

# Olathe Public Schools Equity Audit Report



A Report from Sophic Solutions Group

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**Sophic Solutions Group**

*Assessing Needs – Creating Ideas – Providing Solutions*

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Sophic Solutions is a change management consulting firm based in Kansas City, Missouri. Co-founders and Partners, Stephenie and Rodney Smith come together with nearly 50 years of combined experience to offer management solutions to large and small businesses, and not-for-profit agencies. Sophic provides educational consultation to schools and school districts, provide change management solutions to a variety of organization types and delivers diversity, equity, inclusion & belonging training for various companies and associations. Sophic also designs educational curriculum, offers professional development sessions, and facilitates team-building activities in addition to a number of supplementary management improvement services.

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## INTRODUCTION

One of the best ways to make progress towards an organization's diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging (DEIB) goals is to understand the organization's collective thoughts and perceptions of how DEIB issues are being addressed within the organization. In order to do this, we suggest that organization leaders perform regular audits using qualitative as well as quantitative data collection methods.

What follows are the results of a series of equity-centered focus group discussions, a qualitative data collection method, detailing the importance of diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging to the Olathe Public School District. These equity-centered focus group discussions were conducted from March 2022 through May 2022 by Sophic Solutions, a Kansas City, Missouri based change management consulting firm.

We suggest and anticipate that this report will be used in an on-going fashion to assess Olathe Public School District's progress as it pertains to its diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging (DEIB) goals. The focus groups were, thus, conducted in an effort to address a few inherent questions organizational leaders were pondering regarding the impact and importance of DEIB within the organization and the district's resultant distribution of DEIB focused activities and understandings.

Again, this report is the result of an honest, internal assessment that aims to uncover baseline data of the district's overarching commitment to DEIB, with a special emphasis on racial and gender equity. This work is intended to help build the organization's culture of continuous learning to inform, not only, what the organization does, but who the learning community becomes. In the end, this work aims to deepen Olathe Public Schools' collective commitment to DEIB and foster a shared resolve to eliminate equity gaps within the district and the surrounding community.

For this audit, data were collected via a series of focus group discussions with Olathe Public Schools faculty, staff, parents, community partners as well as elementary, middle and high school students.

During the focus group discussions, stakeholders consistently stated that the organization needs to improve its efforts regarding issues of DEIB; that "we need to do more, especially with regard to students who are harmed by our inaction." Many of the participants expressed that "we need to listen more" especially to voices/perspectives of individuals who represent historically marginalized groups. There was also a reverberating acknowledgement of the challenges that must be overcome so that equitable outcomes and growth can be fully realized. "We need to make sure that we have the on-going education that is needed to support the progress we desire."

Ultimately, the purpose of the focus groups was to compile information that will help Olathe Public Schools strengthen its capacity to champion DEIB throughout the district, and to assist the learning community as it:

- Identifies promising diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging endeavors the district can implement over the next 3 to 5 years, and beyond.
- Realigns organizational policies, practices, procedures and people in an effort to better cultivate DEIB across the district.
- Evaluates and analyzes data in an effort to build district-wide capacity and processes to address current disparities and inequities.
- Grows equity leaders within the district and supports the current leadership team as it fosters equity and inclusion throughout the learning community as well as the surrounding community.

### **I. The Significance of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging**

We suspect that you have heard the terms diversity and inclusion, somewhat, frequently; you may, in fact, use the terms regularly. The terms equity and belonging, however, while they have been floating around in our collective lexicon for the past few years, they are not as familiar. We argue that one cannot fully grasp the meaning of diversity and inclusion without understanding the principles of equity and belonging. In the end, these four values work in tandem to bolster school dynamics, academic innovation and student achievement. Our society in general, and the education community in particular, is starting to realize that learning communities that appreciate the aforementioned concepts often out-think and outperform those that have not come to terms with these principles. These four concepts working together to support a learning community's mission, ensures that each student has equal opportunity to do and be their best, while feeling valued.

**Diversity** usually refers to the demographic make-up of an organization and is often measured or tracked by race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, education level, or socioeconomic background. Diversity, in the end, is synonymous with humanity; meaning that the human species is already extremely rife with variety.

**Equity** involves an understanding of past inequities and works to establish structures to mitigate the current and historical effects of those injustices. Equity requires an examination of societal constructs that perpetuate power and privilege in juxtaposition to groups that have been under-resourced and under-represented. Equity necessitates a commitment to make those historically under-represented and under-resourced individuals whole.

