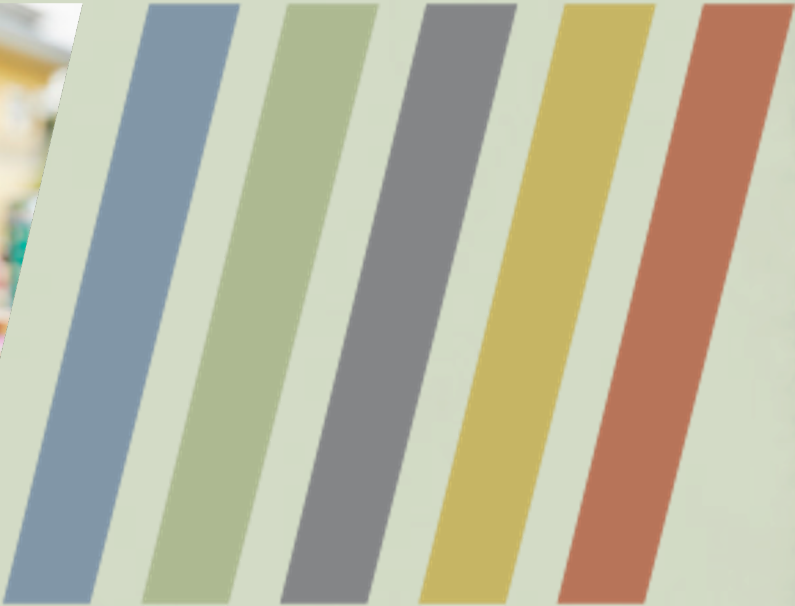


COMPREHENSIVE EQUITY AUDIT

# Avonworth School District



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# PART I

## CONTEXT

In this section, please find:

- An overview of the audit process including background and methodology
- Important district context and background

# INTRODUCTION

Educational equity involves ensuring each and every student receives the appropriate resources, funding, educational experiences, and access to opportunities, based on their individual needs, to achieve their fullest potential, both academically and socially (National Equity Project). Educational equity is achieved when schools and school districts can no longer predict the success or academic outcomes of students solely based on social or cultural factors. Equity extends beyond race and includes such factors as personal and social identity, ethnicity, culture, English Learner status, socio-economic status, gender, orientation, identification, ability, religion, and country of origin or background.

There is currently an active discussion in schools and districts regarding how to ensure that each and every student has equitable access to a high-quality education. Schools and school districts are uniquely situated to impact educator and student actions related to equity. However, without thoughtful planning, clear objectives, and an honest assessment of the current context, districts will be less likely to achieve educational equity for each and every student.

The purpose of this report is to share the results of a comprehensive equity audit that Insight Education Group's team conducted in Avonworth School District (ASD). The team met with stakeholders from the district and larger community in order to gain as many perspectives as possible and to confirm trends identified through examination of multiple data sets. The audit included an analysis of district student achievement data, graduation and discipline data, district staffing, professional development, and stakeholder perceptual data.

Data shows that students in the United States face significant disparities in educational opportunity and outcomes. This is especially true for students of color and students from low-income communities. (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2016; Reardon, 2014). When considering disparities in educational opportunity and outcomes, it is important to also consider access, a third variable that we consider to be the critical bridge between the first two. It is our belief that the pressing challenge facing schools and districts is to provide all students with both equitable opportunity and access to high-quality educational experiences in order for them to achieve successful life outcomes.

The equity audit team has developed this report in alignment with our Racial Equity Framework. It includes recommendations that are aligned to each domain in the framework for the superintendent and his team's consideration. This report addresses the current district landscape pertaining to equity and presents an important opportunity for district leadership to develop a plan to implement the recommendations in an aligned, coherent and intentional manner. It is recommended that the district take time to study and make sense of the findings and recommendations to develop a plan to stage the necessary work efficiently and effectively in order to improve outcomes for each and every student in SMCPS.

## DISTRICT CONTEXT

Avonworth, Pennsylvania is located eight miles northwest of Pittsburgh and has 12,000 residents. Avonworth School District (ASD) served approximately 1,900 students in 2020-2021, as evidenced in June 2021 enrollment data provided by the district. The student population has grown by 15% since 2015. ASD employs approximately 181 teachers and paraprofessionals, 30 operations staff members, and 14 administrators.

ASD has 4 school sites and offers an array of educational opportunities for students from Kindergarten to those preparing for post-secondary options at Avonworth High School and the regional A.W. Beattie Career Center. ASD serves a demographically homogeneous student population in terms of race/ethnicity and socio-economic status.

The student population at ASD can be broken down into the following by race and ethnicity: White (90.7%), Black or African American (2.1%), two or more races (4%), Hispanic/Latinx (approximately 1%) and Asian, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander (OPI) (approximately 1%). Approximately 13% of students are eligible for free or reduced meals; approximately 3% of students are English Learners, and approximately 12% of students are Students with Disabilities.

# METHODOLOGY

## DATA COLLECTION

Insight Education Group conducted an Equity Audit in ASD between July 2021 and February 2022. The team met with stakeholders from the district and larger community to gain as many perspectives as possible to determine district trends using an equity-focused lens while collecting multiple datasets.

In this section of the report, we will review the primary components of our methods surrounding the Comprehensive Equity Audit for ASD and will provide a detailed overview of the data collection process. We will share data analysis techniques employed to inform our understanding of trends occurring in ASD, both in strengths and areas for future improvement. The Insight audit team worked closely with the district to amass a robust set of district data and documents for review in the initial phase of the Equity Audit as well as to engage stakeholder groups throughout the data collection process during the first semester of the 2021-2022 school year.

