivers additionally noted that the experiences that their Black children face also send a very clear message to white students – that “if white students only see that Black children get in trouble, what are we teaching that white student? What is that white student believing about Black children? This whole thing has to stop happening this way.”

For students at CRLS, racial diversity was most noticeable when looking at the demographics of level-classes. For example,

“I'd say that there's a lot of diversity in the high school, but when it came down to the classes, there wasn't as much. I took a majority honors classes, and in there, you wouldn't see as many Black kids, necessarily. It wouldn't be as diverse as the CP classes, I'd say. That's where I would say that there was less of a push for the minorities to do better in school and to push themselves. I'd say, it was kind of just like, ‘If they want to stay in CP, let them stay in CP.’ Or, ‘If they want to drop down from honors to CP, we're not going to really try to work with them and try to get them to work harder. We're just going to let them go ahead and drop down.’”

Another student mentioned, “I remember there was a crazy statistic, it was like 90% of honors classes were white kids. I don't know if you can chalk that up to administrative neglect.”

Students mentioned that there seemed to be different expectations that everyone knew about but felt no one was really addressing this.

Experiences of teachers and staff related to racial diversity. One of the equity objectives articulated by CPSD is to “provide equity and access to increase opportunity and achievement” (Cambridge Public Schools, n.d.). Through the Dynamic Diversity Program, the

district is paying attention to the recruitment and retention of teachers and staff of color. While the online presentation demonstrates an increase in percentages of applicants and hires of teachers of color, the lived experiences of seeing racially diverse teachers in the school still feels underrepresented. As cited in the WBUR *Edify* interview (Cambridge Public Schools, May 2018), Lora Marseille, a CRLS senior at the time of the *Edify* interview, stated she could only name two teachers of color though the report noted there were 40 teachers of color in the building. This highlights that, although the district is making progress in increasing the number of people of color, it is still possible to feel as if there are only a few.

According to teachers and staff, issues of support around diversity were a common theme. Notably, teachers and staff of color were looking for more support and connections with other teachers and staff of color. Many experience isolation in their buildings, and they articulated it would be helpful to have both a building and district-wide support structure for teachers and staff of color. As noted on the CPSD website, Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) were launched in May 2018. This opportunity can provide meaningful connections for teachers and staff of color; however at the time of the qualitative interviews, these groups had not been in place long enough for teachers and staff of color to feel the impact. As expressed by educators of color, “We need to think about things for our teachers of color. There was no like platform for like how you then do that. How do I meet people (of color) in different buildings? How do I see who else works here? I’ve worked in this district for years, and I’ve only met one person in this room before today. Like how does that make any sense? And everyone’s been here for many years or about the same time as me. Where’s Cambridge helping us to do that?”

The educators of color expressed deep frustration with belonging and the lack of structures in place to support them: “If they hire (people of color), do you support them so they

can stay, which is the biggest thing? Like, when you come, you have nobody to support you. Nobody who looks like you. Of course, you're not going to stay. Why would you stay?" There was also a feeling that educators of color may be separated on purpose: "I firmly believe as a person and professional that (scattering) is intentional. That's the way the institution has worked for many, many centuries. And the system has worked that way for many, right?"

Teaching staff (both teachers of color and teachers who are white) also expressed that they are committed to and interested in learning how to create more culturally relevant classrooms; however, the structure of the day and the year do not always allow for them to go to meaningful professional development opportunities. Teachers and staff also noted that the increasing expectation that they are delivering culturally relevant content feels like an "add on" responsibility as opposed to one that is ingrained in the fabric of their roles as educators in Cambridge.

One of the major issues that the district wants to explore is the presence of microaggressions by both educators and students: "We must continue to explore how implicit bias plays a role in our achievement and opportunity gaps," one school professional mentioned. "We are new to looking at issues of education through social justice and but that's what I'm hoping this grant helps us do." While there is a clear commitment in the district to address issues of inequity, one professional noted that there is also a growing frustration that it is not happening faster: "Many families and educators are frustrated with the slow process. There is little trust around this issue (of improvement) because they have said (these concerns) before but nobody seems to be listening."

Finally, educators of color expressed frustration with the burden of there being only a few people of color in a building. Because of these low numbers, many educators of color feel like

they need to commit more time and work to creating greater equity. But, this burden at work also impacts their personal lives:

“Yeah, I have this issue because, again, I’m one of the only people of color. And I feel that it’s one of my responsibilities to stand for culture equity work or to have some good representation. It’s affecting me because, like, I have family, I have kids and I have to take all this burden on me at work and try to manage my own personal life. But I think if I’m not doing this equity work then I’m harming my population and my students. I want them to have a better representation at our school and a better understanding of their needs.”

Other educators emphasized that being one of only a few in a building meant that they had to choose between being a representative at a meeting or making connections across the district (e.g., social gatherings for educators of color):

“So, I do agree that you know, we have to do it, we have to be the change right? I’m going to challenge that because there have been many times where I’ve wanted to attend some sort of educator of color thing right? But there’s another obligation at hand. Am I gonna go to (this district meeting) or am I gonna go to this social event where I can meet other educators of color? Like, these two things are scheduled for the same time, and I can’t split myself in two ways. So, I need to decide which one I’m going to. And, because of my job, I have to choose the district meeting.”

Educators of color expressed that unconscious bias is also a root cause of inequity in the district and that more attention should be paid in this area. And, oftentimes, unconscious bias impacts how administrators treat different populations of educators and, in some cases, how evaluations are perceived:

“I think we need some training for evaluators and administration regarding unconscious bias because I can see the impact of unconscious bias in the building. I see how administrators treat some teachers in a certain way and others in a different way. I’ve witnessed many, many occasions where the root of inequity is unconscious bias. I hear people say, ‘we are so open and we are not racist’ and all that but maybe they have this kind of like unconscious bias that they need to work on. We should focus resources on that kind of deep work.”

But, in order for change to occur, training must be ongoing. As educators of color commented, “I think the piece about training is awesome, but the training should be ongoing. It shouldn't be one snapshot training for the year and then we're done for another five years. We need to hold our colleagues accountable when we see certain behaviors. Not being confrontational but constructive. We need to create cultures where people can tell others that what they're saying might be perceived as sexist, racist, whatever -ism you want to use.”

The district should pay attention to the ways in which educators of color experience fatigue related to diversity work and the taxation they experience being one of the few people of color in their buildings: “It’s like I’m having to do everything. Like it's the same few people (of color) in every school that's doing the work over and over. Having to correct things over and over. And, my observation is that it's been the people of color in the building that's constantly doing the work.”

In order to improve retention of educators of color, it is important to note the many ways that educators of color currently feel frustration, particularly knowing that burnout and teacher of color turnover contributes to the challenges with increasing racial diversity in our educator population:

“It’s exhausting because there's not enough (people of color). Then you end up doing a lot more. Like there's not enough people of color in the building, and sometimes I feel like it’s so hard to sit in every meeting that they have because I end up having to represent the minorities. And if you have two people in the building then, those two people take the job. Then, you no longer really have a life outside of doing school things.”

Culturally relevant curriculum. The issue of culturally responsive and reflective curriculum was a common theme across stakeholder groups. Parents and caregivers of children of color, particularly Black children, noted that there was very little in the curriculum that affirmed the identities of their families as Black. A few parents noted, “When will we change the narrative that our story as Black people began when we were enslaved? When, in their Cambridge educational experience, are they going to learn about the richness of our history, our leadership, and our contributions to society?” Many participants stated that these decisions often align with school culture (i.e., if the school demonstrates a commitment to this work, then most teachers follow those expectations) and school leadership. Participants also noted that the decisions to provide culturally-responsive and relevant curriculum often falls on the individual teacher as opposed to a school wide expectation. Therefore, a child or family can “get lucky” by being in a particular teacher’s class who has committed to educating about cultural diversity or miss out if they get a teacher who does not commit to the work. Many participants noted that the Cambridge Public Schools as a system still buys into a very Eurocentric approach to content and teaching; many core classes are still focused on the contributions of white authors, history, and text and treat racially diverse authors, history and text as an add-on to the curriculum.

One of the additional barriers to implementing culturally relevant curriculum is the competition of other interests that occur at the school level. Though there is existing professional development related to new curriculum and development at the district level, once teachers return back to their individual schools, there is little accountability for delivering curriculum in the way that was expected at the training. In addition, because building coaches are not in supervisory roles, it is difficult to provide a pathway for feedback or accountability in teaching (as it relates to new curriculum and professional development).

Another issue of curriculum came up among parents and caregivers of children of color: “When are we going to stop teaching about Christopher Columbus and how he founded America? I feel like we keep going to the Sunken Place (a reference to the film “Get Out!”) every time we keep telling children that Black people are slaves.” And, a participant mentioned, “It’s interesting that we change the name of the holiday but do little to nothing to actually change the curriculum or how we learn about indigenous people.”

Time and structures to engage in equity work. Time and structure were also common themes in the focus groups. For educators, they were unsure how they could commit a responsible amount of time to shape more equitable classrooms and school culture when they have existing pressures to meet the demands of other academic areas. The common feeling expressed was “If we focus on professional development around issues of equity, then what do we have to give up or re-prioritize?” Many professionals felt limited by the amount of time in the day, weeks in the year, and the existing demands on their teaching practices that equity work felt like a burden as opposed to an integral part of their work. That said, nearly all of the educators who participated in focus groups or individual interviews identified equity work as being important and a necessary driver in moving the district forward to best serve all students and

families. Additional comments around use of time surfaced questions about whether time was used in the best way possible. For example, one suggestion made was that summer scheduling of meetings could be more productive, especially given that the summer was a time to be able to do deeper work without the demands of the academic day. However, this time was not often used wisely and productively.

