




CHAPTER 2

School leaders center the equity agenda on student experiences

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Equity warriors use data to let others visualize student experiences as they create a vision and equity agenda. As it is for superintendents and district leaders, student experiences are the best assets for a principal and other school leaders. School-level equity warriors seek data that tell their school's story within the larger context of the district. At times, the interests of the school are in conflict with the district's interests. The school's smaller size can allow equity warriors to reach quicker agreements and act faster than their district colleagues. The opposite is also true. Data comparisons across schools often contribute to a school community's complacency in maintaining the status quo or its hopelessness at not having the scale and resources to generate momentum for change. School-level equity warriors learn to navigate their ship, conscious of the district's winds and currents, and the other ships around them.

Equity warriors at the school level operate with awareness of their actions across politics, diplomacy, and warfare, as do their district colleagues. Like district-level equity warriors, they coordinate their moves for maximum affect. School-level equity warriors have the advantage of knowing their students in a way that their district-level colleagues cannot. School-level equity warriors have the advantage of freedom to act within their sphere of influence and the disadvantage of being dependent on their district colleagues for encouragement and support. In this way, successful school-level leaders balance not getting too far ahead of the district or their school community with not lagging behind the momentum and interests of either. Relying on data and telling their students' stories is a way to find the balance point. For all equity warriors, especially at the school level, knowing and responding to the needs of students is always the right thing to do.



POLITICS: ENGAGE THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY IN SHAPING AND TELLING THE SCHOOL'S STORY

Equity warriors engage with their school community in creating a vision of what they want their school to become. They build from their knowledge of students and the stories told by the data to create a vision for the school that is sensible to the head and appealing to the heart. They package that with a plan to deliver on the vision.

The ubiquitous access to and communication of information creates opportunities and challenges. In the past, schools were

treated as closed systems, as if only the teachers and principal knew what went on in school every day. Operating with that belief, the principal was the primary link to anyone outside the school doors. Today, we know that schools are not closed systems. External stakeholders have multiple ways to learn about schools. States are required to make available volumes of data about school performance, and websites abound with information about test results, discipline reports, funding, and teacher performance. Students post video and photos. With social media, families and community members no longer need to rely on talking with teachers in grocery store lines to obtain informal data about schools. We are, in fact, awash with data about individual schools.

All of this means that principals must work to shape the school's story while understanding and balancing conflicts that may occur when external stakeholders use school data.

YOUR MOVE: UNDERSTAND THE ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT YOUR SCHOOL.

On the surface, schools are more alike than different. Scratch the surface and you'll see that schools are complex webs of human and social networks. No matter the size—and we have worked in schools with as few as 11 teachers and as many as 200—schools are not what they appear to be. Those within the school walls have different experiences. Teachers are often surprised by the experiences students have outside their classrooms. The further away from the school, the less likely one is to know the school. Assumptions are based on the data available or the data and stories told. Often the data are anecdotal and from a single moment in time long past. Equity warriors know that the politics of student data—how conflict is balanced to govern effectively—determines the school's story and defines how the school is perceived.

Each school's story either builds on or challenges assumptions. Assumptions do not change easily or quickly. School leaders must be able to marshal data in support of the story they want to tell about their school.

Families make assumptions about schools. If a school is in an affluent neighborhood or affluent community, families assume it is a good, safe, and happy school. Families in large urban districts that have school choice often make this assumption and are willing to have their children commute an hour or two each way to attend a school that they consider desirable. Families may make enrollment decisions without ever visiting the

school, relying solely on what they hear from others because they feel unwelcome or may not have the time or resources to visit during the day and visiting at night may not be safe.

No family wants to send their child to a school they consider inferior, so they may selectively use data that support their own assumptions about a school, not actively seeking data that might challenge their personal assumptions. A school often becomes “good” because families have chosen to send their child to the school. After all, no family wants to be responsible for sending their child to a “bad” school.

Assumptions may be self-fulfilling. Students who travel roundtrip to school three or four hours a day must be committed to attending school and more motivated to learn. However, when we disaggregate performance data for students within the attendance zone and those from outside the attendance zone who choose to attend the school, we may find the assigned students mask the performance of students who do not live within the attendance zone.

Equity warriors get ahead of the story that others tell about their school and also engage others in the storytelling process. State education agencies, district leaders, school leaders, teachers, families, and students all may tell different stories about the school. Think of the story that is told about each school whenever test results are released. The data shape the school’s public image. That image may be right from a certain perspective. Often the data presented tell conflicting stories. Assumptions made from a particular perspective do not change easily or quickly. But, if equity warriors are proactive about ensuring that the public has access to a broader set of data that tell the stories of their students, then families and the public will consider test results as only one factor in a broader picture about the school.

YOUR MOVE: CREATE METRICS THAT MATTER TO YOUR COMMUNITY.

Equity warriors are able to build the confidence of the families in their schools by showing leadership and marketing their schools. This move has two parts. The first is having a vision for the school that is sensible to the head and appealing to the heart; the second is having a plan to deliver on the vision. Equity warriors seize the opportunity to select metrics that give credibility to their story. Claiming the metrics that are important to the community can drive the telling of the story and guide the development and execution of the plan. Equity warriors balance

Equity warriors are proactive about ensuring that the public has access to a broader set of data that tell the stories of their students.

metrics that tell the story of closing achievement and opportunity gaps. And, they realize that they need to engage families in a way that builds relationships and recognizes the shared responsibility for student success.

Schools whose students do not perform well on state assessments face the challenge of closing achievement gaps. State or district leadership may dictate the metrics that must be used to evaluate success on closing achievement gaps, which puts this factor outside the school's control. However, even though it might not seem so, how school leaders react to information about closing achievement gaps is within their control. Equity warriors ignore achievement gap data at their peril.

Equity warriors identify which students are struggling learners and the specific barriers to their learning. For example, one instructional strategy for improving student performance focuses on expanding students' familiarity with the academic language used in state assessments. When working with middle and high schools, we found that students were not familiar with the common academic and content-specific vocabulary in the test items. Teachers learned that introducing academic vocabulary enabled students to better understand the prompts and respond with what they knew. Closing achievement gaps is not typically as simple as introducing academic vocabulary and/or vocabulary used in the state test questions, however, we have seen student performance increase by improving their familiarity with common vocabulary, which we take for granted that students will know.

