

Creating “Equitable Classrooms”

It can't be denied that society faces a tremendous challenge in closing achievement gaps. The impacts are far reaching - ranging anywhere from income levels, rates of employment to educational attainment. These are serious problems that continue to demand our attention and action.

Equitable Classrooms is derived from a program I designed and coordinated several years ago when I was on staff at the Buckingham Browne & Nichols School in Cambridge, MA. The program was originally conceived as a means to identify strategies to close an observed achievement gap between the academic performance of students, especially groups defined by socioeconomic status, gender, and race/ethnicity. Although, the program can effectively target the above student populations, I find my work in this area has led me to believe that the program can benefit any student.

One strategy Equitable Classrooms uses is monthly survey data from participating students, as well as from their teachers/advisors and their parents, to help understand how they are experiencing school and what strategies might best help them. Surveys are customized to meet each student's needs and can cover a range of topics:

- Student self-evaluations on their engagement in school, academic challenges, and social-emotional issues
- teacher instruction and support
- teachers/student and teacher/parent relationships and communication

Other key components of Equitable Classrooms include:

- monthly meetings between participating teachers to analyze survey data and create strategies to support students
- monthly observations and feedback on identified goals of participating teachers
- monthly professional development of participating teachers
- bi-weekly teacher/student meetings

The overall outcome of Equitable Classrooms is a data driven responsive system of support for student academic achievement and a greater sense of social-emotional well being and belonging. The intention is to further build a child's capacity for self-advocacy; they will transition out of the program when personal objectives have been met. Other program outcomes I've seen over the years have ranged from:

- greater student independence and ownership of school work
- improved student academic performance
- helping students find their voice inside and outside the classroom
- an enhanced social-emotional school experience that will allow a student to thrive
- improved teacher accountability, instruction and support of students
- individualized strategies and support of students

I am happy to answer any questions you may have about Equitable Classrooms. I can be reached at bjohnson@tpschoool.org or 215-545-5323, Ext. 277

Brian L. Johnson
The Philadelphia School
Director of Admission, 1st - 7th Grade & Director of Diversity

Testimonials:

“Equitable Classrooms integrates equity goals with concrete classroom actions in a way that ensures all students are getting what they need. Teachers who engage in Equitable Classrooms find that they are able to systematically discern the support that students need to be challenged to meet their potential. Students feel seen and heard. Parents know their children’s learning and social needs are being addressed. With only a few extra hours of work per month, Equitable Classrooms can revolutionize the experience of schooling for students who might otherwise stay under the radar. Informed by his decades of experience in schools, Brian Johnson has engineered this program in a way that is both accessible and straightforward. I highly recommend it.”

Ali Michael, Director of the Race Institute for K-12 Educators & University of Pennsylvania Lecturer at the Graduate School of Education

“The Equitable Classrooms Project proved to be very effective here at BB&N. We focused on Black and Brown boys who were experiencing the largest achievement gap. Parents teachers and students all felt the program and added focus on their performance made a huge difference in a relatively short period of time. It forced students to be more honest and aware of their shortcomings and to be more pro-active in the area of self advocacy and gave faculty an added look at their role in student learning. Faculty became more responsive to the individual needs of their students and formed closer relationships as well. The program and approach also allowed parents to be more aware and involved in a more timely, thus helpful fashion. Our students did improve and became more alert, attentive and responsible as a result of the increased attention. My only regret is that we did not continue the program after Brian’s departure from BB&N, but I am seriously considering re-engaging in Equitable Classrooms with Brian’s help.”

Lewis Bryant, Director of Multicultural Services at Buckingham Brown & Nichols School (Cambridge, MA)

The Equitable Classrooms program requires the following 10 steps

* These steps are included in chapter 35 of the book

1. Identify criteria you will use for inclusion in the program.
2. Identify students who you want to include. Focus on students who are not meeting their potential.
3. Survey the identified students, their parents and their teachers about their experiences with school, homework, effort, behavior and achievement.
4. Review the data.
5. Receive the feedback.
6. Create strategies and interventions to address student challenges
7. Meet weekly with students.
8. Assess your interventions and strategies.
9. Rotate students out of Equitable Classrooms if they are meeting the goals.
10. Involve parents

Analyzing Survey Data through a Data Protocol

<p>What parts of the data (answer) catch your attention?</p>	<p>The parts that catch my attention are the narrative answers that are more specific about what moves and interests the students. Something that stands out in Vanessa's response is that she feels most comfortable speaking up in Math class. I wonder what contributes to this being true, or her feeling. I think that it speaks to the closeness we have built through open communication in this program, and her ability to share her perspective through our meetings and this survey. Also the connection that I have built with her mother and the open communication there. Jakob's response is interesting because he is on top of his work but he does not often feel connected to the meaning behind the curriculum.</p>
<p>What does the data tell us - NOT tell us?</p>	<p>The data does not tell us a number of things. One is WHY many of her teachers and her mother all notice in Vanessa that she is not as diligent, many people see her hopefully being a top student but she seems to be comfortable just doing enough sometimes. Also it does not show precisely why she says that she feels more comfortable speaking up in math as compared to other classes.</p>
<p>What good news is there to celebrate</p>	<p>Vanessa is feeling very comfortable and connected with me as an advisor, and has shared specifically that in math class she feels most comfortable speaking up. Jakob seems to feel similarly comfortable.</p>
<p>What problems does the data suggest</p>	<p>Vanessa is not fully comfortable speaking up in all classes. This was communicated to me by her mother to start the year, especially given stepping into a white-majority school.</p>
<p>What are the key conclusions</p>	<p>The opportunity for these two individuals to share their own perspective has given them more agency in their own learning, and allowed them to recognize to a deeper extent the power that they have over their own learning.</p>
<p>What recommendations do you have for addressing the problems</p>	<p>Accept that this is a continued process, give specific feedback to these students around times that they are participating more for Vanessa, and making connections for Jakob, so that they are taking ownership of the moments in which they are doing these things.</p>
<p>What resources will you need to address the problem(s)</p>	<p>Continue to explore ways to educate myself around issues of equity in classrooms, be conscious of how I and my colleagues structure our classrooms with equity as a goal, and discuss with Brian and Ali about ways to remove structures of bias from TPS.</p>