A professional stated, “No, it’s not an issue of time. We do have enough time to look at issues of equity through professional development. But, what we lack are structures that allow us to make good use of our time. We need to use our time more deliberately and have them be expectations of our jobs. I think we actually waste a lot of time – I mean, we certainly could use more time for collaboration – but I think that we just don’t use our structures well.

One recommendation that was echoed by a number of professionals in the district is that expectations around equity has not been explicit. It must be clear where the expectations are held and who is accountable for holding individuals up to the task of doing equity-based work. If this is a district expectation, then there need to be accountability measures at every level of the district; otherwise, we set up individual practitioners to think, “Wait, I sometimes wonder if this is just *my* expectation for educators in the district or not. If it is just my expectation, I don’t really have the power to hold people accountable.”

One area that was raised was “what should happen if individuals in the district are falling short of equity-based teaching or accountability for implementing excellent instruction that is also rooted in cultural competency?” It was unclear to professionals if individuals are held accountable for not doing this work. And, if there are not accountability measures – or if there are measures but people are not being held accountable to it – then this serves as a distraction to this work. A professional shared, “If this is the curriculum we have decided that is important and

relevant, and we know that students can benefit from it, then what do we do when individuals decide not to engage in this curriculum or ineffectively teach it?’

Communication and advocacy. One issue that was unique to the parent and caregiver group was related to communication. In this area, parents and caregivers had very different experiences based on their school affiliation. Some parents and caregivers expressed that they felt there was little to no communication about issues of diversity, equity, or inclusion, particularly related to incidents at the school. While others expressed that their school leaders were very effective in communicating when incidents happen. Though there were differences between school cultures related to communication, there were also different experiences within schools. Some comments included, “Oh, I get way too many emails from our school” while another parent/caregiver at the same school articulated, “Really? I don’t get any.”

Another area of communication in which parents and caregivers expressed frustration is in delivery of information for students with disabilities or those who are interested in pursuing educational testing. Some parents and caregivers stated that their leaders in their schools were very helpful while others felt they had to “fend for themselves” with little or no support. Many parents and caregivers of color identified that they felt the pressure to really advocate for their children at school because they did not think the schools had the success of their children as a priority. Some participants shared the lengths they needed to go in order to advocate for their children, with some sharing they had to take time off from work to go to the school and proactively advocate for their children.

One issue expressed by parents and caregivers of Black children was the ways in which communication seems to come home related to discipline but not when their children’s academic progress is sliding. As stated by a parent, “What message does that send to me as the parent of a

Black boy? It sends me the message that you are more frustrated with his behavior than you are by his academics sliding. Of course, I am concerned about my child's behavior, but when you call me only because of behavior, then I get a sense of what you actually think my Black child should be focusing on."

In a focus group of parents and caregivers, a few Black and Brown adults mentioned that they are often the only ones present at public meetings or council meetings and wish that the concerns that were raised in these focus groups are ones that people would bring to more public forums. While acknowledging that individuals do not always feel safe or welcome to attend, a parent mentioned, "How are the schools to know if we don't show up? I hear you all here and I hear your concerns, but we can't just wait for this report to fix things. We have to go in and be visible, be active, and be vocal about what's going on in our schools." At this focus group, parents and caregivers offered to meet up before the meeting or to go in together so people would not feel so alone, knowing that a sense of safety and of trust are critical to participation. At the end of that focus group, parents and caregivers were collecting names, phone numbers, and email addresses to begin organizing groups to go together.

Community and sense of belonging. The theme of community was broadly expressed related to sense of belonging, developing networks of support, and open communication. For teachers and professionals of color, there is an increasing desire to find other teachers and professionals of color in the district to reduce feelings of isolation. Often, professionals of color feel as if they are the "only ones" in the building and therefore lack opportunities to share identity-based affinity experiences. These feelings of isolation contribute to not feeling connected to a building or school, feeling as if they are confined to relationships only within the classroom, and limit opportunities for broader perspectives and views.

Families, particularly families of children of color, noted that the distance between their homes and their schools can be quite far, thereby creating a physical barrier to developing relationships and building community. Many expressed that, while they understood the purpose for why the district moved away from neighborhood schools, doing so also posed a challenge to building community, to relying on networks of support (e.g., picking up from school, after-school activities), and to engaging in opportunities for building relationships with others. Additionally, some parents and caregivers also felt disconnected to their schools because there were not many opportunities to engage in meeting other families and/or those opportunities were not easy to access (e.g., the school is on the other side of the city, activities took place at inconvenient times).

Voice and feedback. Students, in particular, were invested in these pathways for feedback as it relates to their teachers and new hires. Students in the focus groups articulated a growing frustration with their desire to learn and experiences with teachers who “did not challenge them” or who “did not seem to even like teaching anymore.” Students believed that their voices were an important component in selecting teachers (or providing feedback about teachers). They also stated that being a part of the process for hiring teachers could give candidates a better understanding of what it meant to be a student in the district, and the ways in which they hope their teachers engage them. When asked how they currently give feedback, students mentioned that they are not even aware of any processes that would allow them to give feedback about their experiences with teachers or school leaders.

The students in the focus group advocated for some pathways for feedback to be able to connect with district leaders: “We need a way that we can talk directly to the superintendent, and when we can, we need to not have limitations on what we can talk about or how we can talk

about things.” Given the recent incidents at CRLS where feedback and open forum may have been challenging, students suggested having more open forums when there are not incidents to immediately respond to. Students suggested having regular meetings with the superintendent or opportunities for members of the school committee to meet with student leaders to get a better sense of what their CRLS experience is like.

For parents and caregivers, they affirmed that it was difficult to give feedback about teachers and building leaders. There does not appear to be a structured process – outside of the open invitation to connect with teachers or building leaders – that would facilitate this feedback process. Some parents and caregivers also rooted their hesitation to give feedback in cultural values, believing that it is not their role to “complain or make waves” even when something is not going right with their child. Others in the focus groups believed that it was their right to give feedback and that doing so was the “only way things would be different for my child.” The willingness to give feedback was also rooted in aspects of privilege – participants in the focus groups expressed that white/wealthy parents and caregivers had more agency in the district and their voices were heard more whereas people of color/low income parents and caregivers did not have the same access to privilege.

Both stakeholder groups – parents/caregivers and students – agreed that giving feedback at the end of the school year via a survey was not productive nor helpful. Rather, they would like to see more regular and consistent pathways for feedback.

An unexpected comment about pathways to feedback came up regarding decision-making and transparency. When asked what a recommendation might be to create more equitable decision-making, a professional stated that they wish there were processes in place that would push back on decisions from an equity-lens. A professional stated, “Though I do get to make the

majority of the decisions, I would really benefit from having many more stakeholders weigh in on decisions. I'd also benefit from having someone, in addition to myself, really help me think through decisions that I make from an equity-based lens. I think that would lead to greater transparency, but it would also hold me accountable for those decisions. And, hopefully, that type of feedback might result in changes in policies about how decisions are made, how resources are allocated, and how decision makers are held accountable.”

One area that came up with parents and caregivers was related to homework. In the focus groups, participants shared that there were some schools that removed or reduced homework. While some believe this decision was made to provide greater success for students who might not have assistance or support at home, there have been consequences to learning for some students. Some parents and caregivers, particularly parents and caregivers of color, noted that homework was an essential part of their child's learning outside of school. Teachers who worked with students who have parents/caregivers who, for example, are learning English, stated that sometimes that homework was doing more for the family than just for that child. The homework was a way for families to see what students were learning in school and to be engaged in that learning process. Participants in the group mentioned that it was unclear how some schools arrived at the decision and wondered if this process was equitable or made from an equity- based lens.

Even with an understanding about pathways for feedback, participants also spoke of the frustration of not knowing where the power or leverage actually occurs: “You know, we do have active parents. I know that I need to be active to be heard. We do have parents (of color) who go to school board meetings, who go to school council meetings, who write letters to teachers, who write letters to principals, who write letters to athletic directors. So, I'm like, ‘Where's the lever?

Where's the lever that actually makes something get changed?' And I can't figure out where that lever is.”

During the course of the focus groups, there were moments when participants disagreed with how a decision was made or what a process was like. However, one recommendation continuously came up: how to bring forth voices that typically do not get heard in public processes. As a disruptive model, author Arundhati Joy once wrote, “There’s really no such thing as the voiceless. There are only the deliberately silenced or the preferably unheard.” One participant shared this in the focus groups:

“But you know, I think that I would love to have the district center voices of color and voices of lower income families or voices of immigrants like at the center. Like start conversations there, start with that, people who traditionally are marginalized, start with women and people of color and your transgender families. Start with those voices and then have these public processes that build out because I think public processes are inherently, and the research shows, they’re inherently designed to empower people with more money, who own their own homes, who are more deeply financially invested in their community. Public processes are racist, right? They’re a way to amplify and say, ‘Well we listen to people, the doors are open to everyone.’”

The notion that the absence of discourse is consensus was brought up in the focus groups a number of times. Participants wanted to address the structures of how feedback is gathered, who that process privileges, and how lack of discourse does not always mean that people agree. Therefore, what changes might the district make to its public meetings or gatherings where public voice is solicited:

“I mean, if English is your second language, or you just aren't a speaker-upper, you

know, these processes, these big meetings, don't work. I would really love to see the district really rethink how they take in information and start to think about not listening to everyone but, instead, really spending time and energy listening to people who, for whatever reason haven't been listened to well. I think that would actually, hopefully, bring a lot more voices to the table. I'm constantly frustrated by the same people showing up at public meetings to say same things, and it's not representative of the other 90% of people. There is an assumption that if people don't say anything, then there is consensus. But, I know there are people who are like, 'I would have said something but I can't because I couldn't get off of work.' You know?