**Inclusion** is the result of involving the voices and perspectives of all demographics represented within an organization, especially when engaging in decision-making that leads to organizational policies, practices, procedures and customs. Inclusion happens when the diversity of humanity is engaged, particularly in spaces of power and decision-making.

**Belonging** centers on individuals experiencing a deep sense of acceptance and being valued within an organization. Belonging requires an on-going culture where people feel accepted and valued despite their differences. Belonging indicates that an individual is needed and wanted.

It is important that organizations, not only, refer to the principles of diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging in their mission and vision statements, but make every effort to practice them. When schools and school districts commit to leveraging DEIB in the learning community, they become better organizations. Adherence to these principles has the potential for exponential growth and improvement. Again, a thorough understanding of these values often leads to increased productivity, heightened innovation and boosted morale.

Authentic DEIB endeavors stretch beyond representation; they include meaningful and intentionally inclusive dialogue, equitable policies and purposeful systems of acknowledgement and recognition that support staff, student and family engagement. DEIB efforts should be seen as an active process of integration, adaptation and ongoing change and be responsive to the needs of all students, staff and external stakeholders.

Addressing equity in your district and schools is crucial, as many historically marginalized communities do not often have the resources to dismantle policies and practices that affect their lives. The development of a successful, comprehensive framework depends on the participation of a broad, representative coalition of school leaders, staff, parents and community partners so that policies and practices represent the needs, interest, expertise and insight of all.

## METHODOLOGY & DATA COLLECTION

The focus group discussions were conducted over a three-month period under the guidance of the Department of Diversity and Engagement.

Equity audits/interviews are typically used as a way for organizational leaders to assess the degree to which systemic equity or inequity shows up in policies, practices, programming, and procedures. As well, equity audits/interviews often oversample with historically marginalized communities. This is typically done in this manner because those who represent historically marginalized groups are usually affected most by inequitable practices. In the case of these focus group discussions, however, the respondents were broad and included a wide-ranging sampling of perspectives currently represented in the district. We thought it was critical to hear from a broad swath of individuals as to uncover pertinent information to the learning's community's progress.

Focus group discussions are qualitative in nature and are often used to gain a detailed understanding of an organization. This approach provided the opportunity to highlight the perspectives of various sectors, stakeholders and constituents.

## **I. Focus Group Discussions**

A total of eleven focus group discussions took place. District administrators arranged a focus group discussion with each of the following groups: (2) groups of faculty & staff, (2) groups of parents, (1) group of administrators and principals, (1) group of certified staff, (3) groups of high school students, (1) group of middle school students, (1) group of elementary school students and (1) group of community partners. All focus group discussions lasted approximately one hour.

All participants in the focus group discussions were arranged by Olathe administrators with no compensation provided. The purpose of the discussions were to uncover the stakeholders' thoughts and perspectives, therefore, it was critical to retain confidentiality. No names of stakeholders were recorded. Naturally, during the discussions participants elected to introduce themselves to each other and to the consultants, however no names or identifying data were recorded by the consultants.

As well, some of our discussions included circumstances and events that extended beyond a few years ago, but stretch back into past experiences that have shaped the perspectives of some stakeholders. Such data points have significant bearing on the implications and/or application of current district interventions.

### Note:

*We think it is worth noting that there has been a noticeable change in the national discourse around equity and inclusion over the past few years. The on-going dialogue on the nightly news, in our nation's capital and throughout the entire country has frequently mentioned issues like immigration, international travel bans, LGBTQIA+ rights, incarceration rates, police brutality against people of color, and a host of other related topics. We would be remiss if we neglected to mention that the discussions, as well as this subsequent report, include all of the aforementioned phenomenon as a backdrop to this work.*

## **MAIN FINDINGS/EMERGENT THEMES**

In general, there is wide-spread support for the district's Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging (DEIB) efforts. Many stakeholders recognize the value of having a learning environment that is reflective of the various dimension of diversity that exist throughout humanity — race, gender, sexual orientation, age, nationality, political beliefs, thinking styles, and so on. Stakeholders also understood the importance of preparing today's students with the cross-cultural capabilities that will allow them to take their rightful place in tomorrow's global

community alongside colleagues from all over the world. In an effort to be the equitable and inclusive environment it aspires to be, the district has recently implemented several staffing changes, including the newly created Department of Diversity and Engagement. The Department's leaders have already begun working across the district to actualize its DEIB goals. Several successful DEIB endeavors are current underway, this audit serves as one of them.