School leaders and teachers may resist a focus on instruction they perceive to be "teaching to the test," thinking it is dishonest or not in the students' best interest. Frankly, students who are underserved deserve to have the opportunity to demonstrate proficiency on state tests just as other students do. Even more to the point, knowledge of academic vocabulary will serve students well beyond the test as vocabulary is essential to understanding subject-specific content. Further, going through the exercise of understanding where students are struggling, as in the specific needs of multilingual learners, is vital for teacher efficacy. For example, we worked with a team of 6th-grade humanity teachers who are among the best teachers we have observed. We would be grateful to have our children as students in their classes. Although their instruction was purposeful and students grew academically and in confidence as learners, they did not perform any better on state assessments than they had under their former teachers. Teachers and students became discouraged by the lack of progress. Their first

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reaction was to discard the state assessment results as unimportant. With encouragement and with full confidence in their ability, they dug deeper into possible disconnects between the content they were teaching and state standards. They soon saw that students were learning, but they were missing key areas of content knowledge expected by the state standards—and thus measured by the state test.

Equity warriors propose metrics about the conditions that affect student learning.

Equity warriors propose metrics about the conditions that affect student learning. That includes the well-being of students and adults. For example, schools have become increasingly aware that students, teachers, and staff suffer from trauma in their lives outside of school. Every community, not only those in high-poverty areas, are considering the social and emotional preparedness for learning of their children and adults. Increasing pressures for academic achievement from preK to grade 12 are resulting in stress-related illness. Economic pressures on families, teachers, and staff are prevalent across communities. A few years ago, we began the school year with a values exercise with about 25 teacher leaders from a high school. We gave them a deck of 60 cards, each with a value statement. They worked through a couple of rounds to select five values that were most important to them. Securing their financial future was among the top five for more than two-thirds of the teachers. They talked about the stress they were under as rents were rising, gentrification was driving up home prices in a historically lower-middle-class urban neighborhood close to the school, and with their salaries not increasing, they and their families were being forced to move farther away from their school. Teachers who live in the community share and understand the pressures on students and families.

Clearly, schools must consider the needs of the whole child, which means including the needs of their families. Analyzing opportunity gaps extends beyond providing book bags and pencils to students. Using Maslow's hierarchy of needs as a guide, equity warriors use root cause analysis to consider the physiological, safety, love/belonging, esteem, and self-actualization of students, teachers, staff, and the families they serve. Doing so helps create the aspirational vision and action plan that will be necessary to earn the community's respect and trust.

San Diego Unified School District tackled the idea of creating metrics that truly captured achievement and opportunity gaps to define a quality school. The following example describes how they worked collaboratively to support school leaders as they wrestled with metrics to tell the story of their school.

In 2009, the San Diego Unified Board of Education adopted its mission statement and Vision 2020 for Student Success. In Vision 2020, the board challenged the system to create a “quality school in every neighborhood” within five years. In hearing the challenge, school leaders asked, “What makes a quality school?” District and school leaders were invited to develop indicators of a quality school. The emphasis on indicators was a shift from more traditional attempts at defining school quality by the implementation of district initiatives, by the programs and services schools offered, or by single measures of school performance. By focusing attention on indicators, schools would be able to know their destination and identify progress in reaching their destination. Schools also would be able to identify and learn from exemplary practices in other schools.

The school and district leaders identified 12 quality indicators.

- Access to a broad and challenging curriculum
- Quality teaching
- Quality leadership
- Professional learning for all staff
- Closing the achievement gap with high expectations for all
- Parent/community engagement around student achievement
- Quality support staff integrated and focused on student achievement
- Supportive environment that values diversity in the service of students
- High enrollment of neighborhood students
- Digital literacy
- Neighborhood center with services depending on neighborhood needs
- Safe and well-maintained facilities (San Diego Unified School District, 2012, p. 11)

Each indicator had a destination statement, objectives, and possible evidence/data sources. For example, the destination statement for closing the achievement gap with high expectations for all was: “All schools are places in which high expectations for success in meeting the requirements of a broad and challenging

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curriculum are held by ALL students and the adults who serve them” (p. 20).

The measurable objectives, such as close the achievement gap, were accompanied by specific evidence to be used to measure progress toward closing achievement gaps.

The San Diego Unified example, particularly for its time, was a novel asset-based approach to use metrics to define a school’s vision. It allowed school leaders and their communities to shape conversations to see the complexities of the schools, to determine what they did well, and to focus more attention on areas in need of improvement. Most important, only one indicator—closing the achievement gap—was directly connected to state assessment data. School leaders could broaden the conversation, which was welcomed by teachers, staff, and communities.

The San Diego Unified process informed the ways that California state policy makers designed future iterations of state accountability systems. However, its influence on school-based conversations was limited by a missing key ingredient: the engagement of families.

YOUR MOVE: ENGAGE FAMILIES AS PARTNERS IN DETERMINING THE VISION AND METRICS FOR THEIR SCHOOL.

School leaders, particularly at the secondary level, describe the conundrum of needing family support as partners in their child’s learning and the difficulty of engaging families. We have mentioned some of the reasons given for the lack of engagement. There is no denying that some families face barriers. Nevertheless, part of the problem is that many educators do not know how to engage families.

In almost every district and school in which we have worked, family engagement is among the lowest priorities for educators. Almost everyone points to the critical role that families play in their children’s education, and yet very little is done to engage families as partners. The role of families is often limited to fundraising; participation in events to appreciate teachers, staff, or students; and attending district, state, or federally mandated meetings to approve site or district plans. Family engagement is

something to do when time is available or when a situation has gotten out of hand.

Schools that serve middle- and upper-middle-class families often complain about too much family involvement. Families in these communities are often more actively involved in selecting and participating with school leaders. School leaders are chosen because they can foster positive relations with families and know how to navigate the politics of privilege. In an ideal world, school leaders use families as assets, storytellers, advocates for resources, and influencers to protect the school, to a degree, from having to implement district and state directives that are inconsistent with their vision.

Equity warriors also know families are an asset. They are able to share and shape the school's narrative within the social networks in their communities. That family engagement has not worked is a system failure. Nevertheless, positive and meaningful engagement has occurred in schools when educators and families are willing to learn together how to engage around the needs of their school. Here is an example of how it can be done.

Under the Obama administration, the U.S. Department of Education promoted Karen Mapp's dual capacity-building framework (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). The framework grew out of Mapp's work building family engagement systems in Boston Public Schools. That work taught her that families are not involved because educators don't know how to engage them. She also learned that both educators and families needed opportunities to learn how to work together effectively. Both sides of the equation had to work simultaneously to achieve true engagement.