In these focus groups, a number of participants who were not English-as-a-first-language speakers shared the challenges with speaking up and giving feedback to the district or the schools:

"I think it goes back to the school not taking into consideration all parents. They do these council meetings and they're at times that low-income families are working and we can't attend. And if we do make the effort and attend, they do it in a language that we don't understand. I don't think it's fair for us because it's not only that English is my second language, but my English is very basic. Then I come in and I hear these, all these vocabulary, and I'm like, I'm leaving and I'm like, what were they talking about? Everybody else is getting this idea of what they're doing and where the school is going, but I didn't even get it even if I wanted it. I think it starts there, or them not looking at who are the parents."

Impact of relationship on student engagement. Parent, caregivers, and students offered comment on the ways in which engagement or lack of engagement occurred in the classroom

settings. One root cause of engagement is related to relationships and attention to relationships. While stakeholders commented that course content is one important way of engaging learners (e.g., content in which learners can see their identities represented in positive ways), engagement in classes and in school programs was a product of relationships, perceptions of student ability, and positive interactions in the classroom.

One of the key areas in which student engagement and relationship was emphasized was in the city's Out of School Time programs. In a focus group of practitioners and leaders involved in after-school and out of school time programs, many affirmed that their success with students was largely because of their ability to develop meaningful relationships with students. One practitioner noted, "As OST programs, we have time and liberty and space that some in-school teachers don't have time to do in terms of building relationships."

For some students, the out of school time space provided a place where students felt "heard, seen, and accepted." A few practitioners noted that, "It's not uncommon to have a student in the OST space enjoying themselves and having fun, and then the classroom teacher comes by and the student tenses up and feels anxious." As expressed by an OST practitioner, "Some of our students come in feeling so frustrated with their relationship with their teacher. And, we know that teachers are also frustrated. So, how do we actually meet this gap and serve young people as our goal?"

Another benefit that the OST practitioners experience is their ability to develop relationships with students over time. For example, many students come back year after year to their OST program, allowing practitioner in OST to see continued growth: "One of the benefits of being in OST is that we get to see the growth of children over time, because we stay with them for a few years, whereas teachers in the same school don't get to see how much a child has

grown from year to year.” This relationship over time also helps practitioners develop meaningful relationships with students.

Practitioners noted that it may be difficult for classroom teachers to develop the same types of relationships that OST programs foster because classroom teachers are dealing with a number of other external demands – such as outcomes and assessment and getting through a measured amount of work – that add additional pressures: ““In OST, we have the time and capacity to build relationships with children in ways that classroom teachers don’t seem to have time to do. Strong relationships with kids is what makes it work out.” A comment was made that “it’s not that I believe classroom teachers don’t want to build relationships in this way, I think it’s that, given the other demands, they just can’t.”

In addressing issues of racial equity and engagement, a number of practitioners noted the racial diversity within their focus group as a significant contributing factor to engagement in OST and the contrast to the academic day schedule of the students: “It’s important to really address the lack of men of color in the classroom. Most of the children in our program spend the majority of their day with White women teachers, and so our children of color don’t really get to make these connections with people of color or men of color during their academic day. I think this also plays out when I see some of the teachers having a really hard time with young boys of color. I see a problem with that.”

For OST practitioners, many agreed that their approach is to “take all of the student into account - we take their traumas, their success, their feelings all into the space.” OST programs allow students to experience a place in which they feel seen, heard, and valued. This was often presented in contrast to what OST practitioners have seen and heard from many of the students experience in their academic day.

Conversations related to student engagement at the high school were also focused on relationships and engagement. Students affirmed that, “we really appreciate teachers who don’t tell you the answer, but instead they help you problem solve and give you the tools to make it happen.” Students in the focus group resisted any beliefs that they just want to get by in high school. Many who participated in the group were seeking challenge and support in their classroom settings and wanted opportunities to develop their critical thinking and problem solving in ways that were appropriate. One sentiment that was affirmed in the group was that, “They have high expectations of us at CRLS, but I don’t think they are doing things to help me achieve them.”

Students were also quick to identify that there were some populations of students who were encouraged to push themselves academically and for whom the school was proactive in college guidance or counseling. And, there were other populations of students who had to seek out help, find support, and be advocates for themselves. While these tended to be along academic leveling (e.g., AP, Honors, CP), these levels also represent distinct racialized groupings with more white students in AP and Honors courses and more students of color in College Prep courses.

Students also gave feedback about the ways in which they experience engagement in the classroom. In one class, students remarked, “Good teachers are ones really keep the class engaged. There is this class where the teacher does use videos to make it interesting and that’s good.” However, the students also noted that, “But I also think that teacher shows way too many videos. It was good the first few times, but I can’t say I’m learning a lot just from the videos.”

One area that students recommended needed to be strengthened in CRLS (although this theme did come up a few times with other parent/caregiver groups) was the preparation of the

adults in the community to talk about difficult issues. In CRLS, the structured X-Blocks were brought up as an opportunity to really dive deep into difficult topics; but many of the teachers are not comfortable having these discussions, are given a short presentation to show to students, and many then use X-Block as a study time or to socialize. Students in the focus groups suggested that X-Blocks be used for what they are intended to be – opportunities for discussions about issues that impact their lives: “Teachers just aren’t comfortable with addressing certain topics like racism and sexism and graffiti (X-block type topics) and such -- fix that and we’d see an improvement.”

Students at CRLS also noted that engagement could be improved if they felt connected to teachers. When asked what they might suggest teachers do, students responded with, “A simple ‘hello’ and ‘how was your day’ is pretty easy to do. Teachers should commit to making more connections with students.” Related to student learning, both teachers/professionals as well as students at CRLS noted that there is a school culture they have noticed related to “hanging out in the hallways.” They noted that, “It’s easy to see that it’s Black and Brown students in the hallways during classes. And, when you ask them why they are there, they say that ‘class was boring’ or ‘they aren’t engaged’ or the ‘teacher won’t even notice I’m gone anyway’.” What is contributing to these conditions that students do not feel like their presence matters in the classroom? What type of support do teachers need in the classroom to engage all students? What do we need to better understand about this?

Another way in which engagement was expressed was through leveling in classes. Student expressed that the racial differences in leveling was evident and could, in some ways, impact engagement:

“I think it will be interesting to see the statistics of how many people are in CP, honors and AP. It feels like a very large percentage of (people of color) are in CP and Honors. When you offer tiers of education, having a majority of (people of color) in the lowest tier doesn’t look very good. Maybe more mobility around that so that people who ... or maybe just abolishing one of them and trying to make higher level education the base for everyone, so there isn’t that much disparity in both the classroom diversity and the difference in ... it’s a higher quality education, I would assume. There can be issues at home that prevent you from getting homework done on time. There are so many factors outside of the school to consider, that it does seem a little weird to have these levels. I understand the importance of homework and to keep learning outside of the classroom, but I think it would be important for teachers to offer more leeway or more mobility in different tiers of education.”

Students have remarked that being in a level that does not challenge them contributes to engagement. Students of color who were in a CP level, when they had the ability to be in Honors, often felt that bored in class or not engaged. Yet, as reported by students, it seems as if Honors is a class level reserved for white students and for a few students of color.

Discipline. Students in the CRLS focus group identified discipline as a significant issue in their lives. Many expressed frustrations with two major ways in which discipline was enacted: 1) that discipline approaches did not always work, and 2) that discipline was often used instead of mental health support.

Student expressed frustration with the common situation when “half the class really wants to learn, and the other half of the class is not engaged at all.” They mentioned that the teachers seem to be out of strategies when trying to deal with this dynamic in class, resorting to

“well, they just try to teach whoever is there to show up to learn.” Students also identified the practice of sending disruptive students outside of the classroom, but that oftentimes students are disruptive because they do not understand the material or feel behind in a class; therefore, the act of sending a student out only compounds this issue. The students did not offer a suggestion for how to best handle this, other than that it is a problem in the classroom.

Students in CRLS noted that sometimes discipline issues are just a symptom of a bigger mental health issue that their peer might be facing, noting that “some act out because it’s the most attention they’ve received all day.” They noted there is a significant need for mental health support in the schools and that the addition of greater mental health support might curb some of the behaviors that are interpreted as disciplinary. One student mentioned that they came seeking support for anxiety and was given a brochure about anxiety: “I was expressing that I was anxious, particularly about school, and then I got a brochure – another thing to read – when I was already feeling overwhelmed.” Students note that the counselors are dealing with a large population of students and simply cannot meet the needs of every CRLS student; therefore, the students in the focus group were advocating for greater mental health support.

Parents and caregivers of elementary and middle school children of color expressed concern that their children – particularly Black children – are often treated as if they are older than they are and set up for expectations for children older than their actual age. For example, one parent expressed, “My child is in elementary school, but I honestly feel like some of the white teachers treat him like he’s a teenager. And, then when they forget to treat him like he’s a child, he really internalizes that. I hate having these conversations with my Black son about this because why can’t he just be a kid? He’s ten years old.”