The audit's participants demonstrated a reasonable understanding of the long-standing inequities that plague society, and thus the district. To be sure, the findings below are representative of the organization's attempt to look inward in order to change some of those inequities.

This report underscores the district's willingness to examine itself, retrospectively and futuristically, all in an effort to establish a new record of itself. Perhaps most importantly, this work represents an opportunity to strengthen existing outcomes, not only, to boost student achievement, but also to uplift the community it serves.

The findings suggest both an eagerness and a yearning to engage in education and professional development that would result in a more culturally aware and diverse learning environment. The findings also bring to light the fact that leaders of color are noticeably scarce in the district; that the learning community has to make a concerted effort to be representative of society in general and its surrounding community in particular.

By and large, this audit uncovers a district that is, to some extent, cognizant of its deficiencies as it relates to DEIB. In many respects, this audit stands as evidence that the district is attempting to do something about those deficiencies.

We believe that schools and school districts are most successful in implementing their DEIB initiatives when leaders, teachers, families and community partners lock arms and work together for the benefit of students. When key stakeholders take time to accept and analyze feedback before engaging in productive two-way communication, decision-makers are able to develop empathy and set strategic priorities that put the needs of the community ahead of self-interest. Below is a summary of our findings:

### **I. Micro and Macro Aggressions**

Micro and macroaggressions were mentioned frequently throughout the discussions by students and families, particularly individuals who identify as BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color) and LGBTQIA+; often involving pejorative remarks from other students that went unaddressed and in some instances included hate symbols and speech. Students and their families rarely lingered on the harsh details of the incidents, they simply talked about how those negative experiences made them feel. Families and students who are experiencing these negative experiences often feel disconnected, which leads to their disengagement with the learning community. Also, when these incidents go unaddressed, targeted individuals feel unseen and less valued, again leading to disenfranchisement and detachment. Perhaps more

detrimental is when the phenomenon takes place at the macro level, where the district, itself, appears to disregard or overlook the needs or presence of certain groups in the learning community. The occurrences are often implicit or unintended, but are no less harmful. Some would argue that the implicit macro-level occurrences are much more harmful, considering that they often exist over extended periods of time and are often woven into long-standing traditions and/or the curriculum. See some of the comments below that speaks to these occurrences:

**“Many of my Latino students say things like ‘prom is not for us, it’s for white kids.’**

**“The Black Student Association is strong this year, but their strength is being interpreted as anger and aggression.”**

**“We have a community of fantastic bilingual students who are pushed to the margins, while white students, in full immersion language schools, get to excel.”**

**“Often the response is ‘they don’t know any better’ when racialized comments are made, especially when said by students.”**

**“Regarding dress code, students of color get called out more than white students.”**

The comments that are, arguably, most eye-opening came from students. See some of their thoughts below:

**“When racial incidents happen, I never hear about justice being served.”**

**“I love my culture, I love myself, but this environment makes me want to be someone else sometimes.”**

**“I have never gone to homecoming, because my music is not played, my perspective is missing.”**

**“When racial things happen, I would like for the district to better communicate and acknowledge what happened. When the shooting happened at East, North kids were affected too.”**

The entire district could benefit from comprehensive education around micro and macro aggressions that address issues of race, ethnicity, gender-identity and so on and so forth. School and district leaders could benefit from clear and consistent protocol for responding to negative incidents, preventing escalation by broadly addressing the learning community and the extended community, especially when these incidents are intensified by news and media coverage.

## **II. Recruitment and Hiring**

The glaring racial divide in our nation's K-12 schools can no longer be ignored, especially as the litany of social justice-related issues (police brutality, healthcare disparities, prison-industrial complex) play out on a daily basis in the larger community. While the majority of K-12 teachers in the United States identify as white, they manage classrooms that contain an increasing number of students of color. In fact, there are several states where students of color have long been the majority in public schools, whereas the teachers in those states do not reflect the students' diversity. This racial divide has been problematic on several fronts.