The dual-capacity framework identifies the conditions necessary for both sides to learn and apply what they've learned and to sustain the relationships that are created as a result. According to Mapp and Kuttner, the following types of opportunities are most likely to enable families and educators to improve their ability to work together:

- **Linked to student learning:** Initiatives are aligned with school and district achievement goals and connect families to teaching and learning goals for students.
- **Relational:** A major focus of the initiative is on building respectful and trusting relationships between home and school.

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- **Developmental:** The initiatives focus on building the intellectual, social, and human capital of stakeholders.
- **Collective/collaborative:** Learning occurs in group rather than individual settings and is focused on building learning communities and networks.
- **Interactive:** Participants have opportunities to test and apply skills. (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013, pp. 9–10)

Mapp and Kuttner identify the skills and knowledge that educators and families need to develop in order to work together successfully. They cluster those into four components:

- **Capabilities:** Educators need to identify and learn about the assets available in their communities. To do so, they need cultural competency skills and help in building trustful relationships. Families need to know about student learning and how school systems work, and they need to develop skills to advocate for students.
- **Connections:** Educators and families learn how to create meaningful networks to build relationships between families and their school, among families, and between families and their community.
- **Confidence:** Educators and families gain confidence to express themselves and their interests and to work across cultural differences.
- **Cognition:** Educators and families should share assumptions, beliefs, and a worldview that staff and families are partners. (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013, pp. 10–11)

Equity warriors encourage partnerships with families to signal that educators aren't the only ones responsible for student success.

The framework ends by describing the outcomes that partnerships will foster in building staff and family capacity to improve student learning and improve schools.

Equity warriors encourage partnerships with families to signal that educators aren't the only ones responsible for student success. Building the capacity of staff to engage as partners with families provides opportunities for staff and families to learn together about the ways the school is vital to the lives of families. Families can learn to navigate through the education system, and teachers and families can support each other

in achieving agreed-upon metrics. Equity warriors understand that building capacity of staff and families, particularly for school-dependent students, is not easy, but necessary.

YOUR MOVE: FOCUS ON ASSETS. BE ASPIRATIONAL.

After metrics have been determined in partnership with families, equity warriors have a context for determining how well the school is positioned to move the needle on the metrics. Resolving conflicts in the narrative about the school depends on constructing a story that highlights the school's assets and is aspirational. Telling a compelling, aspirational story is easy when the school is generally successful. For example, during the NCLB years, we worked with a Kansas high school at which 90 percent of the students were at least proficient on state assessments. The principal was able to use data with his instructional leadership team to identify students who were falling behind, primarily students with disabilities, and organize efforts to focus on the 10 percent who were not proficient. Teachers found that all students benefited from instructional strategies designed for students with disabilities. Instructional strategies—particularly the use of learning goals—became an asset they could use in the school's story about creating success for all students. Telling the story of a successful school may seem easier. Nevertheless, demonstrating that the school is committed to the success of all students speaks volumes about a school's expectations and offers great hope for families.

Equity warriors demonstrate courage, leadership, and focus, even in schools that work for a high percentage of their students. In largely successful schools, the adaptive challenge is not one of complacency or efficacy but one of convincing adults to stop doing some of what they are still doing and take on responsibility for new challenges. Reactions among teachers are often interpreted as a personal attack. A teacher explained it to me this way:

I am tired of people not valuing the work I am doing and my work load, and telling me to do something else. It is not whether I think the suggestion is a good idea or not. What I do should be valued.

When schools are not known to be successful with students, aspirational stories are more difficult to tell. In leading state intervention teams into schools designated as failing, we have seen first-hand the results of critical story telling. No one wants to be part of a sinking ship. Students and families who

can exercise options to leave do so. Teachers and administrators who are able to leave do so. Additional resources without clear strategy and commitment to implementation over time do not have the intended effect. Even when data show gains, the starting point can be so low that the narrative doesn't change. We've heard conversations that sound something like the following:

Yes, 24 percent of students are proficient in mathematics, up from just 11 percent last year. Is failing with 76 percent of your students something to celebrate?

No, but just maybe it is the beginning of a new story. The story lies not in the numbers but in the explanation about what teachers did to change those numbers and whether they believe those same strategies will work to continue that improvement for other students.

Equity warriors know the narrative about a school is often wrong, particularly the narrative that high-poverty schools are unsafe. Although plenty of data demonstrate that schools are safe, school leaders are often required to convince families that this is true. This is especially the case at the middle level. Families have confidence in elementary schools, and, even if they leave public schools for middle school years, they often return for high school. For sure, some middle schools are chaotic—early adolescence has something to do with that! The reality is that very, very few schools are unsafe and that, even in the most troubled neighborhoods, schools provide a safe haven and nurturing environment.

Equity warriors learn from others—particularly charter schools whose existence depends on convincing families that they offer a better option—that they need to market their school. The starting point is proactive outreach to families to invite them to be inspired. Data on families are available. More often than not, districts can predict which students will be attending which schools. Therefore, school leaders know the families who are their target audience. Equity warriors hire family liaisons/coordinators who know the community to reach out and maintain contacts with families. They encourage families whose children attend feeder schools in the attendance zone to visit their school. When they do, families see that administrators and teachers are vigilant and students trust them. They see that students are valued and administrators, teachers, and staff believe that all students in their care will be successful. They see the benefits of being a member of the school community for their children and themselves. In the best examples, families

come to understand that schools are complex social systems that work most of the time for students and their families, and to trust the school with their children’s education.

School leaders are most likely to be able to enlist community support in shaping the school’s story when students and families feel more invested in the outcome. School leaders can face unique challenges when a specialized program—such as a STEAM theme school—has been thrust upon a community, perhaps because funding was available, perhaps because a small group of community members lobbied for the program. Equity warriors are mindful about including students and families in exploratory conversations about changes in schools and enlisting students in setting and selling the direction. Anything that hints of a “do to” approach rather than a “do with” approach will jeopardize the support of those we are intended to serve. Not including parents and community members in a school’s future plans is quite simply asking for trouble.

Equity warriors are mindful about including students and families in exploratory conversations about changes in schools and enlisting students in setting and selling the direction.

YOUR MOVE: ARTICULATE THE PLAN TO DELIVER ON THE VISION AND METRICS.