Students also remarked that discipline of the student/child rarely takes into account if there are actually issues in the home environment:

“I think that if there’s inconsistencies in the student’s attendance or grade, that are just beyond what is expected of the individual, the issue should be looked at at home. The individual who is missing school shouldn’t be punished for it if it’s outside of their control. There should be more, and that’s when parents should get involved with the issues. Because you can’t blame the student if they got three hours of sleep the night before because of (something that’s going on at home). Punishing the student for stuff that’s out of their control isn’t fair to anyone. You can blame the parent, however, who has much more control over that kind of situation. But sometimes it’s certainly not the student’s fault.”

Students often remarked that having adult connections in the building helped them feel seen and feel more invested in school. One symptom of not feeling connected is often to act out; therefore, it would benefit the district to explore ways to increase opportunities for students to have meaningful connections with adults at school and to provide holistic support to students while at school. In addition, one benefit that students mentioned that increased their connection is through after-school programs, leadership programs, and academic clubs and organizations.

Knowing that this study intentionally sought out voices of racially diverse parents and caregivers, participants noted that being Black and male often meant that their children were being perceived differently than others. Parents and caregivers remarked that this dynamic was most often seen in discipline from White teachers:

“And honestly, I think, sometimes their perspective from the beginning is the problem, and (teachers) have to learn how to try to mend these broken relationships once they

happen. Because some of these kids are so smart, and they're keeping (these interactions) in their head that, 'I remember that time you didn't treat me like you treated somebody else.' You know? It's the perspective of how they look. And that's what I tell my kid. And I hate to say that to him, but I tell him that, 'You know what, stop giving them what they think you are.' You know? To even have to say that I'm already admitting that I think that they're looking at him in a certain way. It's just tough."

Parents and caregivers of color brought up the tension that exists when supporting their children, particularly their Black and Brown boys. Many noted that, culturally, they believe in the teachers being 100% right; that, their cultures have taught them not to push back on those who are in charge. Yet, as they have watched their children grow up, they realize there is also a responsibility on behalf of the school to also make sure their children feel safe and feel like they belong in the classroom. Some parents noticed the cumulative effect that discipline has played in their children's lives:

"My child got sent to the office. And I don't know the messaging that was said in the office. But when he got sent out of the classroom, it was just, "Get out." And this goes on, and on, and on. What I've learned is that our boys of color experience this. What I'd like to ask Cambridge to do right now with this whole thing, is that we need to create an initiative to support our boys of color from Pre-K. My son is now in high school, and he is one of those children in that hallway. He is one of those children who hangs out in the hallway. And I think what's happened to him? Over the years, he internalized his own self-hate. He used to love to read. He loved learning, he loved those things. I feel bad, but as his parents, we began to say things to him like, 'You're getting in trouble all the time. You're not following the directions. You're not doing what you're supposed to do. Now

on, you do everything you're supposed to do. I don't send you there to make friends, I send you there to learn.' But, that's wrong, that's wrong. We shouldn't have only blamed him. He should also go to school and feel loved and seen. He should be seen as an active kid who is just a kid, instead of someone to just send away."

Parents and caregivers of color also noted that they have to give their children difficult messages that they know white parents do not have to give their children. They give their children the advice that need to be "200% better just to be treated equally" or "do not draw attention to yourself". Parents also shared their struggle with repairing or fixing a relationship that a child has with a teacher if they feel they have already been typecast as someone who causes trouble:

"And honestly, I think, sometimes their perspective from the beginning is the problem, and they have to learn how to try to mend these broken relationships once they happen. Because some of these kids are so smart, and they're keeping (these interactions) in their head that, 'I remember that time you didn't treat me like you treated somebody else.' You know? It's the perspective of how they look. And that's what I tell my kid. And I hate to say that to him, but I tell him that, 'You know what, stop giving them what they think you are.' You know? To even have to say that I'm already admitting that I think that they're looking at him in a certain way. It's just tough."

Experiences related to new immigrants (less than 5 years) in Cambridge. One identity group that was intentionally brought together was related to new immigrants to Cambridge. Knowing that the new immigrant population is growing, it was important to better understand experiences that may be unique to new immigrant communities and how they experience issues of inequity in the public school system. Additionally, it was important to amplify voices of new immigrants as

our current educational system tends to privilege white, Western, middle/upper-middle class ways of knowing and doing.

The immigrant community in Cambridge is both vibrant and diverse within itself. According to the Cambridge Community Development website, the Cambridge Public School Department reports that for the 2018 - 2019 school year over 100 students speak the following foreign languages at home: Spanish (5.6%), Amharic (2.6%), Haitian Kreyol (2.3%), Bengali (2.3%), Arabic (1.9%), and Chinese (1.7%) (<https://www.cambridgema.gov/CDD/factsandmaps/demographicfaq>, n.d.). In this focus group, the majority of participants who identified as new immigrants spoke Bengali and Spanish.

For the new immigrant group who participated in the focus groups, issues of homework, communication, and participation were particularly salient. While the study did not collect information related to socioeconomic status (SES) nor occupation, parents and caregivers agreed with the information that peers shared in the focus groups, inferring that though there may be differences in experiences related to SES and occupation, the adults in the focus group experienced commonalities. One issue that was brought up in the new immigrant group was related to the cultural connection to reading. Parents and caregivers expressed frustration about the time when their children entered early childhood and elementary school. For some of the participants, they noted that the issue of reading was a particularly difficult one to address between the home and school:

“As an immigrant, ... we are not used to readings, but we hear lots of story. When we come here, last 2, 3 years, there is no homework. They start giving only reading – they tell the children to go home and read. But, because we are not growing up every day reading, some parent does not know how to read, because they are new and the book their

child brings home is in English. They're new, they don't know the language, they don't know when you read, they have also lot of emotion. But some cultures don't know, reading is just reading. That is also different.”

Related to reading, many participants shared that their cultural experiences with reading and storytelling were often expressed as a deficit. But, participants encouraged others to see how their approaches are an asset:

“We may not necessarily know the value or have the level of education or whatever have you, but I feel like there can be more of that in the Cambridge Public Schools, using more of that strength-based approach. And really looking into, what are immigrant families already doing, as opposed to what are they not doing. Because there are a lot of things we are doing with our children that aren't being valued or that's not being recognized. I wonder about stuff like that, as well.”

Many participants who shared this sentiment also mentioned that their children were then often recommended for special education or testing – that educators quickly assumed that there was a learning delay or disability instead of taking into account cultural backgrounds and approaches to learning, particularly when coming from another country right into the Cambridge Public Schools. Because of this, there is also a shared wondering if their identities and experiences as immigrants sets them up to be treated differently. And, culturally, for some immigrants, there is an expectation that the teacher is the expert and therefore the parent or caregiver does not have a right to intervene: “Majority of us that are sitting around this table are immigrants, right? Because as immigrants, we do give a lot of our rights to the schools and the teachers. We trust everything they say. We put our full trust into them.”

“We are Cambridge.”

A common theme that surfaced in interviews is the belief that one of the things that holds Cambridge back in addressing equity is that “we talk a good game about equity and justice and other things, but that it doesn’t always work out that way.” Participants also noted that previous efforts to address equity and inequity lacked voices of families who are most impacted by inequity and that “white and middle/upper class families tend to be most organized and heard in this space.” In addition, participants noted that engaging in equity work also requires a great deal of vulnerability – a willingness and ability to be criticized, to be wrong, and to be part of a larger solution.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were gathered from participants through the focus groups as well as individual and small group interviews. In addition, when appropriate, recommendations are provided as a result of current high impact practices in K-12 education, organizational leadership, and equity-based work.

One of the limitations of the study was time. Because the focus groups and interviews were between 30-60 minutes, the majority of the time was spent with participants discussing the root causes of equity. In the final 5-10 minutes, participants focused on making recommendations for how to address inequities in the CPSD system. Because of the time and structure of groups and interviews, the recommendations provided solely from the transcripts are limited. Therefore, the recommendations below address statements from three sources: 1) recommendations provided by participants from the focus groups and interviews (provided in plain text within the report), and 2) *recommendations that are rooted in previous research studies exploring the root causes of equity in schools and education*, and 3) *recommendations based in practitioner work and school leadership (provided in italics within the report)*.

School culture

1. Develop district and school wide equity statements that express both a reflective commitment to diversity as well as a vision/aspiration statement that the school seeks to move forward. Make these visible, clear, and ones that guide the work of the school.

2. Create opportunities for teachers from underrepresented backgrounds within the school to connect with or meet in affinity spaces as a way to strengthen sense of belonging and reduce isolation.
3. Hold listening sessions throughout the year as a way to improve and/or gauge current climate and practices of the school.
4. Conduct an investigation into the climate and the culture of the school with a particular lens towards exploring equity and inequity. Identify aspects of the school, including long-standing traditions or practices, that may be contributing to inequity.
5. Develop opportunities for all those who work in the school to feel a part of the school community. This recommendation is emphasized for those schools that have Out of School Time professionals who come to the school, who (through the focus groups) articulated feeling “othered” at the host school, and who feel disconnected to the school culture. Deepening this connection benefits the relationships at the school and, in turn, result in better relationships that serve children.
6. One aspect of school culture that was represented in concerns by families of color, in particular Black families, is the desire to have their students challenged academically. Many expressed experiences with teachers of color who challenged their children in the classroom whereas they have had experiences with white teachers who tended to rely on “Oh, just keep doing what you’re doing at home” as opposed to providing stimulation in the classroom. Raise awareness of teachers of Black children about recognizing the need for academic challenge when needed and when requested.