The data collection process included the following activities to assess district beliefs, policies, and practices in relation to equity:

- Review of graduation and discipline data
- Review of district documents and communications
- Stakeholder surveys
- Focus groups

## *DISTRICT DOCUMENTS*

In addition to preliminary quantitative datasets provided by ASD, the audit team conducted an evaluative review of district documents to establish additional trends involving equitable beliefs, practices, and policies maintained by the district. The audit team evaluated district artifacts within the scope of five domains outlined by the Insight Equity Framework. The five domains are outlined as follows and will be described in further detail with relevant research in later sections of this report: 1) Structures, Systems, and Resources; 2) Culture and Community; 2) Equity in the Educator Workforce; 4) Professional Learning and Personal Growth; and 5) Curriculum, Instruction, and Learning.

The Insight audit team reviewed district organizational charts and strategic planning documents to evaluate the structures and systems in place at the district level and how they are utilized to provide an equitable education for all Avonworth students. Additionally, the team reviewed the ASD website, social media sites, and outgoing communication to the community, such as published Board of Education meeting notes, to evaluate trends aimed towards building a culture and community grounded in equity. Team members reviewed district discipline policies and student codes of conduct for punitive actions and escalation practices as well as any biased or discriminatory language.

Furthermore, audit team members reviewed professional learning opportunities offered to ASD educators to understand their opportunities for development and advancement. Lastly, the district provided several artifacts, including but not limited to, assessment calendars, district policies, and samples of selected curricula.

## *STAKEHOLDER SURVEYS*

In partnership with Insight's audit team, ASD invited a diverse stakeholder group to complete a survey evaluation of equity within the district as well as the assessment of equitable practices and policies exhibited throughout the district. Survey questionnaires ranged in length from 25 questions to 40 questions depending on which stakeholder group the participant maintained membership. The stakeholder groups included: school leaders, school district staff, middle and high school students, and family and caregivers. A total of 505 stakeholders participated in surveys.

In the first section of each survey, respondents provided descriptive information including personal demographics: race, age, gender, length of professional career, and school affiliation. After completing this demographic section, participants were asked to respond to equity specific questions related to the district and district schools. In this portion of the survey respondents recorded their answers on a 4-point Likert scale. Participants responded to a statement prompt and recorded their level of agreement with the statement. As an example, a student participant would respond to the statement, "My school prioritizes equity." In response, the student participant indicated their agreement using the following: "1" strongly disagree, "2" disagree, "3" agree, and "4" strongly agree. Please refer to page 10 for specific information regarding calculation and meaning of survey statistics.

The third section of the stakeholder survey was qualitative in nature. Participants were asked three to five questions, depending on their respective stakeholder group, centered on equity in the district.

Responses provided by participants were securely acquired, stored, and managed by the Insight audit team. Respondents participated on a voluntary basis and were assured that their confidentiality throughout the data collection and reporting process would be upheld.



## FOCUS GROUPS

ASD recruited stakeholders from multiple groups to engage in focus group sessions with Insight audit team members. During the recruitment process, ASD invited potential group members from the following stakeholder groups: district leaders, K-6 teachers, 7-12 teachers, families and caregivers, high school students, middle school students, paraprofessionals, and parents (four groups). Focus groups were facilitated by Insight team members, held virtually via Zoom tele-conferencing platform with attendees, and were approximately 60 minutes in length. A total of 81 stakeholders participated in focus groups.

During the focus groups, participants were provided the opportunity to share their lived experiences in the district. In particular, focus group participants conveyed the district's definition of equity as well as their understanding of equity as communicated by the school district in beliefs, policies, and practices. All focus groups maintained a standard operating procedure where group members were led in a discussion guided by the same set of questions across all groups facilitated by audit team members.

For ethical and integrity reasons, participants were notified their participation in the focus group was voluntary and should they choose to no longer participate, they were at liberty to terminate their involvement. Participants were assured their identifying information and views expressed during the focus group would remain confidential. As such, audit team members would anonymize all details during the reporting process.

Select quotes provided by stakeholder focus group members and in some cases qualitative portions of the stakeholder surveys, are used to further illustrate thematic findings within the report. We caution overgeneralizing the quotes used to characterize findings regarding how stakeholders understand equity, equitable policy and practice maintained by the school district, and experiences of equity by stakeholders more broadly. Rather, we suggest using the information here as a method of uplifting and considering all lived experiences of stakeholders within the Avonworth School District community at large.

## DATA ANALYSIS

Insight audit team members conducted data analysis in three stages. In one stage, audit team members employed descriptive statistical analysis to data sets provided by the district where analysts documented trends in school profiles, student demographics, and discipline rates. Insight analysts also coded the qualitative data sets derived from district artifacts during this stage of analysis.

During a second stage, Insight analysts conducted survey response analysis across all stakeholder surveys in relation to the five domains of the Equity Framework first with descriptive statistics followed by inferential statistics. All participant responses were coded and cleaned prior to analysis whereby all responses were de-identified using numeric demographic codes, response codes, and responses containing missing data not at random were removed prior to analysis. Survey response data was coded using the Likert-scale previously outlined to determine prompt mean scores (i.e., the participant level of agreement for each prompt). When a prompt mean score reached 3.00, it was considered to have reached a consensus level of agreement also known as general agreement among the population of survey respondents. As part of this stage of analysis, Insight analysts utilized the statistical software package Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) to evaluate differences in mean scores of respondents by subgroups.

Lastly, analysts began qualitative data analysis for focus groups as well as researcher field notes and memos (Emerson et al., 2011). Analysts employed an iterative coding cycle to documents and texts where they executed coding cycles until saturation was reached (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Saunders et al., 2018). Audit team members collaborated during the data analysis phase of the equity audit to ensure inter-rater reliability was achieved among team members for each of the noted district trends, findings, and recommendations. Of note, audit team members triangulated data sources to support all discussed trends, findings, and recommendations from the equity audit of ASD.

# PART II

## FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this section, please find:

- Assets, findings and recommendations for the district grounded in the five domains of the Insight Racial Equity Framework.

