

ANYTHING BUT EQUITABLE

USE OF DATA TO IMPROVE LEARNING IS UNEVEN, INCONSISTENT

Across the educational landscape, there are a growing number of initiatives designed to promote equity and make sure that every child, no matter their background or zip code, receives an education that helps them achieve their full potential. Yet there is one area where there has been little attention paid to equity and not much progress to speak of: the ability for educators to access quality and timely information about their students to make decisions that improve learning.

The analysis tools and systems educators have access to vary widely across the state.

It's not that successful approaches to the use of data don't exist. All schools maintain information about their students and focus on ensuring the security of this data and compliance with reporting requirements. Access to systems that can help schools translate the information they have into action that strengthens teaching and learning is far from universal.

In a series of conversations about the use of data in schools in the fall of 2019, it was evident that the types of data systems and their effectiveness vary widely across the state. Some educators work in districts with the resources for data specialists who can build powerful internal systems or spend significant time working alongside classroom teachers. Other districts had a student information system that produced only the most basic reports.

Increasingly, educators are recognizing that if it is harnessed the right way, the information they have – today – about their students tells an important story. It can reveal where students are performing well and where improvements are necessary. This allows educators to build on best practices or pinpoint how something is taught needs to change or identify a learning standard that has not been emphasized enough.



"We say we want to support our kids. We say we want equity and inclusion. Here is how we can make a difference in that. The data is showing us how we need to make a difference in that."

Latisha Barnett
Chief Equity Officer
Niskayuna Central School District



354 Square Miles, 70 Students

Many involved in the fall of 2019 conversations reported that for all the effort that is put into collecting and reporting data, they have little information that can help them make real changes. That is a frustration shared by Noelle Short, superintendent of the Long Lake Central School District in Hamilton County. The 70-student district sprawls over 354 square miles in the Adirondack Park. With a small staff and scarce resources, the cumbersome process of analyzing data often falls to the bottom of the priority list.

Yet she sees the power in being able to more readily access and connect more information about her students. Her vision includes using data to better know students more holistically.

"We would use it for supporting them, to inform purchasing, have vertical discussions and think of the district as a whole," she said. "Where are our gaps? Where are our strengths? It's like being an athlete. You have different measures and you look for your strengths, but you lean into your weaknesses so that you can be stronger."

Most days that feels out of reach for Short due to a lack of resources and expertise. However, Short's district is one that has signed on to use Tableau through Capital Region BOCES. Her hope is that the data visualization tool and the economy of scale that results from districts working together can fuel some progress for Long Lake.

First Step: Identifying Racial/Ethnic Disparities

About 115 miles away from Long Lake, in Schenectady County's Niskayuna Central School District, information about the experiences in school of different racial and ethnic groups helped lay the foundation for a Strategic Plan for Equity. The plan included a demographic breakdown of the faculty, staff and students, as well as information like suspension rates and participation in Advanced Placement groups by race and ethnicity.

The work of the Strategic Plan for Equity team showed that while the student body is about 29% non-white, the faculty is 2% non-white. Additionally, 33% and 38% of Black and Hispanic students, respectively, took at least one AP course in the 2019-20 school year, while these numbers were 52% for white students and 65% for Asian students. The plan connected empirical data with experiences that students were sharing anecdotally.

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Gathering the data for the district's Strategic Plan for Equity took months.

said the district's Chief Equity Officer Latisha Barnett. "The data is showing us how we need to make a difference in that."

However, compiling the information was no easy task. It required reviewing multiple state and district data reports and going back into systems to analyze old information in the way that the district wanted to see it to move forward. It took months.

"What this revealed for us was we have to come up with a more comprehensive way of collecting that data because it wasn't easy," Barnett said. In a perfect world, data would be gathered and maintained in a way that made it quick and easy to see this information and how it is trending over time. However, just as the statewide conversations in 2019 suggested, many data systems in use are disconnected and used for different purposes.

Yet, like so many others, Barnett sees how information can help improve our schools when used correctly. Even though the data in her district showed sometimes wide variations in the experience of students from different racial and ethnic groups, she believes it's better to have that information than not.

"Showing that we have these disparities, it kind of gives us tools for how we can move forward and change those disparities," she said. "We need to strategically identify where our issues are and how we can change them."

About the Statewide Data Conversation Project:

The district superintendents of the 37 Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) in New York have identified the need for education stakeholders to have meaningful and productive conversation about the best way to use student data to improve education. This paper is a continuation of the conversation, as the BOCES leaders recognize that a failure to come together to ensure best practices, both to improve instruction and ensure privacy and security, will result in missed opportunities to strengthen education for the students of New York. Funding to support this continued conversation was provided, in part, through a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Additional financial and staff support was provided by Capital Region BOCES.