7. For schools, in particular, that are named after people of color or influential activists, be sure that the school community understands the significance of the name changes as well as the significance of the person for who it was named.
8. *Create pathways for learning about school culture through the experiences of various stakeholders. Similar to the focus groups for this grant, seek information about experiences related to diversity, inclusion, and equity within the school community in order to improve, address, and strengthen school culture.*

Race and racism

1. As race and racism were noted as a root cause of inequity, special attention must be paid to the ways in which race and racism are expressed in overt and covert ways in the district.
2. Participants in the focus groups noted that one of the barriers to addressing racism in the district is the overwhelming belief that Cambridge is a progressive, liberal, and socially just community that is beyond racism. Because of this, as reflected in the focus groups, the community, as a whole, sometimes behaves as if there are not major issues to be addressed. One way that this is expressed is in the disbelief when issues of racism do surface (e.g, “I can’t believe that happened in Cambridge!”). One strategy is to continue to amplify the ways in which racism is embedded into even the most progressive and liberal communities and the impact of racism in the community. This can occur through community dialogues and workshop, through professional and personal development that highlights systemic and institutional oppression, and call-in participants who may feel they do not have to participate because “this is Cambridge.”

3. Continue the work of sense-making teams and groups that are looking at data through an equity lens. Continue the work of looking at numbers related to course offerings, class structures, discipline, representation, and experiences through the lens of systemic racism. Without an explicit racialized and equity-focused lens, it is easy to explain away issues as not being directly connected to race and racism. However, in order to address issues of racial equity, it is important to isolate race and lean into issues of race and racism.
4. While racial and racialized experiences focus on issues within and between Black and White communities and populations in Cambridge, it is important to not render invisible other racialized groups in the district, including but not limited to Latinx communities; Asian and Asian American communities; immigrant and new-immigrant communities; communities that include families and individuals who hold undocumented and refugee status, among others.
5. Develop transparency related to cultural competency vs anti-racism approaches. As the Building Equity Bridges project focuses on identifying root causes of inequity, clarify the capacity for moving from culturally competency to anti-racism, acknowledging that this work needs to have a starting point as well as a goal.
6. Continue collaborative and cross-constituency conversations related to student experiences at CRLS, particularly amplifying the concerns from the BSU, and the experiences associated with students who feel marginalized, targeted, and afraid of speaking up against racism.
7. Continue collaborative and cross-constituency conversations related to faculty/teachers at CRLS who both are eager to support students and those who believe the actions were

divisive. Seek opportunities to gain perspective with the goal of moving this work forward to reduce racism and experiences with racism in CRLS.

8. Create model for mentoring, particularly for Black and Brown children, who do not typically see themselves represented in the adult community during the day.
9. *While there are intersections of identity in issues of race and class, it is important to isolate race when developing strategy for reducing race and racism. One helpful tool is *Courageous Conversations on Race* (Singleton & Linton, 2005) which provides six conditions for focusing work on race:*
 - a. *Establish a racial context that is personal, local and immediate – speak from your own experience.*
 - b. *Isolate race while acknowledging other factors – don't avoid the topic of race.*
 - c. *Listen to others' experiences of race. Expect disagreement in viewpoints.*
 - d. *Notice White Talk vs. Color Commentary. Notice perspective of all participants: intellectual, emotional, moral, or social.*
 - e. *Establish agreement on a contemporary working definition of race.*
 - f. *Examine the presence and role of Whiteness and its impact on the conversation and problem being addressed.*

Experiences of Teachers and Staff related to racial diversity

1. Knowing that students gain academic, social, and other educational benefits when provided with diverse educators and role models, CPSD should continue to improve student outcomes by increasing the diversity of our teaching faculty to better reflect and respond to the experiences of our students (Diversity Dashboard, Cambridge Public Schools, n.d.).

2. As the teacher intern program is helpful to widen pathways to teaching positions in the district, CPS should partner with organizations that seek to increase pathways for racially diverse teachers. These partnerships might also need to occur outside of the immediate district (including districts proximate to Boston). These partnerships take years to build and return on investment might not be as apparent in the early stages, so it is important that the district commits to developing sustained partnerships despite slow growth.
3. Prioritize diversity, inclusion, and equity in the hiring process by reviewing interview questions that might help identify candidates who already have demonstrated fluency in this work. The interview process should assess skills, experience, desire, and behaviors that demonstrate this commitment and align it with the goals of the district's commitment to equity.
4. Provide support and training related to identifying bias (both implicit and explicit) in the recruitment and hiring process. All hiring managers and individuals who participate in any aspect of recruitment and hiring should be well-versed in aspects of bias in the hiring process and actively work to reduce those biases. *Affordable webinars, for example, are available through School Reform Initiative related to culturally relevant recruitment, retention and responsibility.*
5. Create a comprehensive onboarding process for all employees, and in particular, employees who have historically experienced higher turnover than others.
6. Identify ways that the union can better engage educators of color. Explore why educators of color are not engaging in the union and how that engagement might be supportive as some educators of color are frustrated with their experiences in the district.

7. Pay attention to educator of color burnout, often experienced because educators of color take on the taxation of having to represent opinions, perspectives and experiences of people of color that, when they are not in the room, do not get heard. Often, educators of color experience having to be in many places at once in order to have representation present.
8. Parents and caregivers of Black children, in particular, have noted the need for more Black male teachers in the district and, in particular, in the full-time classroom. While teacher diversity is beneficial to all students, parents and caregivers of Black children note how important it is for their children to see professionals at school who have racial affinity with them.
9. *The current status of teachers of color as of October 2018 is 24% and the goal set by Fall 2020 is to reach 30% (Diversity Dashboard, Cambridge Public Schools, n.d.). In order to achieve this, further data should be gathered as to the current experiences of teachers and staff of color to address why they choose to teach in Cambridge, why they stay, and what reasons might compel them to leave. The focus groups only began to explore these issues; however much more data can be collected about their experiences to help shape a more inclusive recruitment and retention process.*
10. *Build a cross-district committee to examine both successes and barriers for recruiting and retaining teachers of color. Data should be gathered on multiple factors such as narrative experiences, salaries, additional barriers to living in Cambridge (e.g., cost of living), social isolation, types of positions offered to teachers and staff of color, mentoring opportunities, social and professional networking.*

Culturally Relevant Curriculum

1. Begin assessment of curriculum and the ways in which social identifiers, such as race, are integrated into the curriculum. Make note of whether these identifiers are rooted in a deficit or asset model. *A helpful guideline is provided by the Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium here: <https://maec.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Criteria-for-an-Equitable-Classroom-1.pdf>*
2. Explore ways to expand representation, as a start, of different identities. Begin by adding texts, authors, or perspectives outside of the traditional Eurocentric approach to show the depth and breadth of a local and global community.
3. Engage with evidence-based professional organizations (*e.g., Association of Social Science Teachers, Literature Teachers*) that have guidelines and recommendations for culturally responsive and reflective classrooms that integrate diverse texts, practices, and projects.
4. Critically examine processes or texts that are out of date or that do not reflect our current climate. In a resource-restrictive setting, we tend to rely on texts that we have used for years, despite these texts being outdated or using words/language that is no longer acceptable. Be sure to review readings, assignments, or work that might include these examples.
5. In response to a growing pressure and need to expand our narratives and understandings of racialized groups, map out the number of times racialized minorities are described from a deficit perspective as opposed to an asset perspective. Reframe this narrative and allow opportunities for children to have a more complicated worldview, moving away from the danger of a single story.

6. Partner with existing specialists or experts in the Cambridge Public School system and include them in decision making processes related to curriculum, including but not limited to time spent on particular topics. This might vary between schools and even among classes and partnering with experts will help teachers and leaders adjust and adapt these lessons.
7. Create more explicit understandings about where accountability is held related to equity-based practices. In addition, be clear about who can hold professionals accountable for equity-based work. Currently, individuals who are committed to this work are unsure how to hold others accountable to do this work because they “have no real power to hold anyone accountable.”
8. *Create structures for accountability and partnership within departments and between departments. Bring together teams of educators who can collaborate and examine existing curriculum. Seek input from other schools across the district to learn about how others are approaching this work.*

Time and Structure

1. Utilize summer time more efficiently. Many leaders and administrators in the district are 12-month employees. While the summer time allows for more focused time, meetings are often few and far between because of vacation schedules. Create blocks of time during which leaders and administrators are present to engage in focused work together related to equity.
2. Research, identify, and invest in training that focuses on issues related to identity. Teachers and school professionals, in the focus groups, mentioned they do not feel equipped to handle particular situations related to identity when they come up. Students

affirmed that they believe many of their teachers do not have the skill set to do this (e.g., as evidenced by their experiences with some “X” block topics in CRLS). Additionally, some focus group participants noted that they do not intervene because of the fear of being called “racist” if they handle a situation incorrectly. Training, development, practice, and feedback are all important components of addressing issues of identity and equity in our schools.

3. Invest in training beyond the one-off workshop module. Investigate what ongoing and sustainable training would look like in the district. The current work related to D.E.E.P. is a good start. And, a next step is to explore how to scale this work so that it can permeate throughout the entire city, school district, school, classroom, and homes.
4. Focus on building capacity within the school district and teacher/professional communities. Focus on teachers who have a willingness to learn how to become facilitators/trainers in this work – thereby increasing the personal and professional investment they have in the district and serving as mentors to others. One helpful program is the Courageous Conversations on Race which teaches individuals and communities protocols for how to do engage in meaningful dialogue around race.
5. Amplify the work that is being done within the district by highlighting schools, leaders, CPSD community members, teachers, and students who are doing this work well. While engaging in transformative equity work is difficult and challenging, there are individuals and school leaders who are doing it. Provide structured learning opportunities for others to learn about both their successes and challenges in equity work.