Equity warriors use metrics important to the community and tell the student success story to communicate a compelling vision for the future. The vision does not have credibility unless it includes a plan to deliver on the vision.

Equity warriors use their analysis of achievement gap data to tell part of the story. The most important part of the story is what they—and their school—will do about it. That is where opportunity gap analysis is important. Closing opportunity gaps can mean providing after-school programming, tutoring, and homework support specifically tailored to the community. We have worked with high schools where subtle pressure by administrators and teachers makes it clear that attending after-school tutoring or advising programs is not optional. At one middle school, the administration required students who were not meeting expectations to attend an after-school program every day—without exception. When parents came to the school to personally release their child from the after-school program, the principal would ask to talk with them in her office. The conversation lasted about 45 minutes, which was the length of the after-school session. Word traveled in the community that the principal was serious!

Equity warriors use their analysis of achievement gap data to tell part of the story.

One of the challenges, particularly for schools with large numbers of students who are not meeting expectations, is the reliability of the data they receive about students. For example,

teachers receive students at the start of the year who seem to be performing well below grade level. Experienced teachers know that they need to review concepts and ideas from the previous years so that students have a foundation for new learning. Assessing students' prior knowledge is difficult. Some students experience learning loss during the summer. Some students prefer to "pretend" they don't understand, that they can't remember being taught content and skills that are foundational. There are multiple reasons for the pretending, including lack of engagement, lack of motivation, "testing" the teacher's resolve and determination, or legitimate misunderstandings when content is presented in ways unfamiliar to them. Some students actually have not been exposed to important content in prior grades for reasons beyond their control, or they needed more time to comprehend the material. Any of these reasons can lead to misdiagnosing students, which can stifle growth and/or frustrate teachers' instruction.

Equity warriors help teachers recognize that nobody expects them to be superheroes.

Equity warriors help teachers recognize that nobody expects them to be superheroes. Few teachers have the right skills and the right conditions to help students increase multiple grade levels in a single year. Those who are able to do so will tell you they are not successful every year with every student. Students depend on the dedication and devotion of their teachers if they are to achieve more than one year's growth. Nevertheless, individual teachers cannot do it alone. To convince teachers that their dedication and devotion will be recognized and effective, equity warriors engage teachers and school staff in developing an action plan that articulates the journey to the vision.

We are not suggesting another version of the school improvement plan or compliance documents. Schools have too many of those already. Equity warriors focus on student success by reaching for consensus on student outcomes: What should students know and be able to do as they exit key points in their school careers: end of 5th grade, end of 8th grade, high school graduation? A high-performing middle school we know posted exemplary writing samples for 6th, 7th, and 8th graders in the hallway among the school's English language arts (ELA) classrooms. Teachers selected the samples after they had reached consensus about what student demonstrations of exemplary grade-level work would look like. The work did not follow a formula. Posting the work was intended to send clear messages about teaching and learning for students and teachers: ELA teachers saw learning as an iterative process and that proficient writing was valued as a demonstration of student knowledge—not state test scores. By reaching consensus on the samples, teachers demonstrated that they needed to work together

across grade levels, to do their part. By being public about the expectations, teachers were clear about their responsibility for helping students meet high standards of performance.

Another aspect to the equity warriors' vision is to direct attention to the future. This is also done by bringing people together, using data, and establishing a system of mutual accountability. The following example illustrates one way of doing so.

We facilitated a group of schools from across the country—most from the Midwest—committed to learning from each other's experiences over a decade about how to improve student achievement. At one point in the multiyear journey, they began using student data to put a face on students who they did not yet know. High schools examined performance data of 8th graders within their district, middle schools selected data of 5th graders, and elementary schools looked at the work of kindergarten students. They drew upon datasets of students in performance cohorts. For example, they could predict the number of students reading below grade level, students reading on grade level, and students reading above grade level who would enter their schools the next year. To make it personal, they had the actual names of students in the performance band that would be arriving at their schools.

Their essential questions were something like this: José is a 5th grader who is reading just below grade level. His state ELA assessment results are below proficient in mathematics. What systems will we put into place to have José leave 8th grade ready for success in high school? They used the data to reflect on the current opportunities and supports for students. Would these be adequate for the incoming group of students? Was there something else we could do?

Principals began to plan the narrative to welcome students and families to their schools. Anticipating the needs of students, they used the budget process to consider changes in programs and staffing—not waiting until the budget was set and implemented in the fall. They planned communications that would send the message that students and families are welcome, that we know who you are, and we have a plan to help you be successful. Internally, teachers would learn that the administration had a plan for supporting students and teachers and that it was a process to address the needs of students over several years.

skills of colleagues. When we first conducted walk-throughs 20 years ago, teachers were so eager for feedback that they would follow us to their classroom door hoping to overhear our conversations. Teachers are still hungry for feedback.

School leaders reward teachers in different ways—teaching assignments, classroom locations, supply money, access, visiting their classrooms more or less than others, release time, salary supplements for special projects, leaving the teacher in charge when the administrative team is offsite—to name a few. These are transactional, meaning that school leaders and teachers give and receive something through their relationship. If you help cover a classroom, you will not be questioned when you need to leave school before the end of the school day. Transactions make the organization run smoothly—they are oil for gears.

Equity warriors use transactions with effect. They rely on teachers, staff, and families to gather and share information about what people are thinking and to check the climate of the school. Transactions are often helpful in building momentum while designing an equity agenda, a strategy, and a plan of action. Transactions, however, move the equity agenda only slightly. The equity agenda relies on a vision framed in moral persuasion. Equity warriors take the story and convince students, families, staff, and teachers to believe that it is the right thing to do for each and every student. Diplomacy lives in the plan to achieve the right thing in ways that are sensitive and effective.

YOUR MOVE: BE EMPATHIC AND USE THE “RIGHT” DATA TO BUILD TEACHER EFFICACY.

Sensitivity and effectiveness are often at odds. Whether you are an athlete, a musician, an actor, a reader, a writer, or a tradesperson, you know what good looks like. Even the untrained eye can recognize what great looks like. You study sports, music, acting, and other skills, such as carpentry, by watching, seeing, practicing, and trying to emulate the finished product. When you are trying to demonstrate proficiency in a task, you know whether you have learned the necessary knowledge or skills.