## RESEARCH



### DOMAIN 1

## STRUCTURES, SYSTEMS, AND RESOURCES

Operations, finance, and organizational structure can feel very technical in a school district. But what sits under those technical components is a belief system and understanding of the impacts of bias on adults and students. A growing body of scholarship emphasizes the critical role of district leadership in ensuring equitable access to resources and opportunities for students. Districts must intentionally design organizational structures and routines that support the success of historically underserved students, (Irby et al., 2019).

A district's commitment to equity relies on fundamental systemic change throughout the organization, as well as the anti-racist beliefs and actions of individual educators and leaders (Welton et al., 2018). Furthermore, districts must explicitly centralize equity in their school improvement plans to ensure that resources are equitably distributed to students in both policy and practice (Starr, 2018; Gorski, 2019).

At the foundation, strategic planning (a district process of establishing goals and the strategies that will be employed to achieve those goals) should explicitly name equity as a priority in the organization. Goals must be meaningful and represent access and opportunity, not just absolute achievement, in order to ensure equitable support of all students. In order to achieve this, district goals, as well as their measurable targets, must be developed collaboratively with leaders and stakeholders.

Upon the foundation of strategic planning sit the technical decisions and systems that comprise budgeting; the allocation of resources; access to clean, healthy and updated facilities, access to technology hardware, software and internet; quality. Food and nutrition programs; and safe and effective transportation. Therefore, this domain addresses both the degree to which the school board and senior leadership team have and continue to develop equitable practices to plan strategically, make technical decisions and create structures and systems that promote equity.

There is a clear and direct link between student achievement and access to material and nonmaterial resources such as effective teachers, high-quality instructional materials, academic rigor, and learning-ready facilities (Travers, 2018). The allocation of these resources at the macro level can alleviate or exacerbate inequities across an organization. Research suggests that districts and school boards often do not direct resources to students with equity in mind, resulting in intra-district disparities in teacher assignment, curriculum, and building quality (Darden & Cavendish, 2011). Cheatham, Baker-Jones, and Jordan-Thomas (2020) suggest that districts can demonstrate their commitment to equity by “intentionally allocating their resources more flexibly based on the changing needs of individual students” through strategies such as reconfigured funding formulas and differentiated instructional designs.

## FINDINGS

An important aspect of the structures, systems, and resources that allow a district to ensure equitable practices and improved outcomes for each student is a clear message that equity is important to all members of the district. Frequently, this is represented through an aspect of the district's strategic plan. Districts may also have an equity plan, including the district's vision for equity, that all stakeholders are aware of and understand.

Avonworth School District's strategic plan (2020-2025) speaks to the district's intention to focus on equity, as evidenced by its identification of equity as one of five focus areas. The strategic plan defines the equity work as, "continuing to develop and maintain an inclusive experience for students, staff, and community that promotes a sense of belonging for all." The plan provides further explanation of this goal, including specific strategies and actions it plans to take to address equity.

Another indication of the district's interest in focusing on equity is the creation of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Team. The DEI team is composed of a group of stakeholders who meet to discuss issues regarding equity in the district. Many focus group participants referenced knowledge of the DEI team, but evidenced uncertainty about its role, and felt that it served largely as a problem-solving entity when challenges regarding equity arose in the district. One stakeholder shared, "I have participated in the DEI [team] and we talk 'round and 'round and there's no follow-up...no traction whatsoever...I don't feel like there's a commitment and that's why we're stuck."

The strategic plan's equity goal and the creation of the DEI team are district assets in the movement toward improvement of equitable opportunities, access, and outcomes for students. A review of stakeholder feedback evidenced that stakeholders were unclear about the district's definition and vision of equity and any current practice related to equity. When stakeholders were asked to share ASD's definition of equity one leader stated, "It's fair to say we haven't set a definition ... [but] we have taken the steps to being equitable." A family and caregiver stakeholder shared, "I poked around the website, there is no equity definition... I think now it's supposed to be front and center, it needs to be more important as the district continues to change." A staff member stated, "We have our own [definition], but I cannot tell you what the district's is."

## FINDINGS

Stakeholder feedback indicated a pervasive sense that the majority of ASD's stakeholders, particularly white families and students, are satisfied with their experiences in the district. While this might be considered an asset, it also serves as a barrier to achieving district-wide equitable opportunities, access, and outcomes for all students for the following reasons:

1. There is no pressing need to address concerns maintained by individuals of minority groups. One focus group participant shared, "Avonworth is not as diverse as I would prefer. I am happy with the efforts, but there are still moments [of experienced racism and anti-gay behavior] for me and my children."
1. There are limited opportunities to uplift the voices throughout the larger community, including staff and students, that are focused on equitable change. It is important to note that the district has been intentional in its work to provide students with opportunities to participate in groups such as Gay-Straight Alliance and SHOUT in order to provide safe spaces.
1. There is evidence of some community resistance toward initiating changes to district policy and practices grounded in equity. One family and caregiver focus group participant shared, "They are trying to identify the school's problem [re: equity] when they should concentrate on education, not a non-existent problem. This is a well-integrated community; I don't see a need for intervention."

## FINDINGS

Finally, a key critical aspect of ensuring that the district's vision for equity is being executed with fidelity, is the ability to strategically use data to track and monitor progress. Stakeholder surveys revealed an opportunity for growth in leaders' use of data to determine students' opportunities, access and outcomes. Specifically, school leaders (n=8) evidenced a low level of agreement (where an agreement level of 3 indicates a consensus level of agreement) on two survey prompts:

- o My team and I monitor enrollment in special education, gifted education, and advanced courses for disproportionality (2.33)
- o My team and I monitor resources- including funding, materials, facilities, and staffing- to ensure equitable allocation / distribution (2.33)



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## 1.1

Redevelop the district's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Team to include members as leaders in the district's equity efforts.