Communication and Advocacy

1. Create structures and pathways for communication for Out of School Time professionals to make connections with school teachers and staff.
2. Develop opportunities for OST professionals to know the school community, thereby reducing the effects of feeling disconnected and “othered” in a school.
3. Invest in programs, processes, and people who can help deliver school-related messages in multiple languages. Do not rely solely on culturally-deficient translation such as Google translate. While this is a helpful shortcut, and parents/caregivers in the focus groups noted that it was “at least a start”, particular nuances and culturally relevant information is missed or inaccurate.
4. While email tends to be the easiest form of communication, parents and caregivers noted that having a phone call or automated message was also helpful. Explore opportunities to diversify the ways in which information is shared from school to parents/caregivers.
5. Provide clear and structured opportunities for families to update their information. Some participants noted that they were not even sure if the school had their correct phone number or email address. Without prompting, it is difficult to know whether this occurs. Create a clear pathway for updating information, communicating between school and home with accurate information, and make these pathways accessible.
6. Create opportunities for parents and caregivers of color to give comment in meetings, public forums, and council meetings. While some have expressed that they do not go because of issues of trust or worry that they will be one of the few, it is up to meeting

leaders to make sure that their voices are not silenced nor ignored. Create structures for the voices of the least heard to have pathways for communication and feedback.

Community and Sense of Belonging

1. Examine current meeting structures and times for Parent Teacher Organizations (PTO) to ensure greater access for families from diverse backgrounds, including adults with work schedules that do not align with the school day, child care and meals/snacks at meetings, and access to information when parents and caregivers cannot attend in person.
2. Consider forming diversity councils at each school consisting of parents/caregivers, faculty and staff, and school leaders. The purpose of these councils is to bring together stakeholders who care deeply about issues of diversity and inclusion, who can assist in creating and hosting programs and learning opportunities within the school, and who can provide accountability across the school for working towards greater diversity, equity, and inclusion.
3. Knowing that students come from all areas of the district to attend a school (particularly at the elementary and upper levels), explore opportunities for families to come together to build community. In the focus groups, participants noted that not being grouped in “neighborhood schools” meant it was difficult to create community, to develop networks of support, and created feeling of isolation. This isolation, in some cases, is compounded when students and families already feel disconnected from the schools and the community. Consider exploring opportunities for gathering in affinity or ethnic based communities.
4. *Continue existing work on Employee Resource Groups (ERG) that were written about in May 2018 as a way to better support adult community in the Cambridge Public Schools.*

In particular, develop outreach methods for teachers and staff of color who report feeling isolated in their school communities due to underrepresentation.

Voice and Feedback

1. In partnership with the CEA, develop processes for students to provide feedback about their classroom experiences and their relationships/interactions with their teachers and school adults. While some students noticed that feedback or surveys occur at the end of a school year, this timing is not helpful in addressing or course correcting mid-year if necessary.
2. Explore the opportunities for students to be involved in aspects of the hiring process as a way to engage student voice. This process also gives candidates an opportunity to learn what it is like to be a student in the Cambridge Public School system, deepening their understandings of the expectations of teacher, educators, and leaders.
3. Develop aspects of the performance plan to include learning about diversity, equity, and inclusion, giving teachers and educators a pathway for growth while also establishing measures of accountability. Ensure that those who are responsible for measures of accountability of evaluation also have significant training in diversity, equity, and inclusion to support teachers and educators in this work. Research has demonstrated that bias exists in the evaluation process (MacNeill, Driscoll, & Hunt, 2015) and therefore those who are responsible for evaluation should be aware of how these manifest and how to best process this information with teachers and leaders.
4. Develop a systematic and predictable pathway for feedback from parents and caregivers. While parent/teacher conferences are a helpful way for this to occur, these conferences are focused on the experiences of the student in the classroom. Parents/caregivers are also

seeking pathways for providing feedback about their experiences with the school.

Identify ways for this to occur, make the process transparent, and develop awareness for how parents/caregivers can provide this feedback.

5. Acknowledge that there may be cultural differences that exist in ways in which parents/caregivers interact with the school. For some, being involved as parent/caregiver is expected and aligns with advocacy for their child. For others, there is a cultural context for parents/caregivers to not interfere with what occurs at school. While these approaches may be culturally situated, it is important for schools and teachers to seek culturally relevant ways to solicit feedback and that the lack of communication or advocacy does not always signal satisfaction, but rather is culturally situated. Given the ethnic, racial, and religious diversity (among others) within the district, special attention should be given to how families/individuals from different cultural backgrounds engage with the school.
6. Related to decision making and/or soliciting feedback in a decision-making process, explore pathways for engaging stakeholders in providing feedback regarding building or district level decisions. This process helps to build process through an equity-based lens when stakeholders from different backgrounds and experiences can come together to inform decision making.
7. Shift from a model of public process to one that centers the voices of people of color or those who have been historically marginalized. Typically, those who have access to privilege and power are over-represented in public processes. Create a format and system for hearing those who tend not to have access to power and privilege when making informed decisions.

Importance of Relationship on Student Engagement

1. Support teacher learning for engaging diverse learners in the classroom. With large class sizes and a diverse range of learners, teachers might often use strategies that isolate a group of learners. Provide greater support and ongoing professional development in this area.
2. In the hiring and recruitment process, communicate to prospective teachers about the reality of a Cambridge teaching experience. Specifically, make it clear that the district is not only made up of “children of college professors” (which some have a perception that it is). Be clear about the history of Cambridge as well as the diversity of learners and identities in the district so that teachers are prepared for teaching a diverse population.
3. Communicate frequently with parents/caregivers about how the student is doing in class, ways to partner, and opportunities for feedback. Parents/caregivers might be able to provide a context that is missing from the academic day.
4. Develop and provide culturally responsive and relevant curriculum. When people see themselves in the curriculum and content, they are more likely to be engaged in the learning process. *Conduct a cultural audit (NYU Equity Scorecard is a helpful self-audit) and make improvements to existing curriculum.*
5. Continue efforts to recruit and retain educators of color who can benefit the learning of all students and students of color, in particular.
6. Revisit recommendations related to homework. For some situations, homework is a helpful way to extend the learning beyond the classroom, to develop habits of learning, and to engage the family after the academic day. Develop an inclusive pathway for feedback related to homework policies and practices.

Discipline

1. Explore the connections between discipline and issues connected to greater mental health support. As reported by CRLS students in the focus group, they believe a number of behavior issues are a result of peers not having structures for coping with stress or personal challenges. CRLS students, in particular, have asked for more access to professionals who can provide greater mental health support and connection during the school day.
2. Invest in programs that and people who can provide greater mental health support in our schools. Students as well as parents/caregivers identify the need for greater access to mental health support at the school level, acknowledging that there may exist equity and access issues for mental health outside of the school day. Find creative ways to support this request.
3. Parents and caregivers of elementary and middle school students expressed concern that they often heard about discipline or behavior issues only after multiple incidents have occurred. Address issues with parents and caregivers early on and provide pathways for collaboration and support.
4. Parents and caregivers, particularly of Black children, expressed concern that some disciplinary actions may be informed by race and racialized interactions between students and teachers. Educators should be aware that this perception and dynamic exists and develop personal and professional identity-conscious ways of addressing the relationship between parents and caregivers and educators.
5. Support teachers to manage and address behavioral issues within the classroom. It is unclear, from the focus groups and interviews, as to what the root causes of these

challenges are; however, participants in the focus groups and interviews identified this as a root cause that must be explored more thoroughly.

Limitations to Methodology: An Equity Based Lens

Exploring issues of inequity and root causes of inequity balance between existing tensions: the tension that inequity in education is well documented along with the tension of not fully knowing where to begin with addressing inequity. Inequity in education has been present in the foundations of education and over 100 years later, we are only beginning to address these root causes.

Qualitative research, in its approach, is designed to uplift narrative related to a topic, experience, or issue. One benefit, among many, of the qualitative process is the opportunity to contextualize an experience or phenomenon and to hear from individuals and communities that are left out of structures of power, influence, and privilege. The Building Equity Bridges process took a qualitative approach in order to engage with individuals and communities that have not historically been heard. In addition, the qualitative processes allowed for 1:1 or small group interviews with district and school leaders to better understand how equity and inequity is experienced in CPSD and how we, collectively, might address inequity.

A limitation of qualitative approach is that it relies heavily on the willingness of participants to share their stories. And, as we explore issues of equity, we are aware that characteristics of trust, transparency, vulnerability can serve as both springboards and barriers to the qualitative process. Further, an individual's personal and professional lens are always present in their narratives, and therefore, qualitative research relies on the individual's self-reflection and story-telling.

As the process of engaging with the findings began to unfold, a major question began to surface: “Given the many hours of focus groups, interviews, small group sessions, did we find out the answer to our question of what are the root causes of inequity in the Cambridge Public School district?” To some extent, the root causes of inequity in Cambridge are, largely, the same as many urban school districts that find themselves in the balance of race, class, and access. Unique to Cambridge, however, is the proximity to higher education and access to financial resources and robustness within the district compared to other urban centers. Further, as the home to some of the most respected universities and colleges, the city of Cambridge has an ethos of highly-educated, progressive, socially just and liberal-leaning communities living and working within a larger context of diverse communities of race and class.

A focus on senior leadership in an urban district

According to Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia and Nolly (2004), teachers, administrators, school board members, community members, and policy makers may be aware of inequities in various aspects of their schools, “but they rarely have systematically examined these areas and then devised ways to eliminate the inequities” (p. 133). The researchers also noted that the urban school leaders in their studies, “do not have a clear, accurate, or useful understanding of the degree of inequity present in their own schools and school districts” (Skrla et al, 2004, p. 141) and teachers and administrators often routinely avoid overt discussions of race as a factor in inequitable school outcomes (Skrla et al, 2004, p. 141).

