

Equity at da Vinci

On June 13, 2011, the Portland Public School Board of Education, adopted *Portland Public Schools Racial Educational Equity Policy 2.10.010-P*. The Board *“is committed to the success of every student in each of our schools. The mission of Portland Public Schools is that by the end of elementary, middle, and high school, every student by name will meet or exceed academic standards and will be fully prepared to make productive life decisions. We believe that every student has the potential to achieve, and it is the responsibility of our school district to give each student the opportunity and support to meet his or her highest potential.”*

What does this look like and mean for da Vinci?

As reported in our School Improvement Plan, on the Oregon State Report Card, since 2008-09 da Vinci has received an “Outstanding” school rating for the last three years. This would be cause for celebration, but over the last five years our disaggregated data clearly shows that although many of our students meet or exceed district and state standards in both reading and math, we have a significant achievement gap between Caucasian students and African American students in all areas. This is particularly true in math. As the Board Equity Policy states, *“The persistent achievement gap between White students and students of color is unacceptable...and directly at odds with our belief that all students can achieve.”*

When I shared our achievement gap data with members of the da Vinci community, some were surprised, but all agreed that it was unacceptable. Our African American families were relieved to know that race at da Vinci would be explored through our district equity work. Led by our Equity team, da Vinci staff has read and discussed articles from Glenn Singleton’s text *Courageous Conversations About Race* and from EVERYDAY ANTIRACISM edited by Mica Pollock. Our Equity Late Opening professional development sessions are carefully designed and presented to staff by our entire Equity team. Staff have responded with strong insights, questions, and personal “Ahas” as they explore how race plays out in their classroom, at school, and in their personal lives.

Da Vinci staff reviewed our school’s disaggregated data to fully understand our achievement gap. We also examined national college data by comparing SAT scores of high school seniors with the educational level of their parents. It clearly demonstrated that African American students with parents who have achieved a graduate level of education scored equivalent to a White student whose parents had only earned a high school diploma. This glaring gap is but one of many indicators that institutional racism does exist in all our schools and demands for us to take action. We are responsible for, and must eliminate our achievement gap at da Vinci.

Taking Action

Glenn Singleton, Director of the Pacific Education Group who is leading the district’s Courageous Conversations Equity work asks, *“Do we have the will to change?”* The answer is first personal and then collective. What I have quickly come to appreciate about the entire da Vinci community is their sense of urgency. In addition to the annual OAKS assessment data, staff are tracking all students, and paying

particular attention to students of color. In talking to parents of color, they have openly shared the initial culture shock their son or daughter experienced by attending a predominantly White school. However, with support, their students are now feeling able to “*meet his or her highest potential*” as mandated by the PPS’s Racial Equity Board Policy.

A Data Wall, an elaborate system of tracking students, helps us know which supports and interventions have been tried and with what success. The Data Wall also includes effective communication directly with the student’s family and working in partnership to find the right support. Da Vinci staff members are tracking results with quarterly grading and disaggregated data. We will examine results and adjust strategies until we close the gap. As a school community da Vinci has a strong will. I am confident that we will work tirelessly until our students of color are performing at or above the same levels as their White peers.

Finally, understanding race and how to affect positive change by interrupting racist practice is my personal commitment. I described my own journey to Luis Versalles, a Pacific Education Group mentor, as “one of hills and valleys with a steep learning curve.” Luis was impressed that we were mirroring our staff work with community members, and spoke to the power of deepening this work with staff and parents separately but at the same time. This personal journey is the right work for us all at da Vinci. Reducing and eliminating our achievement gap will be cause for great celebration. I look forward to that day. Our da Vinci Equity Team is fully committed to this most critical work.

Equity Resources:

Darling-Hammond. L. (1997). *The Right To Learn. A Blueprint For Creating Schools That Work.* San Francisco, Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Nathan, L. (2009). *The Hardest Questions Aren’t on the Test; Lesson From an Innovative Urban School.* Boston, Beacon Press.

Olsen, L. (1997). *Made in America; Immigrant Students in our Public Schools.* New York, The New Press.

Pollock, M. et al. (2008). *EVERYDAY ANTIRACISM.* New York, The New Press.

Singleton, G. (2006). *Courageous Conversations About Race.* Thousand Oaks, Corwin Press. Inc.

Tatum, B.D. (1997). *“Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?” And Other Conversations About Race.* New York, Basic Books.

<http://www.pps.k12.or.us/depts/communications/docs/PPS-Equity-Policy.pdf>