

## Promoting Equity and Meaningful Learning for All

Arnetha Ball, Ann Jaquith, and Danielle Greene  
Stanford University

### Context

Educators from the Central City School District<sup>1</sup> (CCSD) are committed to developing a culture of learning that is more equitable and just, with the aim of closing the “achievement gap” within their district. This commitment was made when the new superintendent arrived into the district, which corresponded with the district’s placement in Program Improvement under the federal accountability plan for not making adequate yearly progress in English Language Arts.

Efforts to begin tackling the district’s achievement gap involved learning from outside experts and then coming together in a safe place to discuss and make sense of this expertise. This safe and informal space for sense making and for looking at the district’s student data was an early iteration of the district’s Do Right For Kids group (DRK). Although the DRK began as a way for educators to talk about what they were learning about gaps of achievement between student groups, it evolved into a group committed to developing cultures of learning in the district’s schools that are more equitable and just, so as to assure the positive social, emotional, academic, physical, and artistic growth of its students. Group members examined the relationships between race, social-class, and language; they considered students’ and their families’ sense of belonging to the school community; and the extent to which the curriculum was culturally relevant and identity-affirming.

To assist in these efforts, the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education (SCOPE) participated in a research collaboration with the CCSD to:

- Collect data on the structures, processes, practices, and beliefs within the DRK;
- Help the CCSD think through whether it has inequitable or biased practices and structures;
- Share research knowledge about effective practices for increasing the achievement of minority students in majority white districts; and
- Analyze data and share results in order to help CCSD figure out ways it can close opportunity and achievement gaps within the district.

### Rationale for Research

This research grew out of a collaboration between a group of educators in a small, affluent, and historically white suburban school district, who are part of a district-wide “Do Right for Kids” group (DRK), and a team of researchers at a nearby private university. The nearly all-white DRK began as a way for individuals in the district to talk about what it was learning about persistent gaps in academic achievement. However, at the time that the project began, the DRK had not yet taken action to disrupt prejudice, bias, and/or inequity within the district. Researchers were invited to become participant observers of the district’s DRK meetings during the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 academic years. The researchers’ role was to document their ongoing work, offer

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms used for schools and school districts.

observations, provide guidance, facilitate discussions and collect data on the progress toward equitable practices discussed in the DRK sessions.

In his work on stereotype threat, Claude Steele has argued that when minority students face negative stereotypes about their group's intellectual capacities, they are aware that important people in their schooling environment may doubt their ability and belonging (Steele, 1992; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Steele, 2010). This is a type of social identity threat, which is a "threat that occurs when people recognize they may be devalued in a setting because of one of their social identities" (Murphy, Steele & Gross, 2007, p. 879). Many studies have demonstrated the way stereotype or social identity threat affects an individual's performance in ways that undermine their performance (e.g., Steele & Aronson, 1995; Aronson, Lustina, Good, Keogh, Steele, & Brown, 1999). Social identity threat occurs for different social groups at different times in different settings. For example, when white teachers are confronted with their racist or biased beliefs, they may experience stereotype threat. If they do, then they can become reluctant, unwilling, or unable to talk about race or how their racial beliefs influence their behavior.

Perhaps because of a reluctance to discuss race or biased practices, the problem of the racial gap and student achievement persists in many schools and districts. Pedro Noguero (2011) studied the quest for education excellence and equity in affluent school districts and found that the structural mechanisms through which racial inequality is reproduced tended to be subtle and complex. In these districts committed to equity he found "institutional bias is generally not based on overtly racist behaviors and intentions on the part of school personnel... The policies and practices that reinforce academic disparities appear on the surface to be race neutral [yet] ... close analysis of their impact reveals clear and distinct costs and benefits that break down along racial lines" (p. 36). Closely examining how these policies and practices contribute to inequities requires having the capacity to engage openly and constructively in conversations about race, bias, and privilege. Yet, as a society we continue to struggle with how to talk constructively about race and implicit bias in our schools. This study provided an opportunity to learn how conversations about increasing equity get brokered in a predominately white, affluent district and to what effect.

An aim of this project was to help DRK members deepen their understanding of their racial identities, develop awareness of existing practices that may advantage some individuals in the district and disadvantage others, and to observe how this more structured and intentional approach spurred members to action. Examining how CCSD makes efforts to promote greater equity in the district can reveal important insights about what leaders in an affluent and predominately white district can do to identify (and possibly begin to dismantle) inequitable educational structures and practices and what obstacles they must confront.

## Study Design & Methodology

The research project was guided by the following research questions:

1. What structures, processes, and leadership practices can be used to increase the sense of belonging of students and families of color in the district?
2. What structures, processes and leadership practices can be used to support the growth and development of low-academic achieving students in the district?
3. What supports and constrains the effective use of these structures, processes and leadership practices ?