District leaders play an integral role in the implementation of equity strategies. Andrews and Ridenour (2006) found that a professional learning program for administrators focused on equity issues increased participant awareness of stereotyping, discrimination, and biased language. This awareness informed the district leader’s interactions, priorities, and even

relationships with families and students. Further, districts control resources (e.g., release time) that enable teacher learning. As the participants in the study articulated, they were looking for more opportunities to engage in equity work but lacked the structural opportunities for release time or professional development. Finally, according to Ross and Berger (2009), principals need to “recognize that schools are nested in a systemically biased society in which powerful forces support the existing hierarchy of social groups. Principals with a deep commitment to equity outcomes need to take a critical stance toward the extra-school forces that inhibit social justice and act as advocates for underprivileged students in the community beyond the school” (p. 276).

Leading and social justice. Educational leadership scholars have made significant contributions to our understanding of the ways educators lead for social justice in schools (Marshall & Gerstl-Pepin, 2005; Marshall & Oliva, 2006). A social justice orientation toward educational leadership practice means that practitioners understand “how institutionalized theories, norms, and practices in schools and society lead to social, economic, and educational inequities” (Dantley & Tillman, 2006, p. 17). This understanding often empowers leaders to serve historically marginalized students and disrupt embedded norms that privilege certain students at the expense of others. However, awareness of social injustices is not sufficient, school leaders must act when they identify inequity (Brooks 2006). School and district leaders who engage in this work often contend with organizational barriers that perpetuate inequity within schools (e.g., Gooden, 2005) and are uniquely positioned to facilitate meaningful change at the building and district level.

Leaders who have committed to examining inequities and the systemic role of the school district can make real change. As one commits to understanding social injustices and the impact on students, teachers, and families, district leaders move from awareness to action. And, as many

leaders have discovered, engaging in equity work is difficult and risky. Working against a system that was, in its founding, not meant to be equal, district and school leaders learn what it means to disrupt social structures, norms, and processes can lead to interpersonal and institutional reprisals (Brooks and Jean-Marie, 2007). Furthermore, critical activists face potential threats from inside their organizations and from external stakeholders if they challenge longstanding traditions, regardless of whether it is from a moral high ground (Larson & Murtadha, 2002).

Future Discussions for the senior leadership level. Taken together, there are a number of challenges to engaging in this inquiry related to root causes of inequity and recommendations to address inequity. One of the key challenges in addressing equity-based work is at the most senior and administrative levels. It is important to note that findings within the confine of the study did not directly address the conflict or risk embedded at the senior levels in addressing inequity. Reasons for the lack of findings among the senior team are not as easy to dismiss as “they were not discussed”, however. Reasons for not directly addressing inequities within the senior team could include: a) lack of trust between participant and researcher; b) focus on departmental areas facing outward as opposed to the internal operating culture that contributes to inequity at the senior level; c) concerns about how conversations might be presented within this report.

Knowing that these exist from an equity-based methodology, the following observations are posed as questions to better explore limitations of the study, the qualitative approach, and questions related to the work of the senior administrative team. Because these were not findings explicitly within the findings of the focus group, they are presented as questions so as to amplify equity-based approaches that should be addressed among the senior leadership team:

- To what extent have leaders within the district addressed their own learning related to inequity, particularly racial inequity, in their own leadership and engagement? Knowing that leadership matters, how are decisions at the leadership level informed by equity-based frameworks?
- Knowing that shifting from diversity to inclusion to equity requires risk and conflict to existing practices, policies, and perspectives, to what extent have leaders within the district addressed the inherent risks and conflict that come with equity-based work?
- What keeps inequity in place at the leadership level? How is inequity reinforced through existing policies and practices that were in place to maintain inequity and limit access of marginalized groups? How might existing policies and practices unduly burden staff, students, and families who hold marginalized identities?
- To what extent is “serving student learning and growth” a priority at all levels within the district? How might educational approaches differ from business approaches to education? Have these been discussed and reconciled, if at all, at the district level?
- Knowing that education has a foundation of inequity, how might our current approaches in decision making, teaching, practices, and policies uphold this inequity?
- Given the resources and time spent on the Building Equity Bridges project, to what extent is this considered a district-wide initiative with district-wide information and buy-in, and to what extent is, as articulated by some participants,

this another version of just asking for information? What does the district leadership believe happens next?

- Knowing that equity work often falls on the shoulders and backs of few people – who often, though not always, are people of color or hold identities in marginalized groups – to what extent is this work structurally supported as opposed to an add-on for stakeholders? Related to the “time and structure” themes within the findings, how has time and structure been created and continued for this work?
- Where do we find ourselves in forced-choice models that either focus on compliance or on access? In equity work, conflict and risk are inherent in the processes that seek to disrupt and revise existing oppressive structures. Therefore, what is the pathway for engaging in equity-based work in systems and structures that were built based on issues of inequity? How are decisions made based on this model? How does or will leadership approach equity-based work in response to the investment of the district and individuals in this project?

Conclusion

A common theme echoed in the focus groups and interviews was “We are Cambridge. We are supposed to be able to do this.” This sentiment reinforces that the Cambridge community, as a whole, believes that this work is possible and that there are resources, opportunities, and the will to work towards equity in the district. However, the same sentiment of “We are Cambridge. We are supposed to be able to do this” also denotes that the city and its people are further behind than they believe they should be. As one participant stated, “We need to be honest with ourselves about this. We need an internal reckoning about who we are, who we

say we are, what we do, and what we are prepared to do.” Systemic inequity is baked into the very identities of our public schools, and therefore this work is difficult. Addressing systemic inequity requires a detailed dismantling of thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes that reinforce a dominant narrative and approach. It is important to acknowledge that even in a city that is as racially diverse as Cambridge that these dominant systemic inequities exist. In order to move forward in this work, the community must first embrace that the work is difficult, that it will take time, and that there is an urgency to addressing these inequities.

Addressing the issue of equity and inequity is not without risk – risk of relationships, power, privilege, and fragility. As one participant noted, “People in Cambridge are all for doing the right thing, until that right thing impacts what their own child will have access to.” When asked, “What is one thing you really want to see in this report?” a number of participants noted, “I want to see us be honest with ourselves. I want us to be honest that, yes, Cambridge is a great place to work, to live, and to go to school; but it does not always feel that way for everyone.”

In this qualitative process, participants were given the opportunity to share their experiences living, learning, leading, and working in Cambridge. While quantitative data is important in informing our understanding of education and inequity, it is the voices, narratives, and stories of individuals and group that help us to contextualize what these issues are, how they are experienced, and how we might begin to address them. Though we work to resist the practice of making decisions rooted in a single-story, it is important to commit to the practice of listening to, and seeking out, those stories of our neighbors, students, teachers and staff, community members, leaders, and all those whose lives are impacted by education in Cambridge.

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Appendices

APPENDIX A: CEA Member Organizer Application: *Building Equity Bridges* grant (24 positions, individuals may apply for multiple positions)

Description:

Funded by the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, *Building Equity Bridges* is a partnership between Cambridge Public Schools (CPS) and the Cambridge Education Association (CEA).

Our goal is to deepen our understanding of the barriers to educational equity that are faced by CPS students, families, and educators from groups that have faced historical and systemic marginalization within our schools.

Building Equity Bridges will bring together diverse stakeholder groups to listen and learn.

Through honest and authentic dialogue, we will explore root causes of the persistent inequities that are limiting the futures of too many CPS students and graduates. We will investigate our individual, collective, and cumulative impacts – and our ongoing opportunities to more effectively promote equity.

Ultimately, the CEA believes that this work will increase our individual and collective capacities as educators to 1) advance inclusion, equity, and racial justice for and with our students and 2) disrupt and dismantle racism and inequity in our schools.

As part of this work, CEA Member Organizers will support member engagement work among CPS educators. This work is intended to:

- create inclusive and safe spaces where CEA educators and other community stakeholders can build community, exchange practices, and engage in dialogue to reflect on equity issues in our schools;
- build awareness and interest among CEA educators to engage with the *Building Equity Bridges* project;
- ensure high and diverse educator participation in equity-focused surveys, interviews, and focus groups,
- identify CEA members to engage in equity-focused dialogue, action and leadership moving forward; and
- develop findings and recommendations about sustaining equity-focused CEA member engagement beyond the grant period, so that our individual and collective actions as educators serve to 1) advance inclusion, equity, and racial justice for and with our students and 2) disrupt and dismantle racism and inequity in our schools.

Member Organizers will be trained and supported in this work by Lissette Castillo, the CEA's Equity & Engagement Coordinator.

Responsibilities: From April 2018 through February 2019, each Member Organizer will:

- **Recruit and engage colleagues with an interest in dialogue, action, and/or leadership toward inclusion, equity, and racial justice**;
- **Support the CEA to broaden, diversify, and deepen educator engagement in Building Equity Bridges work** (including participation in surveys, interviews, focus groups, and email lists);
- **Collaborate with colleagues to organize at least one district-wide equity-focused event for educators**;
- **Attend 2-3 gatherings with other Member Organizers to build community, share practices, and develop recommendations to advance inclusion, equity, and racial justice in Cambridge; and**
- **Communicate with grant staff (electronically and in person) to: share input and feedback about the work of the grant; share organizing approaches; identify lessons learned; and provide information to help inform the grant team and the CEA Executive Board about our work.**

Qualifications:

- Ability to facilitate, organize, or support equity-focused dialogue and events;
 - Ability to create bridges and establish strong connections with colleagues and networks of educators;
 - Experience using authentic ways to engage colleagues; and
 - Strong interpersonal and communication skills.
- Note: This position is only open to current CPS employees.*

Start and End Dates:

4/1/2018 - 2/28/2019

Contract Amount:

\$30.00 per hour. Up to 15 hours by 2/28/2019 for each of the 24 positions listed below, for a possible stipend of up to \$450 per position.