For longer than we wish to admit, we visited classrooms with principals to collect objectives and agendas, to talk with students, to determine the minutes teachers worked with students, to note whether students were collaborating or just present in

groups, to read student work or otherwise to judge the learning climate. We used the data collected to determine, for example, who could write an objective that included content, level of rigor, and means for judging student success. Then, we planned professional development for whole schools and departments based on the data we collected. If we observed that most or almost all teachers were able to write and post an objective we deemed good, the principal would talk with those who did not, and we moved on.

Needless to say, the teachers were not pleased with our visits. Those who were responsive wondered whether they had the right words on the wall. When we entered the room, they would move chart paper stands and other objects so that the agenda was not blocked from view; or they would walk near the agenda so that if we were looking at them, we would see the agenda; or they would repeatedly turn the PowerPoint presentation back to the lesson objective slide. We were unsympathetic when they complained that they didn't see the point. After all, if you cannot clearly express your purpose, students cannot learn.

After a time, we realized that focusing on what the teacher was doing—per se—was not making a difference. It didn't really matter whether the words on the wall were right. What mattered is that students demonstrated what they knew or could do based on the task of the day. So we shifted our attention away from teacher actions to what students were doing. By focusing on students rather than the teacher, we also found that we were able to build trust with teachers by clarifying their purpose and helping them analyze and develop better tasks and assessments of rigorous student learning. This was real work. Teachers know the difference.

Of course, focusing on what students were doing did not mean we were ignoring what the teacher was doing. The difference is that we were not reporting on the teacher's actions; we were reporting on students. For example, a 7th-grade math teacher was pleased to invite us to watch an interactive lesson that had students create a city map where the infrastructure was proportional and used geometric shapes. We wondered, having seen a similar lesson in a 4th-grade math class in another school, whether the lesson was advanced for 4th graders or way below the standards for 7th graders.

Observations and questions like these launch very different conversations with teachers than do observations about whether the objective is stated correctly. The conversation causes teachers to articulate their thinking about the activity and whether the student product is grade-level work. Was the

7th-grade teacher seeking much more in complexity than what was expected by the 4th graders? In any case, focusing on the product helps the teacher and the administrator understand the expectations for student learning through the eyes and actions of students rather than objectives on the wall.

Collecting student products regularly as data on student progress helps equity warriors build teacher efficacy. Another recent learning for us is how many teachers do not believe their daily instruction makes a difference in student learning. For example, we know teachers who believe that some students are good at mathematics and others are not. These teachers believe they can help students learn mathematics, but students will be truly proficient only if they have the disposition to learn mathematics.

Equity warriors go deeper. Working with teachers to set measurable learning targets and collect data on how students do on performance tasks regularly provides evidence of student learning that can change beliefs. For example, in one classroom, a pretest of 15 learning target questions showed five students could answer seven or more questions correctly. By the end of the week, with specific instruction on the learning targets, 10 students could answer 10 or more questions correctly. By the end of the two-week period, 13 students could answer all 15 questions correctly. The results are powerful for students as well as teachers.

When teachers begin to see daily progress from students who they did not believe in, their attitude about their teaching changes. To be honest, it is hard to believe that teachers do not have efficacy. We did not consider that one could teach every day and not believe that students learned something from the instructor. We didn't look for it. However, when we explored beliefs about teaching and student learning and listened to teachers, the lack of efficacy was pervasive. We should not have been surprised. Teaching is a human endeavor, and effective teaching requires an emotional connection between teacher and students. As a teacher, it can be incredibly disheartening to not see growth day-to-day and year-to-year with students who are school dependent. Pouring emotions as well as energy into teaching is demanding. The demand on teachers was evident when I interviewed teachers who had taught for a decade or more at three of the most underperforming middle schools in Jefferson County, Kentucky, before transferring to schools serving more affluent, less school-dependent students. They told emotion-laden stories of poring their heart and soul into teaching at the underperforming schools and seeing little in the way of student progress. This is not because they were not good teachers. They were committing less of themselves in

their new schools and seeing greater results. They blamed their lack of experience and lack of skill for not reaching students at the underperforming schools. Had they known then what they know now, they said, those students would have been better served.

These teachers were self-reflective and honest. To survive, some teachers do not allow themselves the freedom to be self-reflective and honest. They are resigned to the way it is.

We will say more about efficacy and daily instruction in later chapters. Collecting student performance data regularly on daily tasks is a best practice to improve student achievement and build teacher efficacy. Equity warriors use this practice because it is sensitive and effective.

YOUR MOVE: JUDGE READINESS AND PREPAREDNESS FOR EQUITY

For equity warriors, the success of using data to execute an equity vision is tied to readiness—readiness of the district/supervisors, of teachers/staff, of parents/community, of students, and, most important, of the principal and her leadership team. As we consider each, the principal's readiness is the driver. At the end of the day, and there will be some tough days, the principal's commitment to persevere is the determining factor.

Readiness of the district staff and the principal's supervisors is the necessary starting point. Districts vary in the degree of autonomy provided to school leaders. Often, a principal's experience, relationships, success, and powerbase contribute to the amount of autonomy granted or taken. Some districts have constant turnover or changes in reporting structures so that principal supervision is inconsistent. We have worked in districts where principals reported having seven different supervisors in seven years. Just as a supervisor becomes familiar with the school and the principal, the assignment changes. Trust, necessary to advance an equity agenda, does not have a chance to develop. As a result, principals interpret the signs as an indication of the district's intention to support equity and how much support they will receive when teachers, unions, and families push back.

School leaders who are equity warriors need answers to three questions to determine the district's readiness to support the school's equity agenda:

- Does the principal trust the sincerity of her supervisor's announced intention to support and push the equity

agenda? (For example, is the supervisor encouraging action in response to a particular political or short-term problem? Is this a multiyear effort?)

- How do district leaders provide cover for the principal in executing an equity agenda? (For example, has the board made policy or voted on resolutions? Have district leaders pushed an equity agenda publicly?)
- Are all schools receiving the same push to execute an equity agenda, and have some acted on it?

Without affirmation on all three questions, equity warriors should be cautious about stepping out on a limb for fear of having it cut off beneath them.

Equity warriors know that being ready is different from being prepared. Being prepared takes foresight to have the people and structures in place for a successful launch, and to anticipate possible resistance. Teacher and staff preparedness depends on leadership. Just as it is important for teachers to understand that it takes teachers working together, equity warriors create a team to distribute leadership across departments and grade levels. In the previous chapter, we described how district leaders might develop a guiding coalition to push on change from the outside. In the same way, school-level equity warriors can create a team of influencers and work with them to shape, guide, and execute the vision. However, the team's success depends on the principal having a clear vision of the achievable outcomes. The size of the school allows for and depends on the principal's leadership in setting directions.