Having too few teachers of color place both students and teachers at a disadvantage. A number of studies (Armstrong, 2020; Egalite & Kisida, 2016; Rodriguez, 2021; Wells et al, 2016) reveal that racially diverse role models in the classroom benefit all children, regardless of race. Meanwhile, having racial mismatches between students and teachers can negatively affect students' future career choices, thus contributing to social and economic inequities. When conducting a quick literature review (Gershenson et al, 2018; Holt & Papageorge, 2016; Penney, 2017), you will find that teachers of color benefit students of color in many ways, such as: boosting overall academic performance, improving reading and math scores, and improving graduation rates in addition to setting high expectations for students and becoming advocates for students of color as well as teaching them how to advocate for themselves. Again, the presence of teachers of color have worked to increase students' outcomes in various areas of education, including but not limited to, higher academic achievement, increases in attendance rates, and higher college completion rates. Simply put, it is imperative that students of color see reflections of themselves in the front of the classroom, the benefits are exponential.

Having few teachers of color or having just one, which is often the case in a number of schools, can spur feelings of isolation and, subsequently, contribute to teachers of color leaving the profession at a disproportionately higher rate than their White counterparts. The need to see more administrators and teachers of color in Olathe Public Schools was a resounding point made by several stakeholders during the focus group discussions. See their comments below:

**"The district is not doing a good job related to our hiring practices."**

**"There's a lack of representation in our schools. I didn't have an African American teacher in the district. Students of color don't see themselves reflected in teachers."**

**"I'd like to see more opportunities given to veterans and diverse staff. Diversity is not well-represented in leadership roles in our district."**

**"Diversity of people of color is absent, it's alarmingly absent."**

**"My children have never had a teacher of color; that is a problem."**

**“We hire Hispanic people to clean our schools. There are many educated Hispanic people in the community that should be hired.”**

A few additional comments spoke to an existing culture and ways of being that could work in opposition to the district seeing any significant increase of staff of color in the learning community. See a few comments below that highlight this point:

**“In our district, it seems that people hire people like themselves. I am a product of this district, I’ve seen change with our students, but not with our staff.”**

**“We are told that no people of color apply to work in Olathe, but that is not exactly true.”**

**“I am somewhat taken back by where we are as a district, because I come from a district where we were much further along with DEIB efforts.”**

**“Opportunities don’t seem to present themselves to some of us.”**

It is quite obvious that having more staff of color would mean a lot to the district. Most of the focus group participants instinctively understood that a more diverse staff would immensely contribute to all students’ perceptions of self and will lead to better instructional practices, systems and policies that strengthen the entire learning community.

### **III. Continuous Learning and Professional Development**

Research (Sparks, 2020) shows that one-off diversity trainings make little impact on educators’ day-to-day practices (i.e. classroom management, student discipline sanctions, gifted education program referrals, family and community engagement, etc.). To be sure, prioritizing on-going professional development opportunities that supports innovation, inclusion and culturally responsive teaching and learning is what will create long-term sustainability. The continuous learning topics could and should include anti-racism training, unconscious bias training, overall DEIB awareness, and cross-cultural skill building, intended to train staff on how to better engage with, not only, students and families, but also with their colleagues and co-workers. These training and learning opportunities must, of course, be offered to stakeholders who are responsible for key decision-making in the district, decisions like hiring, promotion and advancement.

Additionally, this work must include a well-developed DEIB strategic plan and a visible DEIB commitment statement to be included in staff handbooks and the district’s website and social media platforms. The district can increase comfort around reporting DEIB grievances and micro-aggressions by creating clear and consistent processes for reporting bias, harassment or discrimination and a no-tolerance policy for racism, xenophobia, homophobia and transphobia.

Stakeholders expressed a deep desire to engage in more DEIB training. Here are a few comments that support this theme:

**“The district needs to bring in someone who can educate the district leaders, principals, teachers (all staff); parents and community partners should be a part of the conversation too.”**

**“We need cultural sensitivity training, awareness training and trauma-informed training.”**

**“We need more resources in our building. We need people who can facilitate these conversations.”**

**“Continuing education helps teachers who have less experience interacting with students who are different from them.”**

**“The district needs a common language that teachers can leverage.”**

A few individuals expressed a desire for greater involvement, where they would serve as Equity Champions to assist the district with its DEIB goals. Simply put, there are a number of stakeholders who are, not only, committed to this work, but would bring a level of expertise to help drive the district along its path to increased diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging. In addition to the expertise these individuals would bring to the conversation, we suspect that their commitment would inspire others to join the movement. Some of their comments are offered here:

**“I would like to help educate my school’s community. I want to educate our families.”**

**“There are great people in the district right now fighting for these things. We need to do a better job of giving these champions voice.”**

**“Let us present at staff and leadership meetings; share the perspective of people on the front lines.”**

**“I need opportunities to actualize all of my talents.”**

Arguably, the most powerful voices for change are those of students. We believe that any effort to inform, reform or transform education has to include the perspective of students. Including student voice provides for truly authentic change, while simultaneously building confidence in students as a result of having caring adults believing in them. Here are a few remarks that address the significance of student voice:

**“Getting more student voice to contribute to this work is essential.”**

**“Yes to student voice! I have seen students who have thrived because of being heard and I've seen students who have not because they are being ignored.”**

**“Students should take a DEIB class or workshop. The more people you educate, the more equity champions we produce.”**

**“We need to hear more from our students.”**

Overall, there is significant interest to learn more as it relates to diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging. There are several stakeholders who would like to play a more pronounced role in helping the district along its journey. As well, there are some stakeholders who have a deep desire to learn and do more, they simply are uncertain about next steps. Ultimately, there is wide-spread readiness to learn more, and to do and be better. Virtually all of the focus group participants were appreciative of the opportunity to engage in an equity-focused conversation and desired the opportunity to participate in more.

#### **IV. A Need for Culture Shift/Potential Obstacles**

Perhaps the most critical step in creating an equitable and inclusive environment is to actively search for and attend to growth opportunities. These are an organization’s problematic areas, but also serve as the areas with the greatest potential for progress. Some of these elements are not easily identified; they are often discovered after careful investigation and cautious discernment. These elements can sometimes disguise themselves as benign indifference or nonthreatening ambiguity, but can be evidence of a kind of “veiled resistance”. Some of the comments below speaks to the presence of a somewhat hidden opposition to this work, while other comments highlight the existence of a more noticeable objection to the changes that are taking place in the district. See a few of the observations below:

**“This is our community too, it seems that some of us are holding on to a 40 year old version of Olathe.”**

**“I do not feel welcomed to place a picture of my same sex partner on my desk because of fear of the backlash I will likely receive.”**

**“First, we need to acknowledge that we have people that do not believe in this work, then set a standard as a district of how we move forward.”**

**“We should be more proactive about teaching DEIB in the district. We are overly concerned about the ‘conservative perspective’ in the district, to the detriment of students of color”**

**“The district keeps saying that the community is not ready for this work. They are prioritizing white communities over communities of color.”**

Stakeholders also identified a few additional challenges that are much more concealed in nature but can surely derail the district’s desires to be a more inclusive environment, if not addressed.

**“Simply because I'm Hispanic, doesn't mean that I should be the only one working with Hispanic students. DEIB should be the commitment of the entire district.”**

**“Most of the kids on the soccer team are white, they play the game differently. I did not play club level due to the cost. In order to play on the team, it seems that you need to have played club level.”**

**“DEIB has been our long range goal, it's a 12 year old conversation. I'd like to see the district follow-through on its long range plans.”**

**“This work, unfortunately, depends on the school you work for or attend.”**

There were a few additional responses that spoke to some of the social challenges of today. These remarks address a few of the issues that appear on the nightly news on a daily basis; some of these issues have led to common misunderstandings in society as a whole. These ways of thinking, in many respects, are unfortunately unavoidable:

**“There's a lot of community pushback. There is a faction that says we shouldn't use the word "equity" when we are talking about diversity.”**

**“[There is] a natural resistance to change in the district, coupled with a misunderstanding of this work.”**

**“Unfortunately, this work is subject to political hijacking; DEIB work is being seen as teaching Critical Race Theory by some in the community.”**

Throughout this report, we have drawn attention to the fact that Olathe Public Schools is making great strides to be the inclusive environment it desires to be. However, the district must remain vigilant and in some cases hyper-vigilant to ensure that the seemingly benign sentiments mentioned above do not transform into full-on obstacles to progress. It is evident that this work is important to the district, it is also clear that the learning community has, within its halls and walls, the presence of apathy. The apathy we mention here, speaks more to stakeholders' lack of belief that things will change and less of their capabilities to produce change. The district must be watchful of this potential problem or else it will not realize the progress it so desires.