The project activities included:

- **Two rounds of interviews in Spring 2018 and Spring 2019**

The 2018 interviews were conducted with 13 of the 18 DRK members. Members were asked to reflect on their past year experiences in the DRK and to articulate goals for the following year. The second-round interviews focused on district goals for equity and inclusivity. We spoke with 12 DRK members and seven non-DRK members from the district’s administrative executive leadership team, the director of human resources, and certificated staff. Each interview was transcribed and coded for themes related to equity, belonging, awareness of racial identities, taking action, and avoidance of confronting inequities.

- **Guiding district-wide talk about race and implicit bias**

We developed a customized literature review and guidance document, *Learning to Talk About Race and Implicit Bias in Historically White Districts: Some Guidance for Educators*. The guidance document includes relevant research on the equity challenges confronting CCSD and makes recommendations for disrupting inequity in historically and majority white schools. The document was read and discussed on multiple occasions within CCSD; all 20 DRK members and several members of the School Board participated in conversations to make sense of the document and its implications for the district. Sharing the guidance document with the DRK members was designed as a springboard for taking action.

- **Mapping CCSD’s five-year focus on equity, inclusion, and belonging**

We met with CCSD administrators to learn more about the history of the district’s prior explicit equity-focused work and collected and reviewed historical documents.

- **Observing and documenting equity-focused actions taken by the DRK**

We collected and analyzed qualitative data on the structures, processes, and activities that the DRK members designed, participated in and/or enacted. We attended and documented all the DRK meetings. We offered to observe DRK members as they enacted their planned equity work at their school sites, and we attended these activities when we were invited. We provided regular updates to the district regarding our observations, questions, and emerging insights.

## Key Findings

- **Many significant changes were made within the district to advance their work on creating a climate of greater equity and inclusivity.**

The district adopted a new bell schedule that was more equitable in design and prioritized the needs of the district's most marginalized populations. This change had been discussed in previous years, but this research project gave educators a forum and platform to frame this change as a necessary shift to increase equity in the district. Administrators from CCSD cited the discussions from the DRK meetings as contributing to their understanding of how the existing bell schedule disproportionately disadvantaged the most vulnerable populations. Changing the bell schedule for more equitable access to learning opportunities became a moral imperative for the administration.

- **CCSD was able to have productive conversations about race and bias.**

We discovered that sharing the guidance document, *Learning to Talk About Race and Implicit Bias in Historically White Districts: Some Guidance for Education*, through structured reflection and conversation, provided an opportunity for initiating a conversation about race and implicit bias in the district. These conversations happened five times during the year. This was a significant accomplishment due to a historic lack of discussion on race in the district.

- **Conversations about racism and bias led to greater self-awareness.**

Through participation in project activities, such as reading and discussing the guidance document, DRK members identified some district practices that advantaged some groups and disadvantaged others. Participants engaged in racial identity conversations and some participants identified personal biases and recognized privileges afforded to them, advantages some said they had not fully appreciated before.

- **The need for community-affirming practices were recognized and initiated.**

Teachers became more aware of the need for culturally responsive curriculum and identity-affirming texts for each of their students. IEP meetings were restructured in ways that demonstrated care for the child and family and promoted a sense of parental belonging. The model for special education became increasingly one where services were "pushed in" to the classroom rather than "pulling" students out. In total these changes represent an enormous amount of progress over the past seven years.

- **Learning excursions developed staff relationships across differences but usually did not transfer to daily lived experiences within the district**

Almost all (16 out of 19) of the people we interviewed had been on a district-sponsored learning excursion one or more times to engage with the concepts of equity, social justice, and tolerance. For those who went on the learning excursion, the experience accomplished its intended goal, which was to give people an opportunity to consider their own biases. However, interviewees indicated that this experience had not yet influenced the day-to-day reality of district life. The experience, while acknowledged by most everyone as powerful, seems to have remained isolated and separate from the collective lived experience of people in the district.

## **Recommendations for Policy/Practice**

### **1. Making space for equity conscious conversations and actions is an on-going necessity. There is no end-point to this work.**

Most everyone we spoke to thought confronting inequities and biases in the district was only in the beginning stages and needed more and continuous attention and effort. There were concerns about the impact of their efforts on students and comments about how the adult culture within the district can be divisive and biased. We also heard from several other interviewees that the teacher community sometimes felt separate from and, perhaps less than, the dominant parent community.

The intentional actions that CCSD has taken over the past five years are important strides toward achieving equity in the district. Our interviews and observations, however, indicate that the adult culture, particularly among teaching ranks within the district, has not yet achieved the district's goal to establish a climate that "respects diversity, is inclusive, and provides equity for students, parents, staff, and administrators."

### **2. Identify and dismantle structures and practices that disadvantage and perpetuate inequities.**

If districts similar to CCSD want to reduce the racial and economic gaps in student performance, they must remain committed both to identifying and tackling structural mechanisms (e.g., the staggered schedule) that perpetuate inequity and confront the biased beliefs, attitudes, and stereotypes that continue to exist in the district. This would help counter teachers' inclination to consider how every change (e.g., to curriculum, to facilities, to approaches for providing students with extra support, etc.) will affect them personally rather than how it will affect students' well-being.