Equity warriors create a team to distribute leadership across departments and grade levels.

Principals use transactions to invite teachers and staff on the team—to get the right people on the bus at the right time. We advise that teams mirror the school's organizational structure so that every adult in the school is touched by at least one member of the team. To keep the team size manageable, schools may need to modify other structures. For example, instead of having a team member from every grade level, team members are responsible for multiple grade levels—kindergarten–grade 2, grades 3–5, and so on.

Team members have dual responsibilities—two-way communication, and informing and leading. Meetings are structured so that team members report back on interactions with others and use the interactions as data in adjusting the plans. This means team members accept responsibility for working on their own time and are comfortable leading other adults. Many teachers are not willing or comfortable. This is where transactions are

necessary. Having a full-day release time for team meetings rather than meeting after school demonstrates the school leader's commitment to the importance of the agenda and appreciates team members' time. Team members are more likely to give of their time for follow-up activities. Additionally, team members need to feel comfortable leading. We have used team meetings to design and practice an agenda for follow-up meetings. Doing so allows team members to have a plan of action and a shared experience to critique the meeting and plan the next one.

Reaching consensus on the vision and plan has happened faster at the school level than at the district level, depending on the size of the school and the time of year the work is launched. School life has its seasons! We have seen the pattern repeated continuously. The time to launch new initiatives is in the spring, preferably after state testing. This period has a parallel to spring training for baseball teams. It is a time to prepare, experiment, and practice for learning about the best approach going forward. Summer is for individual development and preparation. The opening of schools is game time. Trying to launch in the fall of the school year is contrary to a school's cycle. Budgets are committed, annual objectives are set. The fall is the time for execution and learning.

Equity warriors understand the patterns of school life and judge the preparedness of the staff.

The implementation cycle for school-level initiatives also has a predictable, three-year pattern. The first year is chiefly awareness. In the second year, the initiative becomes real. If the equity warrior is consistent, the school community begins to realize that the equity agenda is serious. Pushback, deeper learning, and staff transitions are predictable in the second year. It is during the third year that the initiative begins to become rooted in the school's culture.

Equity warriors understand the patterns of school life and judge the preparedness of the staff. Here are three sets of questions equity warriors consider to determine teacher and staff preparedness:

- Do I have a leadership team structure in place that reaches all adults in the school? Are the leadership team members the right people? Can my colleagues and I trust that team members are willing to take on responsibility and are comfortable with leading?
- What equity-focused initiatives are in place? Where are they in the implementation cycle (e.g., just starting, year 1)?

- Is part of the vision ready to be enacted at my direction? Is there a symbolic action that the leadership team will help me plan for implementation immediately?

In partnering with family members, the principal's vision, communication, and confidence are key factors in judging readiness. School leaders have transactional relationships with family and community members. Those are the people the principal calls on for help in organizing recognition events, representing the school on district-required advisory groups, and school fundraising, to name a few. In return, family and community members feel satisfaction in contributing to the school, are privy to information, and know the principal will look after their children.

The principal's go-to people are not always the best at determining preparedness. They may not have the pulse of the community or may have alienated other families because they are seen as having power and/or excluding others from their circle. The go-to people may go along with an idea that is doomed to failure and find they have been placed in an untenable situation. In these situations, the principal may turn against the partner, and/or the person may be ostracized from other families and community members.

Equity warriors build coalitions of family and community members. Principals also need to understand the coalitions that individual teachers and staff members have developed. We know of schools where the teachers and staff members have activated their networks in opposition to the principal's agenda or for their own advantage. When the principal does not have supportive data and other community members to advance his position, it becomes difficult for district leaders to advocate on his behalf.

When equity leaders can speak with confidence about the vision and the effect decisions will have on their children, families and community members follow. However, other preparedness considerations need to be addressed. We have seen families and community members follow equity warriors when their vision makes sense, they are willing to lead, and a coalition of different voices supports the effort. For family members who are fundamentally concerned with their child's experience, the message needs to be communicated clearly and explain what will be different for each student.

We didn't mention the need to evaluate students' readiness and preparedness for equity. Trust us. They are ready! But don't forget that they need to be prepared.

Equity warriors build coalitions of family and community members.

interim assessment questions. Teachers used the intervening days to prep students to memorize and reproduce the answers when the assessment was given. The result was that a well-intended, low-risk tool to provide planning data to teachers was rendered useless.

To be honest, there is no way around it: Assessment data are used to judge teachers, students, and school leaders. Assessment data are only low stakes in schools where students are high performing or when teachers are too tired or frustrated to care. Another exception is teachers new to the profession who have lived through and were educated in the era of high-stakes testing. To the overwhelming number of teachers, a focus on assessment data often feels like an act of war.

Equity warriors anticipate the reciprocal actions of defensiveness, resignation, and/or counterattacks that exposing data is likely to unleash. They know that accurate, authentic, and objective data that truly represent the experiences of students are the best levers to pressure teachers who wish to fight or flee rather than engage.

Equity warriors anticipate the reciprocal actions of defensiveness, resignation, and/or counterattacks that exposing data is likely to unleash.

YOUR MOVE: IDENTIFY MEANINGFUL DATA. ESTABLISH INTENTIONALITY.

Equity warriors set the conditions to use data for teachers to monitor student progress and learn from each other. Meaningfulness of the data and intentionality of the processes are among the conditions that need to be met. Data walls that track progress of individual students on periodic assessments can be an effective way to help teachers see success. But because data walls take time to update, teachers frequently abandon them when the cost in time exceeds the benefit. Similarly, we have seen grade-level or classroom data posted on wall charts in teachers' lounges and principal's offices. Initially, the charts lead to informal conversations. Then, not much else. We have seen student grades posted in classrooms—including classes where 75 percent of the students have a D or F average. Teachers, administrators, and students walk by paying little notice.

Using data to publicly blame or shame teachers is not helpful. We know a principal, a passionate equity warrior, who spent three years of strong instructional leadership and investment in professional learning, only to become frustrated with the lack of student progress. At the start of the fourth school year, he brought teachers together and showed student data by teacher.

Equity warriors set the conditions to use data for teachers to monitor student progress and learn from each other.

Although he did not name teachers, the grade-level teams knew which teacher had students who performed at the high level and who had students who performed 30 percent lower. Instead of motivating teachers to learn from each other, teachers became more defensive and the school's culture divisive. Most other teachers we have shared this story with concur: Shaming is not an effective approach to improving practice.