## **V. Positive Attributes and Progress**

More than a few participants voiced gratitude for the progress that is being made in the district. There were a series of comments that highlighted the work of Olathe's diversity team. As well, there was mention of the significance of Affinity Groups. Some stakeholders, primarily students, mentioned a few programs that are helping individuals to find, both, a sense of community and

a sense of belonging. The remarks below serve as evidence that equity improvements are underway. They also represent attributes that could and should be expanded:

**“I would like to give praise to the district for having the various affinity groups.”**

**“The diversity team has brought more awareness; it has been helpful. The district has also been doing a good job of listening. We weren’t having these conversations a year or so ago.”**

**“Our librarian displays different histories and cultures in the library. It's the 1st time I've seen it done in my school experience.”**

**“The Dual Immersion Program is a step toward inclusion. Our kids have not been "othered" there. My students feel cared for and embraced. I commend the teachers for expanding their understanding of different cultures. My kids seem very happy.”**

**“I like our clubs, because they help me feel like I belong; the Hispanic Leadership Club and Bike Club.”**

**“I would like to see more presence of our district DEI team in our building; spending time with us and seeing what our real needs are; helping administrators with our blind spots.”**

This audit revealed that Olathe Public Schools is well on its way to being the inclusive environment it aspires to be. The audit also revealed that there are many district constituents who are dedicated to equity and would like to see this work prioritized and embedded in policies, practice and professional development. Staff, parents and students all suggested that more action should be taken to pursue equity, such as enhancing educational materials in the classroom and increasing exposure to diversity and culture throughout instructional practices. Stakeholders called for district-wide messaging (i.e. DEIB commitment statement, policies, strategic plan, etc.) and an increase in equity-centered community engagement events. Again, Olathe Public Schools is making significant strides as it relates to Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging. We encourage district leaders to seize the momentum that has been created by recent activity. We also encourage leaders to consider the power of continuous improvement. Progress does not have to take place with huge gestures or steps; equity advancements often happen because of a phenomenon we’ve coined, “relentless incrementalism.” Be reminded that there are “No Quick Fixes” to this work.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations below are structured into emphasis areas that are in direct relationship to the aforementioned themes/findings. These elements of focus represent areas the district already has some foundational strengths to capitalize on. As well, they denote areas of challenge, in addition to being areas of opportunity. Within each recommendation, we share a set of suggestions that are based on those strengths and challenges. In the end, the recommendations are intended to assist the district with its next phase of equity planning, and as such, suggest focus areas to pursue in that planning process; this is intentional. As the district moves towards next steps of planning, we encourage district leaders to identify opportunities to involve stakeholders to pinpoint specific areas of interest along with action plans. To be sure, these recommendations serve as a continuation of the work that has already started in and throughout the district.

### **I. A Culturally Responsive District (i.e. Leadership, Teaching and Curriculum)**

As mentioned throughout this report, Olathe Public Schools is well on its way in its DEIB journey. There is wide-spread recognition that inequities exist, accompanied with a general desire and intent to increase diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging across the district. Stakeholders recognize that the community's demographics have changed over time, with increased diversity across multiple identity indicators, including race, language, and socioeconomic status—and that as a result, the district needs to work differently to embrace and support the richly diverse community of Olathe so every student receives what they need to succeed. Stakeholders at all levels mentioned recent happenings like the Covid-19 pandemic as a medium that helped to underscore the inequities that exist across the district. Stakeholders expressed a belief that it is the district's responsibility to address those inequities. As well, there is wide-spread agreement across the district of the importance of pursuing equity at the individual as well as systemic level, and a widely shared desire to develop the mindsets, practices, and policies to achieve that goal. The district's collective understanding regarding the importance of equity provides a strong foundation upon which to build, and implies that the district is poised to take more substantial steps.

Ultimately, in order for the district to actualize its DEIB goals, there must be universal buy-in from all district stakeholders. In the end, there are no quick fixes to actualizing equity. The district must plan for the long-haul and continue to commit itself to its DEIB goals and aspirations. We recommend the following:

- Expand current district-wide efforts that amplify the district's DEIB goals and aspirations, all while incrementally sharing this message, not only, with the learning community, but throughout the surrounding community.
- Review current Professional Development (PD) offerings for inclusive language and integrate DEIB into each training, and work to make genuine connections with colleagues through meaningful debriefing questions and promptings during and after PD activities.