- Develop an application process to identify key district stakeholders from the collective Avonworth School District community to participate as members on the DEI team.
  - Include parents, students, district leaders, instructional and non-instructional staff, community partners, and others.
- Identify clear roles and responsibilities for DEI team members.
- Identify and implement structures and processes, including consistent meeting times, agendas, etc., that will elevate the DEI team's autonomy to serve in an advisory role in the district.
- Empower the DEI team to support the district as it implements the recommendations in the district Equity Audit Report.

## 1.2

Assist each school in developing a School-based Diversity Equity, and Inclusion (SDEI) Team to serve as leaders in developing equitable practices in the building.

- Identify SDEI team participants in each building.
- Identify clear roles and responsibilities for the SDEI team.
- Use the SDEI team to develop a building-based equity plan aligned to the school improvement plan and the District equity plan.
- Ensure that the SDEI team provides ongoing equity-related professional learning opportunities to all staff members.
- Ensure alignment between the processes and structures of the DEI and SDEI teams.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

1.2

Develop system-wide data practices that examine equitable opportunities, access, and outcomes for all students.

- Identify a consistent, ongoing process at the district office and in each school for reviewing data for disproportionalities in students' opportunities, access and outcomes.
- Identify consistent data points (academic achievement, disciplinary infractions and outcomes, access to enrichment programs, etc.) that will be examined at the district office and in each school to identify areas for programmatic improvement.
- Develop a specific planning process at the district office and in schools to mitigate the disproportionalities discovered in the data review.



## CULTURE AND COMMUNITY

Cultural and racial competence involves creating a culture that allows students, educators, and families of traditionally marginalized and minoritized populations such as people of color, members of the LGBT+ community, and dis/abled individuals to feel safe, welcome, and valued in their school and district community. Establishing a culture of cultural and racial competence requires creating an anti-racist and socially-just climate in every building; and leveraging family and community partnerships to develop trust. With racial and cultural competence as the foundation of a district's culture, students, educators, and families can understand and challenge biases that may contribute to inequitable or non-inclusive learning environments; engage in productive conversations about social justice; and work to reach their full potential in a safe and supportive school environment.

The distinction between school climate and school culture is nuanced but can be explained as follows: climate refers to a school's attitude, while culture refers to its personality. A school or district's culture is shaped over time through changes to its climate (Gruenert, 2008). Therefore, creating an equitable climate in every school is necessary for establishing a deeply ingrained culture of racial and cultural competence throughout a district.

An equitable school climate gives all students, staff, and families—regardless of racial or socioeconomic background—access to “effectively supported high expectations for teaching, learning, and achievement; emotionally and physically safe, healthy learning environments for all; caring, courageous, self-reflective relationships among and between peers and adults; and multiple, culturally responsive pathways to participation” (Ross, Brown, & Biagas, 2020).

A district's commitment to cultural and racial competence requires teachers and leaders to have an asset-based approach to educating and serving students and families of marginalized communities. This means that diversity is viewed as a strength and individuals are valued for their unique contributions to the school and district community.

A racially and culturally competent school climate mitigates the potentially harmful effects of policies and practices. Dress, hair, and conduct policies often include language about appearances and attitudes, with negative consequences for students of color, including harsher punishments and increased time away from the classroom (Fregni & Zingg, 2020).

Restorative discipline is a promising alternative to traditional disciplinary methods that “fosters belonging over exclusion” and helps improve school climate and culture (Institute for Restorative Justice and Restorative Dialogue, n.d.). Social and emotional learning (SEL) can also be used as a driver for equity in education. SEL in schools should be approached with the explicit purpose of creating a culture of cultural competence through improving the self-awareness and social and emotional intelligence of all students and educators with respect to equity.

Establishing an equitable school climate also requires including the voices of diverse students, staff, families, and community members in decisions related to school policy and facilitating “courageous conversations” about equity on an ongoing basis (Ross, Brown, & Biagas, 2020).

Research has shown that family and community engagement benefits not only individual student achievement, but also overall school improvement. Still, many districts do not effectively involve families and communities of traditionally marginalized groups, including people of color, in their school improvement efforts, often due to misguided deficit thinking about non-white cultures and attitudes about education (McAlister, 2013). School and district leaders must develop social trust and positive relationships with families and community organizations to strengthen the culture of cultural and racial competence and improve.

## FINDINGS

Avonworth School District has made recent strides in developing an inclusive culture and climate in its schools and the district. District leaders, school leaders, and staff all prescribe to creating an environment in which students feel they belong. In the February 2021 newsletter, they cite the district goal, "...to ensure a welcoming environment where all feel they belong," and identify ways in which the team plans to contribute to the development of that environment. The ASD Board of Directors (BOD) shared an official resolution in July 2021, *Supporting an Anti-Racist School Climate* (July 2020). In this resolution, the BOD states that the Avonworth School Board "unequivocally stands firm in our collective responsibility to foster an equitable and inclusive environment for every student, staff member, parent, and community member." Additionally, the former superintendent released a written statement, *"Avonworth School District: A Place of Belonging for All."* The document shares the superintendent's goal that "all children in our schools grow to become empathetic, contributing citizens who reach their full potential and make our world a better place." He further states, "in order for this to be possible, the school environment we create must be free from hateful speech and actions that encourage discrimination and violence."

During a review of stakeholder feedback, participants spoke to a central idea that there were efforts being made to spur equity in schools and the district. The notion of inclusiveness and belonging were also mentioned. During focus groups, participants used the terms the "Avonworth Way" and "Avonworth Bubble" as positive examples of the climate and culture in the district. However, this group mindset presents challenges for students who do not fit in with this identified majority culture. For example, one school leader referenced the district's belief in the importance of encouraging students to participate in activities, clubs, etc. as a way to feel they "belong" in the ASD culture. In a student focus group, however, a member expressed being "an introvert" and not experiencing group activities in a way that was comfortable or that allowed him/her to feel belonging.