One of the theories supporting high-stakes testing is that if teachers have the information about what students know and are able to do, then they will make data-based decisions to guide their teaching. This theory makes two assumptions about high-stakes testing: Teachers value the assessment, and the data are helpful in making teaching decisions. Neither assumption is accurate. Yet, schools tend to post data from assessments that teachers do not value or grades from assessments that students do not value. Doing so is inauthentic. Teachers like to see data on their own students. However, like the student who receives a failing grade on a test measuring something they didn't know, data about other students have little effect. It is just an exercise in posting data for the sake of posting data.

Equity warriors know that linking data collection to their vision for how the school should be perceived is important to establish its relevance for teachers and students. The ways that state assessments are positioned—and some would argue the state assessment system itself—undermines not only the importance of the test but also the school's purpose in educating students. Students who do not see, understand, or benefit from the results comply with taking the test only because they are told it is somehow important. It is certainly not important to them. On the contrary, if the school's vision is helping each and every student be prepared for success in the next grade or school level, then students and teachers must be able to see the connections among collecting data and their success. If they do understand the connections, teachers and students are more likely to respect the data and agree that they provide a way to measure their progress toward preparation for the next step.

Equity warriors also know that the processes to collect and analyze data must be intentional about when assessments are *for their learning*, meaning the assessment and results are intended to enable teachers to reflect on their practices and learn, and when assessments are *of student learning*, meaning the results are intended to hold teachers accountable for their effectiveness as measured by student progress. If the vision is to help teachers know their students and be learners themselves, then data that will be used to evaluate teachers must be clearly articulated and

separated from the learning process. There is a parallel to how teachers assess students. Teachers assess students in multiple ways. For example, the daily tasks provide teachers with information about whether students are understanding and learning. At some point, students must demonstrate that they have mastered our expectations for their learning. The same should apply to teachers.

YOUR MOVE: ASK STUDENTS.

We can't achieve equitable outcomes for students if we don't know them as learners. The question is how to gather quantitative data from students that are valid. Multiple methods are frequently used—surveys, questionnaires, polls, and focus groups. They all have a purpose, and given time, the results provide insights into what students feel about their school experience. These methods, by design, are objective and impersonal. We propose *three methods* that lead adults to deeper understanding about their students. These methods also have the benefit of building adult-student trust and relationships that provide advantages to equity warriors beyond the initial purpose.

THREE STRATEGIES FOR ASKING STUDENTS

Students hold answers to the challenges facing them. What tools can equity warriors use to know students as learners?

Student watching: Equity warriors observe students during a class or a few classes and use the data to inform the ways they know students.

Focus students: Equity warriors select focus students who are representative of students in their classrooms and monitor their performance as a way to understand more about all students.

Student interviews: Equity warriors identify a concern in the school, collect data to learn more about its root cause, and then select 10–12 students for one-on-one interviews.

Student watching. The idea is simple. Educators watch students during a class or a few classes and use the observations to inform the ways they know students. The key and the difficult part is to really, really watch students. There are several models

of this practice, including a focus on multilingual learners experienced with specific instructional approaches (Soto, 2021). Depending on the purpose, the observer sits in proximity to a selected student or students. The observer notes what students are doing at regular intervals during the lesson. How many minutes are focused on the teacher? How does the student react to the teacher's instruction or direction? Is the student given a task? How difficult is the task? Is it a new task? Is the student part of a group? Are students in the group interacting? Are students engaged? When are they engaged? Where does the student struggle? And so on.

The point here is that watching can tell a lot about teaching. For example, if teachers know that students lose concentration after 15 minutes, then a 30-minute explanation of a mathematical problem is not good teaching. More is definitely not better. If students are in cooperative groups and talk with each other about anything other than the assignment, teachers need to understand the reason. If the assignment is too easy, or too difficult, teachers need to know how to increase the rigor or provide a better scaffold.

As much as the data are important, how data are gathered may be more important. An elementary school principal taught me her version of student watching.

The principal picked the same students every time she entered a classroom and interacted with them for extended periods. She would ask the students to read, ask questions to determine their comprehension and understanding, and otherwise determine how they were doing. She selected students for specific reasons. If she thought the teacher was not rigorous enough, she would follow an average or advanced student. If the teacher was having classroom management issues, she would select students who were the most likely to be disruptive. If the teacher had several students with disabilities, she would select one of them.

Her observations were the subject of her conversations with teachers. The principal had four purposes. The first was to build partnership with teachers around students whose learning was a concern. The conversations were collegial and professional, complimenting the teacher on progress, and brainstorming next steps. The second was to impress teachers with her instructional knowledge by focusing on students who she knew teachers were

having difficulty reaching. Teachers at this school preferred for the principal to stay in her office doing whatever it is that principals do. She intended to let teachers know she saw them and knew good from poor instruction. Third, she recognized that teachers cannot notice student actions and reactions to everything that happens in a classroom of 30 students. Another pair of eyes, supportive and constructive, might provide insights that could make a difference in instruction. And fourth, she ensured that teachers attended to students whom they had difficulty reaching. When they realized that the principal would work with the same students each time she visited their classroom, they knew to attend to those students as well.

Student watching helps students as well as teachers. Student watching reinforces the notion that learning about learners is everyone's responsibility. Students gain a personal relationship with school leaders and with teachers who participate in student watching. We know secondary schools where teachers watch their students in other teacher's classrooms and how they engage in learning in other content areas.

Focus students. Equity warriors develop systems to monitor student progress. Monitoring progress of representative groups of students is a way to use sampling data to inform teaching practices.

*Equity warriors
develop systems
to monitor
student progress.*

Our work with data-based decision-making systems has evolved over time. In the early days of NCLB, several of our partner schools devised data-monitoring systems to track student progress based on state assessment scores. Teachers prepared data binders containing lists of each student in every class ranked from the highest to the lowest performers on state assessments. Lines would be drawn to differentiate groups of students—high, middle, and low. Principals held quarterly data conferences with teachers where teachers presented data on assessments (e.g., teacher-made tests, reading comprehension running records) and district or informal school assessments as a way to monitor student progress.