- Assess how well students of color and their backgrounds and experiences are being incorporated into classroom content and ensure that they are being authentically engaged in classroom interactions.
- Expand the district's efforts that highlight students of color images in classroom material, textbooks and other publications.
- Spend time and resources thinking about identity (i.e. race, ethnicity, language, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, socioeconomic status, and ability) in order to provide a high quality education for all students.
- Organizational leaders should continue to enlist commitment of the entire organization and work toward building a respectful, trusting and supportive culture focused on equity and high-quality connections among colleagues.
- Leverage the expertise and commitment of internal equity champions to help other stakeholders better understand the importance of diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging.
- Establish a culture and climate team at each school to monitor and discuss issues related to diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging.

## **II. Amplify Student Voice and Increase Student Access & Opportunities**

This recommendation is driven by the assumption that by examining the district from the perspective of the student, valuable insights would emerge that would shed light on the intricacies of the learning community that, in the end, will sustain the students' interest and involvement. An examination from the students' viewpoint would ultimately qualify as well quantify the district's overall impact. According to Edwards (2007), any effort that utilizes the voices of students as it attempts to enact awareness, enlightenment or create reform, provides an authentically powerful argument. This recommendation, too, uplifts the often marginalized voice of students of color at its center, accentuating the notion that their voices are rarely sought when attempting to address issues of advancement and/or growth. As well, by soliciting the voices of students, the district simultaneously builds confidence in those students. The message is sent that the adults in their lives, not only, trust their perspectives, but believes in them and their opinions.

- Utilize storytelling: Share students' stories across multiple platforms. Student voice helps amplify stories on social media outlets and helps when partnering with traditional media outlets to get stories to broader audiences. We suggest that the district start student voice clubs and host student storytelling events.
- Partner with Students: Engage students as partners in school change efforts. This may mean students playing a role in professional development activities, serving on focus groups, serve in school board seats or participate in hiring searches.
- Recognize the limitations of formal structures like student councils, committees, and advisory groups. These may only appeal to certain kinds of students. Make a point to engage students who have commonly been excluded from these structures.

- Consider Student Learning Communities (SLC's): SLC's are opportunities for students to participate in "listening conferences" led by trained facilitators or members of the district's staff to discuss cultural and social values, understand one another and resolve conflict.

### **III. Continuous Learning and Professional Development**

In the education industry, especially in the K-12 sector, it is particularly important for educators to pursue professional development opportunities, not only to ensure the best learning outcomes for their students, but also to be more effective and satisfied in a variety of other aspects of their work. These training opportunities must address equity-focused teaching. Equity-focused teaching is an approach to education that allows instructors to acknowledge and disrupt historical and contemporary patterns of educational disenfranchisement that often negatively impact marginalized and minoritized students. It recognizes that systemic inequities shape all students' individual and group-based experiences of social identity and produce vastly different relationships of power in and outside of the classroom, which impact students' learning and success. The work of equity-focused teaching involves deliberately cultivating a learning environment where students 1) Have equal access to learning, 2) Feel valued and supported in their learning, 3) Experience parity in achieving positive course outcomes and 4) Share responsibility for the equitable engagement and treatment of all in the learning community.

Equity-focused teaching is an ongoing commitment and practice that should develop across the life of a teaching career. This commitment is always in the service of achieving just outcomes for both students and educators alike. As training and learning opportunities continue, the district must consider ways to operationalize what stakeholders are learning. The trainings and professional development opportunities, in the end, will enhance Olathe Public Schools' capacity to address DEIB issues throughout the district. We recommend the following additions to current training and learning opportunities:

- **Becoming an Antiracist:** learning opportunities that teach participants how to actively fight against racism.
- **Racial Equity Facilitator Training:** a training that will help current equity champions learn how to facilitate discussions with and for their colleagues.
- **Curricular, Pedagogical and Instructional Equity:** Help participants push beyond heroes and holidays approaches to equity awareness, focusing more on teaching, student engagement, and other classroom practices.
- **Feature trainings such as "How to effectively intervene when identity bullying, bias, discriminatory behavior and communication takes place."**
- **Organizational Transformation:** Engage participants in a process of critically examining how access and opportunity are distributed by societal and institutional policy and practice. Facilitate conversations that are vital to cultivating equity awareness in individuals and in the organization's overall culture.
- **How to be an Effective Ally:** Help participants learn how to actively and appropriately serve as allies for students and colleagues from underrepresented groups.