Another theme that emerged regarding the district's culture during various focus groups was that the negative experiences of members of underrepresented or marginalized communities and their allies are largely kept quiet, require the need for self-identification in an attempt to be heard, or remain unaddressed.

A staff member shared in a focus group that, “Those conversations (about equity and social factors) [as a schoolwide discussion] are very rarely addressed—the truth is even though we have kids in those populations, it is not priority because it does not affect the majority. Diversity here is small in nature.”

This experience negatively impacts students of underrepresented or marginalized communities, as was evidenced in students’ feedback during focus groups. A student shared, “I have been mistaken for other minorities of Asian descent by teachers... for teachers or people to say we look like the only other minority in the school and for teachers to be able to recognize individual white students and not us, it’s not very equitable.” Another stated, “It would be nice to have more teachers recognize all forms of microaggressions and be ready and able to defend students...you feel alone in those situations... and you don’t have the ability to defend yourself or no one to defend you... it would be nice if teachers were willing to step in to be like, ‘Hey you can’t say that!’”

This points to a need for the district to lead efforts in helping all stakeholders recognize that individuals from different cultures, backgrounds, and contexts outside of the Avonworth community bring assets to the current culture. This will be especially important given the recent increase in community diversity from additional families moving into the area, as well as projected student population growth in ASD, as noted in a report: Demographic School Analysis: Population Projections for the Avonworth School District (Stewman, 2019).

A district’s culture and climate are also driven by policies and practices. The district’s Behavior Support policy (113.2 November 12, 2018) speaks to interventions that will take place if a student’s behaviors “impede the learning process and/or interpersonal relationships with adults and/or peers.” Additionally, ASD publishes a yearly Student Handbook and Discipline Code that contains guidelines for maintaining a safe environment, and also includes information about attendance, grading, athletics and co-curricular activities, and consequences for behavior.

The Student Handbook evidences a district “*Philosophy of Promoting Positive Behavior in Students,*” and states it will “provide opportunities to promote in each student the ability for self-direction, self-discipline, and positive decision-making.” Students are expected to “practice self-discipline” and it is the “responsibility of the teacher to maintain the proper learning environment. To maintain this environment, it is necessary for the students to follow basic rules, and therefore, to be responsible for their own behaviors and actions.”

The handbook provides an explanation of a multi-level behavior response system for elementary and secondary schools. An example is as follows: "Our elementary discipline system is based upon a progressive discipline approach – each succeeding offense/infraction will result in a more severe consequence. The purpose of this approach is rehabilitation and the development of self-control and self-motivation." The system is based on three tiers and outlines the procedure at each step as follows:

- **Administrative Intervention Step 1:** The teacher contacts the parent (call or email) and Principal conferences with the student.
- **Administrative Intervention Step 2:** The Principal contacts the parent (call or email) and conferences with the student.
- **Administrative Intervention Step 3:** The Principal notifies parents of a meeting with the Principal and other involved staff members, including the counselor. Consequences may include, but are not limited to:

- Lunch/recess detention

Loss of privileges (i.e. activities/assemblies)

- Possible referral to Response to Intervention Team
- Out-of-School Suspension

There was no evidence in the handbook that there is a specific, uniformly implemented positive behavior support system in place in the district (Positive Behavior Support, e.g.), or that there is an expectation for the use of restorative practices. Follow up conversations with the district indicated that some leaders are using restorative practices. Without uniform systems and practices in place, inconsistency in defining and helping students actualize terms such as "self-direction, self-discipline, and positive decision-making" leaves them open for interpretation by students, families, and staff. When coupled with the punitive nature of the multi-level behavior system, this will likely contribute to variable disciplinary practices across classrooms and schools and the potential for disproportionality in infractions and consequences. For example, one leader stated, "We are at 5% minority but for students transferring in that number is around 29% minority. In reviewing my discipline data, I noticed new students came to the office at a disproportionate rate."

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### 2.1

Enlist the entire school community to work toward establishing a supportive community focused on equitable outcomes and inclusivity among all stakeholder groups

- Establish a culture of two-way communication by developing and communicating a process by which all stakeholder voices can be heard and acknowledged.
- Develop stakeholder comfort by holding meetings with ASD leaders, staff, caregivers, and students (particularly students of color, from the LGBTQ+ community, those with disabilities, etc.) on specific issues relevant to them. It is critical to use a process of deep listening with students, parents, and staff who endeavor to be part of a more inclusive and transparent school improvement process.
- Promote an affirming school culture using the tenets of ASCD's Whole Child Initiative (please see links below for information)

[https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Educating\\_Whole\\_Child\\_REPORT.pdf](https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Educating_Whole_Child_REPORT.pdf)

<https://files.ascd.org/staticfiles/ascd/pdf/siteASCD/publications/wholechild/wsc-a-collaborative-approach.pdf>

### 2.2

Develop a system-wide, consistently implemented restorative process for development of positive behavior supports and implementation, enforcement, and reporting of disciplinary matters.

- Review examples of systems of positive behavior supports that exist nationally. Identify a system and begin implementation in ASD.
- Review the district's current Progressive Disciplinary Consequences. Replace punitive consequences with restorative practices such as affective statements, community-building circles, small impromptu conferencing, and setting classroom agreements or norms.
- Develop common definitions of terminology found in district discipline documents so that all in the system have a clear understanding of infractions and expectations for restoration and discipline.
- Ensure equitable access to policies by providing a brief online video on how to locate the policies online for new families, non-English speaking families, and families who may need ADA accommodations.





## EQUITY IN THE EDUCATOR WORKFORCE

Every student deserves educators who will provide them with the knowledge and skills they need to be successful in school today and in their futures. Some of the most compelling research in recent years indicates the significant positive impact that teachers of color have on all students—particularly students of color—in terms of achievement, expectations for success, and long-term life outcomes. A racially diverse educator workforce represents a district’s dedication to creating equitable access to excellent educational opportunities for all students, as well as its commitment to eliminating barriers to entry and providing equitable career advancement opportunities for all educators.