Please note that one individual can apply for multiple Member Organizer positions. *For example, someone might apply to be the Member Organizer at two different elementary schools and apply to be a Member Organizer for Educators of Color district-wide.*

Additionally, two individuals can share a position. *For example, two colleagues could collaborate (and split the stipend) to share the Member Organizer role at their school.*

Educators of Color (2 positions to engage educators of color district-wide)	Morse
Amigos	Peabody
Baldwin	Tobin Montessori
Cambridgeport	Cambridge Street Upper School

MLK	Putnam Ave Upper School
Fletcher Maynard Academy	Rindge Ave Upper School
Graham & Parks	Vassal Lane Upper School
Haggerty	Cambridge Rindge & Latin School (4 positions)
Kennedy Longfellow	High School Extension Program
King Open	CEA educators who work from the district office

Please include the following information:

1. Name:
2. School:
3. What is your current position?
4. List other additional responsibilities (activities and volunteer work at your school) independent from your current position:
5. Please share 1-2 examples as to how you have helped create inclusive and safe spaces while also engaging in dialogue that addresses equity issues at your school?
6. Please provide 1-2 recommendations about sustaining equity at CPS in advancing inclusion, equity, and racial justice for our students and the teachers.

APPENDIX B: Family/CPS Community Member Organizer Job Description

No experience in organizing is necessary to be a family organizer. Family organizers will be coached and supported by grant staff.

The Cambridge Public Schools (CPS), in partnership with the Cambridge Educators Association (CEA), has been awarded the Nellie Mae Building Equity Bridges Grant.

CPS has in the past launched, and continues to implement, many initiatives to address inequities rooted in – but not limited to – race, income, language, learning styles and immigration status. However, our best intentions and committed efforts have been insufficient on a systemic level.

So, during this one-year grant period, we will:

- Attempt to understand the root causes of inequities across the district by critically examining existing systems and structures.
- Facilitate a transparent process centered on the voices of CPS students, families, educators, and community members.
- Engage those affected by entrenched systems of oppression, such as racism.

Central to our approach to investigating the root causes of inequities in our schools and communities are structured focus groups with youth, families, and educators. During these focus groups we hope to create spaces for students, families, and educators to speak openly and honestly about their experiences with the Cambridge Public Schools. We are looking for family organizers to support recruiting parents and guardians to focus groups, and to help to facilitate focus groups.

Duties:

(Organizers will work closely with the lead researcher, Liza Talusan.)

- Participate in a 2-hour training in late September/early October with lead researcher to gain knowledge of the qualitative process, focus groups, and facilitation and develop group questions.
- Conduct outreach to identify individuals and groups with whom you will co-facilitate focus groups.
- Work closely with lead researcher in October-November to gather a group of individuals for the focus groups.
- Co-facilitate at least 2 90-minute focus groups between October and December with community members and debrief with principal researcher before/after each group.
- Meet as a facilitation-leader group in December to discuss major themes and highlights from your group.
- Review write up from principal researcher in early February to verify that the report accurately reflects the concerns and experiences you heard in your focus groups.

Requirements and Responsibilities:

- Commitment to confidentiality and discretion related to information shared during this project.
- Have established trusting relationships with other families.
- Actively seeking multilingual facilitator-leaders.

Start and End Dates:

9/5/2018 - 3/1/2019

Contract Amount:

\$25.00 per hour. Up to 30 hours by 3/1/2019

APPENDIX C: Youth Organizer Job Description

No experience in organizing is necessary to be a youth organizer. Youth organizers will be coached and supported by grant staff.

The Cambridge Public Schools (CPS), in partnership with the Cambridge Educators Association (CEA), has been awarded the Nellie Mae Building Equity Bridges Grant.

CPS has in the past launched, and continues to implement, many initiatives to address inequities rooted in – but not limited to – race, income, language, learning styles and immigration status. However, our best intentions and committed efforts have been insufficient on a systemic level.

So, during this one-year grant period, we will:

- Attempt to understand the root causes of inequities across the district by critically examining existing systems and structures.
- Facilitate a transparent process centered on the voices of CPS students, families, educators, and community members.
- Engage those affected by entrenched systems of oppression, such as racism.

Central to our approach to investigating the root causes of inequities in our schools and communities are structured focus groups with youth, families, and educators. During these focus groups we hope to create spaces for students, families, and educators to speak openly and honestly about their experiences with the Cambridge Public Schools. We are looking for youth organizers to support recruiting parents and guardians to focus groups, and to help to facilitate focus groups.

Duties:

(Youth organizers will work closely with the lead researcher, Liza Talusan.)

- Participate in a 2-hour training on October 28th 1-3pm with lead researcher to gain knowledge of the qualitative process, focus groups, and facilitation and develop group questions.
- Conduct outreach to identify individuals and groups with whom you will co-facilitate focus groups.
- Work closely with lead researcher in mid-September to gather a group of individuals for the focus groups.
- Co-facilitate at least one 90-minute focus groups in November and early December with youth and debrief with principal researcher before/after.
- Meet as a facilitation-leader group in January to discuss major themes and highlights from your group.
- Review write up from principal researcher in February to verify that the report accurately reflects the concerns and experiences you heard in your focus groups.

Requirements and Responsibilities:

- Commitment to confidentiality and discretion related to information shared during this project.
- Have established trusting relationships with other young people.
- Actively seeking multilingual facilitator-leaders.

Start and End Dates:

10/1/2018 - 3/1/2019

Contract Amount:

\$15.00 per hour. Up to 25 hours by 3/1/2019

APPENDIX D: Semi-structured Interview protocol (a guide for focus group discussions)

“Hello, and welcome to our focus group today. My name is Dr. Liza Talusan, and I am the facilitator for this focus group. This project is designed to explore the root causes of inequity in the Cambridge Public School district so that we can build better bridges between and among our community. We have about 60 minutes together, and I’ll be asking some questions to help get the conversation going.

This focus group is voluntary; however, in order to participate, I will be asking you to read and sign a consent form. At no time is your name, child/student’s name, school, neighborhood or any identifiable information about you being shared. Your confidentiality is of the utmost importance.

My role is to help get our conversation going, to guide you as you cover important and relevant topics, and to keep us on time. To do that, there are a few ground rules for this focus group:

- It is an expectation that we will respect other people’s opinions in this focus group. Assume best intentions. Speak the truth and hear the truth.
- So that we can remain on time and hear as many voices and experiences as possible, I may need to move the conversation along or re-direct us if we get off topic. My apologies in advance if it means I may interrupt you or ask you to yield some time to others.
- Finally, yet most important, these sessions are highly confidential. It is an utmost expectation that you are not discussing identifying information about people in this group outside of this group. We expect that you uphold confidentiality for each other in here.

This research project focuses on uncovering the root causes of inequity in the Cambridge Public School system, including the experiences of students, faculty, staff, and families:

- What do you believe **are** some of the root causes of inequity in CPS?
 - (additional follow up: Where do they come from? How did they come about? What do they look like today?)
- We understand that one of the root causes of inequity in education is race and racism. What have been your experiences related to issues of race and race equity in CPS?
 - What do you believe students, faculty, staff, and families face in CPS related to race and race equity?
- In thinking about leadership, what have you experienced - if anything - related to leadership and addressing inequity in CPS?
- What do you believe CPS is doing well related to equity or addressing inequity?
- What types of trainings, information, programs, policies, protocols or resources might be helpful for you in your work as a leader in the district? What would be helpful for faculty/staff/families?

- What recommendations would you make to the school district, leaders, teachers, families or other students that would make things better in Cambridge?

APPENDIX D: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

This project was designed to provide opportunities for individuals to share what they experienced related to inequity in education and in the Cambridge Public Schools system.

- What issues do you think individuals would bring up in these focus groups when asked about “inequity in education”?
- Why are those the ones that you believe would be brought up in the focus groups?
- What are some reasons why individuals would **choose to participate** in these focus groups?
- What are some reasons why individuals would **choose not to participate** in these focus groups?
- How might your answers help us understand the context of the focus group findings?

Participants were asked to provide some recommendations for how to address inequity in education (approximately the last 5-6 minutes of the focus group/interview).

- What do you believe might have been some recommendations that participants provided?

After reviewing the findings,

- What finding was MOST surprising to you? Why was it surprising to you?
- What did you expect to see that was NOT in the findings? What makes that important to you?
- How does the context of the previous conversation (about participation, barriers, expectations, etc) inform your view of what was surprising or what you did not see in the report?

Previous groups have provided feedback as to whether we should include ONLY recommendations made by participants or if we should include a combination of participant recommendations AND ones informed by previous research, literature, and practices.

- What are the benefits and challenges of only including recommendations by participants?
- What are the benefits and challenges of providing recommendations informed by previous research, literature and practices?

Given the recommendations provided in the paper, what are the biggest challenges to disrupting inequity in the school system, building, department, and classroom levels?

- What risks or challenges are embedded in addressing inequity in education?
- What risks are individuals and/or the district prepared to take?
- What risks are too great to address at the individual and district levels?