- Introduce trainings that address child and adolescent development and their relationship to racial, ethnic or gender identity.

#### **IV. Develop a Plan to Recruit, Hire and Retain Staff of Color**

As mentioned previously in this report, increasing teacher diversity is a very important strategy for improving learning for students of color and for closing achievement gaps. And, while White students benefit by learning from teachers of color, the impact is especially significant for students of color, who have higher test scores, are more likely to graduate high school, and more likely to succeed in college when they have had teachers of color who serve as role models and support their attachment to school and learning. Students with racially diverse teachers also have fewer unexcused absences and are less likely to be chronically absent. Because of these facts, we encourage district leaders to develop a comprehensive vision and proactive plan for recruiting, hiring, and retaining leadership, faculty, and staff that represents the diversity of the student population.

- Know and consider macro conditions when developing staff hiring and retention plans. Macro conditions (financial incentives, targeted recruitment and outreach, and workplace support) impact career decisions of all educators regardless of ethnicity or race.
- When recruiting African American and Latinx American educators, be sure to have a presence in the areas/counties/regions where African Americans and Latinx Americans are already present.
- Include teachers of color in the hiring process in meaningful ways, including creating diverse hiring committees or compensating teachers for attending recruitment fairs.
- Offer comprehensive induction support to teachers of color in their first years of teaching. Induction support often includes being matched with a veteran mentor teacher and can also include seminars, classroom assistance, time to collaborate with other teachers, coaching and feedback from experienced teachers, and reduced workloads.
- For less diverse school settings, consider providing opportunities for ethnically diverse teachers and administrators to interact with colleagues of color throughout other parts of the district.
- Consider providing additional support for educators who work in underserved communities.

#### **V. Increase Community Engagement**

The community that surrounds a learning community can play a significant role in a district's progress. As such, we suggest that non-traditional community engagement strategies be considered. Instead of traditional parent-teacher conferences or sports programs, a deeper community engagement is needed. For example, incentivizing teachers and administrators to attend community-based meetings and then advocate for the goals of the local community is one potential strategy. We also recommend an investment into ways that will allow more overlap

between the district and the community. Becoming involved in community-based activities will go a long way in improving district-to-community relationships. Because some minoritized parents have less favorable district-to-community experiences than White parents, we suggest leaders and teachers discover local communities of color interests, concerns, and causes, and get involved.

- Establish a DEIB Business Council made up of professionals from local businesses who support the district’s equity and inclusion efforts.
- Partner with local businesses that are willing to accept students as interns for a day or during summer months.
- Have students choose a group or organization to “adopt.” Students could choose a local nursing home or hospital and complete service projects or perform simple kind acts throughout the year to support the group.
- Create a mentorship program between community members and students.
- Design learning experiences with the community: Invite community involvement from the very beginning of a design cycle—whether designing a class, a project, or even an actual school building. This approach ensures that community interests are represented from day one, creating partnerships that are meaningful and mutually beneficial.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS AND GRATITUDE

This audit demonstrates an awareness of and a commitment to increasing and upholding diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging in the district. District-wide goals include an analysis of current perceptions, the establishment of an Equity Task Force and ongoing education for Olathe Public School staff; efforts from school leadership to address current events that may impact students, staff and families is evident. At the same time, exposure by some students to bias may be a source of the social inequities and stressors that contribute to students' sense of belonging. Again, this document highlights some disparities that exist, and underscores areas of promise, strengths and assets the district can build upon.

We are grateful to everyone who contributed to this report. The focus group discussions and this subsequent report would not have been possible without the generous input of several dedicated students, staff, faculty, parents and community partners. Their gracious gift of time, insight, candor, responsiveness, openness, engagement and perspective are deeply appreciated.

Given the discourse, dedication and hard work that has led to this report, Olathe Public Schools continues to be poised to fulfill its promises and aspirations regarding diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging. We are certain that the district will continue to leverage its resources to cultivate a healthy environment that finds strength in its diversity. We hope that this report stands as a helpful tool and a valuable instrument used to set equity goals for the future. Olathe Public Schools has many assets to build upon, with its people serving as its greatest.

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