Given the significant impact of effective educators on student outcomes, getting the right people in the right positions should be a top priority for school districts. When educator talent is managed well, a district can transform entrenched bureaucratic systems into more nimble processes that support the ultimate goal of ensuring all students have access to effective teachers in every classroom and effective leaders in every school.

Equitable beliefs, policies, and practices are necessary at every stage of an educator’s progression through a school district, from recruitment and hiring, to retention, to placement and promotion. People of color are both less likely to enter education at all and more likely to leave if they do enter. Therefore, a district must employ intentional strategies to attract racially diverse candidates into open positions, equitably place them in schools and classrooms, encourage them to remain in the district at proportional rates, and provide equitable opportunities for them to progress upwards in the organization.

These strategies could include involving diverse voices in the hiring and onboarding process; implementing induction programs and leadership academies specifically for educators of color; and ensuring that school and district leaders understand the positive and negative experiences of teachers and staff of color. Together, these strategies can mitigate racial inequities and ensure the equitable representation of educators of color at all levels of the organization.

Diversity benefits every workforce, and teaching is no exception. Research repeatedly indicates that teachers of color benefit students of color—particularly Black males—in a variety of ways, including increased test scores, lowered school suspensions, improved academic attitudes, increased student attendance, and reduction in the risk of dropping out (Gershenson et al., 2017; Lee, 2018; Miller, 2018; Partelow et al., 2017). Racial diversity among teachers also helps break down biases across races, thus having a positive effect on all students (Partelow et al., 2017).

Yet most districts do not effectively recruit and retain educators of color. In 40% of U.S. schools, there is not a single teacher of color on staff, and teachers of color only represent 18% of the overall teaching population (Partelow et al., 2017; Putman & Walsh, 2016). Many school districts are not yet implementing strategies to address this challenge: only one in three districts actively recruits from HBCUs or MSIs, only 40% of districts even consider a teacher's contribution to workforce diversity when hiring teachers, and 80% of districts "do not provide any specific supports geared toward inducting teachers of color" (Konoske-Graf, Partelow, & Benner, 2016).


Teachers of color tend to leave the profession or transfer schools at higher rates than white teachers (Barshay, 2018). In fact, national data indicates that there is a turnover disparity of approximately 7 percentage points between Black and white teachers (Barnum, 2018). According to a recent report by Dixon, Griffin, and Teoh (2018), teachers of color often leave their districts and/or education altogether due to antagonistic school culture, unfavorable work conditions, lack of agency and autonomy, feeling undervalued, and the high social and emotional cost of being a teacher of color.

In many districts, there is a trend to place higher percentages of teachers of color in hard-to-staff, low-income schools with less experienced leadership and with fewer professional development opportunities, leading to frustration and teachers exiting the district. Additionally, findings suggest that Black teachers tend to change schools or leave the profession if they aren't exposed to Black colleagues or a principal of color (Mahnken, 2018).

## FINDINGS

The data regarding equity in the educator workforce in ASD reflects many of the challenges outlined in the research cited previously. The district is majority White at all levels of staff. Evidence collected in the district suggested that both recruitment and retention of staff of color are areas in need of continued growth. As noted on surveys collected from staff at all levels of the organization, participants indicated a low level of agreement when asked about the district's ability to recruit and retain staff of color. The average response level for recruitment was 2.6 and retention was 2.72, where 3 is considered a consensus level of agreement. The importance of diversifying the teaching and leading workforce is critical to improving all students' school experience. One stakeholder shared in a focus group, "The district has hired new staff and none of them look like my kids... The first time my children saw anyone who looked like them it was almost a palpable relief for them, and I think for me too."

A review of the district's website in the "Personnel and Professional Learning" section evidenced that the district is aware and focused on the need to continue to diversify its workforce. The following statement illustrates that belief: "The Avonworth School District believes in the importance of students having the ability to see a reflection of themselves in both the curriculum they are learning from but also in the adults providing them with their education. The District is committed to attracting and retaining teachers, administrators, and staff from diverse backgrounds. In Pennsylvania, this can be challenging as only 5% of teachers in Pennsylvania are people of color. Although faced with this challenge, we are proud of the incredibly talented candidates we have been able to attract from diverse backgrounds." The following graphic illustrates Avonworth's current metrics related to student and staff racial demographics, as well as comparable information from the county and state.

	Asian	Black	Hispanic	Multiracial	White
<b>ASD Students</b>	2.5%	2.2%	1.6%	3.5%	90.2%
<b>ASD Instructional Staff</b>	2.2%	3.4%	0.6%	0.6%	93.2%
<b>Allegheny County Teachers (16-17)</b>	0.0%	3.0%	0.0%	0.0%	96.0%
<b>Pennsylvania Teachers (16-17)</b>	1.0%	4.0%	1.0%	0.0%	94.0%

## FINDINGS

Avonworth School District has evidenced its commitment to supporting teachers of color through its work with the Digital Promise Teacher of Color Cohort. ASD is one of seven districts across the country involved in Digital Promise's Design Studios, empowering teachers and leaders to identify solutions to human capital challenges. ASD has partnered with two other district's in the Pittsburgh area and currently in the second year of working with this collaborative. The Digital Promise partnership is based on the premise that it is important to involve teachers of color in identifying innovative ways to solve current challenges related to the recruitment and retention in districts.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### 3.1

Identify a senior leader to develop talent management strategies for the district. Strategies should address recruitment, retention, and development of a talent pipeline to encourage career options and advancement specific to staff of color.