Principals reviewed performance data from all students. Typically, particular attention was given to the students in the middle—the bubble students—whose performance had the most effect on a school's scores on the state assessments. By moving students who were just below the line to the next level—for example, basic to proficient—the overall school annual progress performance would increase. It was important to ensure

that the top performers did not slip, and there was always hope that, with help, lower performers would make progress. Improving the test performance of bubble students was considered a strategic investment that would pay dividends. Some districts employed support teams that visited schools to work with bubble students, often pulling them from class for test preparation activities. State assessment scores increased. Targeted test preparation worked in the NCLB environment.

In addition to raising test scores, school leaders took information from the data binders and targeted students of special interest to them. Some principals had teachers prepare seating charts with the names of students so that they could observe and talk with the targeted students during a classroom visit. Some principals focused on students with learning disabilities, others selected students they knew for some reason—for example, a student who had behavior problems or a student whose family had expressed concern about their child's teacher. In addition to checking on students during walk-throughs, principals observed the teachers' attention to the focus students during observations.

Building on these earlier efforts, equity warriors help teachers select focus students who are representative of groups of students in their classrooms. At the start of each year, school leaders ask teachers to identify four or five focus students. Teachers describe their rationale for identifying each of the focus students and propose approaches to address the students' learning needs. To help teachers think about sampling, school leaders ask teachers to prepare an interim assessment early in the first marking period. As they score the interim assessment, teachers note students whose performance is similar to that of other students in the class. If most students in the class performed similarly, teachers knew they were able to move on or needed to reteach the content. If focus students performed similarly to other students, teachers knew the teaching strategies selected for use with the focus students might also work with other students.

In addition to using sampling techniques to reduce a teacher's feeling of being overwhelmed, sampling assists teachers as they move into differentiating instruction. Sampling techniques give teachers another source of information, beyond reading comprehension assessment data at the elementary school level, for grouping students. At the secondary level, sampling techniques may uncover gaps in content knowledge, vocabulary, or skills for accessing information.

Sampling and recording data about focus students has become considerably easier with the advent of mobile devices and software programs tailored to these purposes. School leaders

can check student data on their mobile phones. They can easily access information on focus students, including their photographs, and take notes on progress, raise questions, and/or share with teachers their noticings or conversations with students. Sometimes, different grade-level teachers identify the same focus students, which allows for team conversation about students. School leaders can also follow focus students who have multiple teachers and note the differences in approaches, and the performance of students across classes. Teachers no longer need to transfer data to binders or create seating maps. Once student data are loaded, access is at their fingertips.

Scheduling time to discuss focus student progress is the challenge. Technology is an asset. However, systems are necessary for educators to examine and use the data. When teachers make the leap to sampling, they realize the benefit, filling the gap between whole class and individual instruction.

Student interviews. There is a myth that high school teachers are resistant to change. Maybe. We believe that high school teachers are skeptical. They need to be shown there is a compelling reason to change, that there is a better way. This is equally true in high schools where students perform well and in schools where students underperform. In high-performing schools, feelings of competence, pride, competition, and/or ease of established patterns are enemies of change. In lower-performing schools, feelings of defensiveness, frustration, and being overwhelmed get in the way.

Interviewing students, as the following example illustrates, yields valuable insights to inform planning.

A large high school had a reputation for good performance on state assessments and a high graduation rate. Still, large numbers of students were not successful. They dropped out or transferred to other schools before graduation. The school's size and performance of the majority hid the true story. Teachers were comfortable, complacent, and resistant to any hard look that called into question the school's practices.

The principal created an instructional leadership team composed of the administrative team, the department head and a lead teacher from each academic department, and representatives from other departments—guidance, special education, and student activities. She presented data to the team about the

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dropout and transfer rates of students. She faced much resistance for focusing on the few rather than the success of the many. She persisted as the first marking period rolled on. The most vocal team members finally conceded that there was a group of students—about 25 percent of the freshman class—who were not successful. As we dug deeper into the data, the group was largely Black or Latinx but actually represented all races/ethnicities. We had landed on a focus group.

The instructional leadership team meetings began to explore the root causes for the target group's lack of success. The team believed academic grades provided the most reliable data. The most vocal team members argued that excessive absences and not completing homework explained why students received multiple D and F grades. They believed that students would learn if they attended class and did the work expected of them. In other words, students were responsible for their failure.

In preparation for the next team meeting, we reviewed grades for the first marking period by race/ethnicity. Students with As and Bs were at the top of each list; students with multiple Ds and Fs at the bottom. As one of us called out the name of a student with multiple failures, the other checked the database for absences. Four Fs and a D, no absences. Must be the exception. Three Fs, two Ds, three absences. More exceptions. Certainly, some students on the list had multiple absences. However, there was little correlation between failing grades and absences.

Sharing these data with the team changed the conversation—slightly. Teachers were not convinced. They questioned the data out of frustration. Nevertheless, each teacher agreed to briefly interview 10 students who had multiple Ds and Fs, to tabulate the results, and return in a week.

We also agreed to interview 10 students. No two were alike. A few just cut classes and had a good time with their friends. No one monitored them or made them aware of the consequences. However, the majority were students who were attending classes, taking notes, and completing homework or trying to. One student showed us her notebook full of clear, detailed notes. She was spending two hours a night on her mathematics homework and wasn't getting it.

The tone of the next team meeting was strikingly different from the previous ones. Almost all the teachers had similar results. Students were in their classes, were trying to meet expectations, and were unsuccessful. No one checked on those who were absent until after the marking period, and by then it was too late. Teachers began to offer other reasons for student failure:

- Classes of 35 hindered teachers from knowing their students.
- Teachers were more concerned with moving through the curriculum than checking whether students were understanding. As long as students were quiet and attentive, teachers assumed they were learning.
- Multilingual learners and others who had not experienced academic success were reluctant to ask a question in front of their peers.
- Students did not have the study skills needed for success in an academic environment.
- The district had not facilitated transitions from smaller, personalized middle schools to large high schools.
- Middle schools offered few consequences for students' poor academic performance.
- Students were unaware of the importance of earning credits toward graduation.
- Students' homes did not communicate when students were struggling.
- Guidance counselors, assigned to seniors and freshmen, focused all of their attention on scheduling and helping students prepare college applications. They did not meet with 9th graders during the first semester.
- Administrators attended to campus security and establishing routines rather than trying to get to know students.

As the list continued to grow, the adults realized that the lack of systems and supports—not students—was the cause for failures. So, instead of blaming incoming freshmen, the conversation shifted to doing a better job of preparing incoming 9th graders for success. Teachers, counselors, and administrators were not to blame. The system was built to fail students who were school dependent.

