



WESTPORT PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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To: Westport Board of Education Members
From: Thomas Scarice, Superintendent of Schools
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Re: Equity Study Final Report - Presentation Cover Memo

Introduction

For well over a century public schools have considered the variance in performance across subgroups of students. Schools have historically disaggregated performance data and compared achievement results across specific subgroups of students. Typically, these comparisons have been made across socioeconomic status, racial/ethnic profile, gender, and disability identification, among others.

In the early 20th century, as the economy shifted from an agrarian base to an industrial base, waves of immigrants arrived on American shores, and industry saw the need to sort and stratify the workforce for these new jobs. Public schools responded in kind. At the time of this phenomenon, instruments were being developed to sort students based on their perceived innate measurable intelligence. Soon thereafter, schools developed tracking systems to sort subgroups of students based on their identification.

As the century progressed and the battle for civil rights raged, President Lyndon B. Johnson launched the “War on Poverty”. A cornerstone of this federal legislation, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), focused on public education and the commitment to equal access to quality education for all students, including all subgroups of students, particularly those below the poverty line. Title I, a provision of this legislation, distributed entitlement funds to schools by disaggregating subgroups of students, identifying those with a high percentage of students from low-income families, and distributing funding accordingly. This legislation sought to close the academic skills gap between students from low-income households and their peers in higher socioeconomic status school systems.

Various iterations of federal legislation disaggregating student performance followed over the subsequent decades, but perhaps none more impactful than the the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and the reauthorization of ESEA in 2002, known as “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB). Each federal law further specified the aim to disaggregate student subgroups in order to provide necessary services and close academic skills gaps across subgroups.

IDEA sought to ensure that all children with disabilities are appropriately identified and provided a free appropriate public education (FAPE) to meet their uniquely identified needs. NCLB sought to close academic skills gaps through accountability measures that explicitly disaggregated students by race, socioeconomic status, disability identification, and multilingual status. Schools and districts that did not close gaps across these subgroups on state tests in reading and math were sanctioned, punished, and allocated additional resources to promote equitable outcomes.

The original intent of NCLB continues to drive state and local education policy through the latest iteration, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), passed in 2015, by disaggregating student performance across racial, socioeconomic, disability identification, and multilingual status subgroups.

As this brief overview illustrates, over the past century, public schools have demonstrated a commitment to identifying students across various subgroups and compared performance levels in an effort to ensure equitable access to a high quality education, while marshaling resources in pursuit of equitable student performance outcomes.

The Westport Public Schools Equity Study

The majority of the members of the previous Westport Board of Education expressed interest in conducting an equity study. This study would continue the focus on various subgroups of students, yet rather than a singular focus on student achievement, this study also focused on the student experience.

The student experience, namely the social aspects of belonging and affiliation, is foundational to the overall academic, psychological, and social development for all students, and is a critically necessary component of public education. This crucial component of public schooling includes a moral imperative to ensure that the identities of all students are seen, heard, and valued.

Westport is not alone in this pursuit. On February 3, 2021, the Connecticut State Board of Education adopted a revised position statement on the promotion of a culturally responsive education to all students to close achievement gaps. In this statement, the Board stated that

“The purpose of this revision is to solidify State Board of Education’s continuing commitment that sufficient, specialized and appropriate resources must be provided to close the achievement gaps between high-performing and low-performing students, males and females, and students of different racial, ethnic and socioeconomic groups.”

This resolution also affirmed the state Board of Education commitment to equity and to providing a student experience in welcoming school environments by reiterating a joint statement made in December of 2020 by the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE), the Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents (CAPSS), and the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education (CABE):

“[The joint statement]... emphasized our mutual commitment to providing all students with school environments where they do not feel threatened regardless of their race, gender, gender identity or expression, religion, nationality, status of citizenship, or sexual orientation. It is our core responsibility as educators to do everything we can to foster environments that ensure equity, diversity and inclusion.”

Similarly, the Westport Public Schools sought to administer an equity study since:

- It is critical to continually assess the extent to which students feel a deep sense of belonging, affiliation, and access to opportunities in our schools.
- There is a national conversation on the topics of diversity, equity and inclusion in our society,
- There a number of compelling narratives have been shared from our own students and families that warrant our attention.
- The Comprehensive School Climate Inventory administered in 2018-19 identified a Sense of Social Emotional Security - a sense that students feel safe from verbal abuse, teasing and exclusion as a relative weakness in the district. Out of the 13 dimensions measured, a Sense of Social Emotional Security was identified as the area of greatest concern.

The nature of studies is to ask questions and contemplate. Ordinarily, questions beget more refined questions and eventually lead to interpretations and theories. Through a “RFP” process, the district secured the services of the New York University Steinhardt Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools to engage in this work. For well over a year, complicated by navigating the pandemic, a committee of educators and community members were able to consider evidence of disproportionality across subgroups with a focus on access to programs and services, school climate, and curriculum and instruction. The team looked at a variety of indicators (e.g. student performance, discipline data, surveys, focus group/interview feedback, etc.) to make interpretations, and consider further questions. During this time-bound study, the preponderance of time and effort was spent on assessing student access to programs, and the overall student experience.

Next Steps

The enclosed report represents the summary, interpretations, and recommendations of our consultants from the New York University Steinhardt Metropolitan Center. On Monday April 25, a team of Westport educators will present the findings and recommendations of this report to the Westport Board of Education. Although recommendations have been provided, specific district action steps have yet to be defined.

The report provides four recommendation focus areas:

1. develop welcoming and affirming school communities
2. increase access to educational programming for every student
3. overhaul data systems: disaggregate data collection, analysis, and usage
4. invest in ongoing professional learning and development

As I mentioned in previous messages, I have changed my original recommendation of including equity study action steps in the district strategic plan. The district has the capacity to maintain multiple plans and focus as evidenced by plans dedicated to facilities, technology, curriculum renewal, etc. As I also mentioned, there will be, and should be, explicit crossover across these plans, honoring a “systems” approach. However, I recommend that the forthcoming action steps of the equity study stand alone on the merits and value they can bring to our student population. The district committee of educators will reconvene to begin the development of action steps to continue advancing this work.

I have complete confidence that the work of all forthcoming action steps, while critically necessary for groups of students, will benefit all students of the Westport Public Schools. I look forward to the presentation on April 25 and subsequent action steps moving forward.