- Create conditions for all district leaders to reflect on their personal biases and how these factors may be impacting their decisions regarding recruitment, retention, and advancement of staff of color.
- Build on the lessons learned through involvement with the Digital Promise and other district processes and structures to continue to refine practices that support the active recruitment, retention, and advancement of staff of color, and the creation of systems and structures that will nurture their success.



## PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AND PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

For years, educational equity work has centered primarily (and necessarily) on our students, their race, culture, language, socioeconomic status, and identity. However, too often, the impact of educators' race, culture, and identity on students has been left unacknowledged. Placing equity at the center of educator practice means building structural, individual, and collective consciousness among all staff regarding biases the ways in which they undermine equitable education for students. By engaging all educators in personalized, aligned professional learning that critically examines individual and systemic biases and provides effective tools and practices, schools can improve their effectiveness in working with diverse populations.

As districts work towards creating equitable systems, it is imperative that their professional learning examine, question, and address personal and institutional issues of race, bias, and power head-on. People are not born racially competent—the skills and attitudes that comprise racial competence are learned through continuous questioning, reflection, and realignment. And yet, that work is often avoided out of fear that it will “expose our gaps in racial competence, and people might think we are racist. But without asking questions or taking risks, we can’t grow. If schools adopt a growth mindset about race, we can create a culture in which everyone is continuously developing their racial competence” (Michael, n.d.).

Additionally, research shows that professional learning is most effective when it is content-focused and job-embedded. When creating professional learning to develop the racial consciousness of educators across the district, it is important to not only meet staff where they are in their personal learning, but also to ensure that the offerings are tailored and appropriate for their specific role. Engaging educators in collaborative professional learning and providing opportunities for them to have an active role in the development and implementation of professional learning is essential for sustaining an effective and responsive professional learning program.

In order to ensure that the district creates a professional learning culture grounded in the need for continuous development of racial competence, it is critical to seize every opportunity to engage educators in the understanding and ownership of the priorities around equity. In doing so, improvement feels cohesive and relevant, and becomes an invaluable part of what it means to be a racially competent educator.

Recent research repeatedly corroborates the link between teacher quality and outcomes for students (Kraft, Blazar, & Hogan, 2018). According to the Center for Public Education, teacher quality has a greater impact on student achievement than other factors often associated with academic outcomes, including a student's race, socioeconomic status, and prior academic record (Schmidt et al., 2017).

In order to have a positive impact on outcomes for all students, teachers must be provided with the training, resources, and supports needed to deliver high-quality instruction to all students. Research also shows that teachers and their implicit biases can be a barrier to students of color reaching their full academic potential (Gershenson, Holt, & Papageorge, 2016). Teachers must be provided with opportunities to participate in equity-focused training so that they are willing and able to continually and critically reflect on the ways in which their personal and professional identities inform their ability to effectively meet the needs of a diverse student population (Larrivee, 2000).

While the impact of teachers cannot be overstated, students' experiences in schools are influenced by all adults employed by the district. Ongoing professional learning in equity and bias must be designed to allow all educators to reflect on their implicit biases and learn culturally responsive best practices.

Educators who engage in professional learning related to race and equity learn to formulate strategies for collectively addressing equity issues in their schools. Through this process educators gain a deeper understanding of equity and equity-related problems in their school context and are more empowered to contribute to the solutions.

## FINDINGS

The district provided artifacts that indicate attention toward improving Avonworth School District staff members' understanding of the importance of developing cultural competence. For example, educators had the opportunity to attend a multi-day Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion professional learning opportunity entitled "Beginning the Conversation- Critical Consciousness Through Culture, Care, and Compassion" (2021). Additionally, the district recognizes that for professional development to be effective, it needs to occur across multiple sessions. An example is professional learning sessions regarding implicit bias, which took place over sustained period of time during the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 school years. During this period of time, staff engaged in workshops that focused on building equity and inclusion by examining and reflecting on implicit bias.

An inconsistency in having access to professional learning opportunities focused on equity and its impact on schooling was evidenced in school leader and staff survey responses. All school leader respondents reached a consensus level of agreement to having and providing staff members with professional learning on equity at 3.0 where 100% of school leaders agreed to providing such opportunities. ASD staff respondents recorded an average level of agreement to having access to such professional learning opportunities at 2.57. This lower level of agreement indicated by ASD staff compared to ASD school leaders presents a difference in perceptions of whether equity-based professional learning sessions are available to all staff members.

An important thematic asset that emerged during the examination of stakeholder feedback is that staff at all levels of the organization recognize the need to receive consistent and ongoing professional learning to support improvement of equitable mindsets and practices in the district. The following list, gathered across multiple stakeholder groups, provides examples about interest in receiving additional professional learning in equity, and how participants would like to experience it:

- Tailored, differentiated professional learning
- Consistency in professional development delivery
- Systematic delivery of professional learning that others have received for new staff
- Learning centered on climate and culture, creating safe spaces, and preparedness to handle sensitive topics



## FINDINGS

Family and Caregiver focus group members also expressed the hope that the district would invest in professional learning opportunities focused on equity. The following comments are representative of the group's reflections: "The district needs diversity training to be prepared for conversations about race, gender identity, and dis/ability", and "It takes bravery, honesty, and courage. I hope we put things in place and can work from others' best practices, or seek input from others that have done it and done it well."

Families and caregivers also recognized the need for all staff members to continue to develop cultural competence. The following speaks to their experience in the district and was gathered during focus groups. One family member shared, "There's a need for professional development because it seems teachers are unprepared to discuss or address issues of race. I heard an inappropriate comment [during dismissal] directed at my daughter from another student... but as the teacher stood there, they did nothing to correct the student." Another family member shared, "My son routinely met with bigoted language, and it has kind of been building..."

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### 4.1

Develop and implement a plan for district-wide, consistently implemented professional learning, with a focus on cultural competence, for all levels of staff; including district office staff members.

- Elevate the leadership of staff members in the district by providing opportunities for them to receive advanced, intensive cultural competence professional learning so that they can then develop and deliver professional learning sessions for all ASD staff.
- Partner with an external organization with demonstrated experience in training school district staff members in developing culturally competent mindsets and practices.
- Ensure that all aspects of equity and cultural competence, including race, ethnicity, LGBTQ+, and other identities, are addressed during professional learning.
- Develop a multi-year training plan that ensures consistency in professional learning schedules and content for all members.



## CURRICULUM, INSTRUCTION, AND LEARNING

The quality of a student’s learning environment and their access to opportunity play a key role in their academic and developmental life outcomes. Research has shown that a culturally responsive curriculum and teaching practices are beneficial to all educators and learners. An equitable learning environment provides the culture, climate, and content needed to enable all students to thrive in the global economy. The establishment of equitable teaching and learning practices and the equitable provision of teaching materials and resources ensure positive student outcomes by providing culturally affirming and high-quality instruction, diverse and inclusive curriculum, and programmatic access and equity.

Good practice dictates that educators analyze student performance and identify gaps in learning. However, if those educators do not reflect on the systems, biases, and practices that lead to such inequitable outcomes, there is a tendency to engage in deficit thinking and seek to “fix” the students. Educators who instead focus on fixing the system are those who have invested in increasing their own understanding of the historical and social context of students, their culture, and education through reading, reflection, and discussion with colleagues and students.

These equity-conscious educators:

- Ensure each student feels like an active member of an inclusive learning family through engagement and connection.
- Center all students by promoting their voice and celebrating their identities, interests, cultures, and context.
- Actively engage each student in meaningful learning experiences through collaboration, differentiation, and exploration.

Providing students with equitable learning opportunities builds trust, enhances rapport with learners and, consequently, improves student motivation (Weimer, 2010). As noted by Chiefs for Change in their 2019 report “Honoring Origins and Helping Students Succeed: The Case for Cultural Relevance in High-Quality Instructional Materials,” a commitment to cultural relevance is a commitment to honoring student diversity and increasing student engagement and cannot result in the decrease of academic rigor. Providing a high-quality education to all students requires that a district offer them equitable access to a variety of courses. Students are best prepared for successful lives when they are engaged in teaching and learning that goes beyond knowledge transfer and pushes them to generate new ideas, engage with content critically, express themselves effectively, and work with others to solve problems in a global world.

## FINDINGS

ASD is a highly academically focused school district where students are held to high standards and are provided a rigorous and challenging education. As noted on surveys, students perceive that there are rigorous academic experiences in the district. This was corroborated by work samples provided as artifacts, which evidenced tasks and content that were designed to develop students' ability to perform rigorous tasks with increasing levels of independence.

The district has been intentional in developing and reviewing existing curriculum, purchasing materials, and providing course options for students that allow them to explore themes related to more diverse perspectives. The following examples were identified during conversations with school-based staff members:

- At the Avonworth Primary Center, each grade level explores two social studies modules in English Language Arts (ELA) that focus on diverse cultures across different eras.
- The district selected a new elementary ELA resource (Wit and Wisdom), primarily because of its alignment to the research on the best practices for teaching reading, its rigor, and inclusion of award-winning, authentic literature. The authentic literature includes multiple perspectives, diverse authors, and exposure to diverse cultures which also factored into the selection of this resource.
- A middle school teacher conducts student book clubs that highlight varied perspectives, with topics including race, gender, and physical and mental health. Students self-select texts and participate in an in-depth study.
- High School teachers shared several examples of more inclusive courses currently being offered.
  - In the Modern Dilemmas; Race, Class and Gender; and World Cultures classes, issues of race, class, and gender are studied and discussed, and there is movement toward being more inclusive of the histories being taught.
  - An Art teacher has shifted away from teaching the more traditional masters and toward including diverse voices and perspectives.
  - Multiple focus group stakeholders (school leadership, family and caregivers, students) mentioned the district's World Cultures course as a comprehensive means to cultural responsiveness in the district and school curriculum.

## FINDINGS

- An advanced high school ELA class includes a unit of study focused on social justice/injustice and includes themes of intersectionality in readings and discussion.
- The district uses a curriculum evaluation tool to understand where gaps in inclusion and equity exist (outdated images, inaccurate portrayal of history; ideas, social constructs, e.g.).

While the above-mentioned information identifies movement toward a more inclusive approach to curriculum and instruction, staff also shared the hope that systems and structures would be created to support changes that some staff members are implementing to make spaces more equitable. Additionally, surveys noted different perceptions between school leaders and students regarding the curriculum being reflective of diverse populations. School leaders evidenced a slightly above average of agreement at 3.17, while students were below average, at 2.84 (3.0 indicates a consensus level of agreement).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.1

Develop or expand current curricula and instructional materials in all content areas to prioritize inclusion and equity.

- Continue to use the current curriculum evaluation tool to understand where gaps in inclusion and equity exist (outdated images, inaccurate portrayal of history; ideas, social constructs, e.g.)
- Continue to develop or revise curricula, materials, and instructional practices based on findings
  - Continue to work toward ensuring representation of a diversity of perspectives, authors, and characters
  - Identify resources for customizing curriculum to meet students' unique needs and interests.
- Provide professional learning for all levels of staff in the use of new/revised curricula and materials
- Set the expectation that all staff move toward teaching from a more equity-minded lens

### 5.2

Establish a district-wide culture of developmental responsiveness which ensures that the practices adults use respond to students' individual, cultural, and developmental learning needs and strengths.

- Invest in professional development that provides educators with robust support and resources on the following:
  - Use of active and interactive teaching practices
  - Creating and sustaining a classroom of belonging that represents all students
  - Use of words and non-linguistic models
  - Developing connections and ways of knowing students

# PART III

## APPENDICES AND REFERENCES

In this section, please find:

- List of all references used in the compilation of this report.

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