

# Equity-focused Schools Carry All Students to High Levels

Despite decades of experience supporting efforts from local to state levels to improve learning for underserved students, Sonia Caus Gleason and WestEd's Nancy Gerzon could not point to examples of entire schools accomplishing what they believed was possible: high-poverty public schools personalizing learning for all students to consistently reach high achievement.

They began asking colleagues to identify exemplary schools that met their dual criteria of high poverty and high achievement. A typical response: "I don't know any, but tell me when you find them."

Gleason and Gerzon persisted, eventually selecting four schools to study in depth. "The schools actually exceeded our expectations," says Gerzon, a WestEd Senior Program/Research Associate. "The sophistication and intensity with which they personalize learning for students and staff goes well beyond what we thought we'd see."

She and Gleason capture what they learned from these four exemplary schools in a new book, *Growing Into Equity: Professional Learning and Personalization in High-Achieving Schools*, published by Corwin.

Each of the case study schools serves significant numbers of low-income students (ranging from 46 to 80 percent of the school's total) and has had rising student achievement for 5 to 10 years—not only for its general student population but also for each of its disaggregated subgroups, such as English learners and students of color. Each has pursued personalization for students across the board to reach equity in learning. Student achievement surpasses state averages, and a large majority of each school's students reaches high achievement levels.

"We were looking for schools where every single student mattered and did well, whatever their background," wrote the authors. The schools they selected to study: Stults Road Elementary in Dallas; Social Justice Humanitas Academy, a small high school in Los Angeles; Montgomery Center School, a preK–8 school in Vermont; and Tusculum View Elementary School in Greeneville, Tennessee.

The authors found many elements that have surfaced in other studies of high-performing schools, such as heavy teacher collaboration and high academic standards. But a focus on *equity* turns out to be what sets these particular examples apart and constitutes the first of three main findings that the book details:

- I. Equity is a core value that drives everything else. Every student is expected to succeed, and "the focus on equity compels educators to become increasingly precise in personalizing student learning," says Gerzon.

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2. Professional development is key and, like the personalization of student learning, is personalized for each educator.
3. Leadership and support systems sustain and guide the focus on equity, personalization, and continuous improvement.

## **Commitment to equity drives personalization and high expectations**

"Equity is *the* fundamental value exhibited by these schools," says Gleason, a professional learning consultant and coach. "It's visible through public commitments and specific practices." It means educators focus not just on the needs of a generalized body of *all* students, but attend specifically to the needs of *each* student.

A central and striking quality of the case study schools, according to Gleason and Gerzon, is that every student is known well—and not just by one teacher but by many. Toward this end, Montgomery Center has its middle school subject matter teachers work with the same students for three years. And Beth O'Brien, the principal, notes that for children in special education, "they are not only the special educators' responsibility, they are *all* of our responsibility."

Teachers in these schools probe deep to understand the interests, home background, parents, and culture of each student, as well as the child's learning style and academic strengths and weaknesses, says Gleason. They also tap the community to help personalize instruction. Tusculum View Elementary, for example, uses parent volunteers, retired teachers, peer tutors, community mentors, and college students to work with students.

The case study schools have very little whole-class teaching, no mixed expectations, no grading on a curve or teachers working in isolation. Instead, students work often in small groups or at learning stations on personalized lessons. "Student groupings are flexible; we don't assign classrooms by reading level," says Tusculum View Elementary's principal Patricia Donaldson. "A teacher might begin class with a short whole-group lesson but will then move students into small groups or send some to work individually on computers with a prescriptive learning path or other projects. Within the small groups, there may be further differentiation."

## **Drive to personalize encourages formative assessment**

Having worked extensively with schools, districts, and state education agencies to deepen formative assessment practices, Gerzon expected formative assessment to be a major contributor to the success of these four schools. Although she found that none had yet undergone extensive training in formative assessment practices, the schools' focus on equity and supporting individual needs was leading teachers to apply elements of formative assessment.

Gerzon says the schools she observed had begun to use more data, including data related to daily instructional goals. "The teachers look at evidence regularly," she notes. "They are getting smarter all the time about how to use that evidence."

Tusculum View, for example, uses technology-based programs that include formative-like assessments to track individual student learning and data that help teachers shape instruction, Donaldson says. A reading program used by the school provides explicit, systematic, personalized instruction and provides ongoing performance data and analysis.

"We keep refining. We are a lot better in using formative assessments and hard data for planning than we were even four years ago," Donaldson says. "Student conferencing has been another tool

for using formative assessment information. Teachers frequently work with students individually to help master skills before the final assessment. The students can tell where they are, what they are strong in, what they have mastered, and what they need to know.”

Similarly, Montgomery Center’s O’Brien says her school has “come a long way” in using assessments and evidence to shape instruction. The use of evidence accompanies a fundamental shift in all four schools toward thinking it is high academic achievement, not time, that must be the constant in education. Teachers act on the belief that all children can reach lofty academic goals, though students will travel different paths at different paces to reach those heights.

### **Professional learning and schoolwide systems support success**

Gleason and Gerzon emphasize that successfully creating a culture of personalization and high achievement requires continuously building educators’ skills, knowledge, and dispositions. It requires a culture of ongoing professional learning that is supported by leadership. In the four schools, they observed that the equity focus and personalization drive have shifted professional learning in fundamental ways. It now mirrors student learning in that professional development is personalized. The schools’ leadership and support systems promote ongoing, customized professional learning.

When O’Brien became principal at Montgomery Center in 1999, she set out to cultivate a learning culture among teachers. “We were not a collaborative culture,” she says. “So we began focusing on really developing excellence in teaching and using data to plan support and intervention.”

O’Brien began to learn about the concept of professional learning communities (PLCs)—structures that help educators inquire about and solve problems and reflect on their work together. And in a practice characteristic of all the case study schools, says Gerzon, everyone studied the PLC concept, built a common understanding, and then carried it out with fidelity. Montgomery Center used PLCs to introduce team-level analysis of curriculum, instruction, and assessment. The school also created grade-level PLCs, a middle school PLC, and an Academic Student Support Team to track the impact of student interventions over time.

All of the case study schools have grade-level or multigrade teacher teams, vertical teams to align the curriculum across the grades, team leaders, and scheduled meeting times of at least an hour a week, usually more. Most also have data teams. And professional development is differentiated so teachers can choose areas where they want to improve. “We assign adults based on what we know the adult’s strengths are and on the needs of the kids,” says O’Brien. “We put the most highly trained person with the most needy learner.” Tusculum View also uses an instructional specialist to help new teachers and, increasingly, experienced ones to refine their teaching and personalize their professional development, Donaldson says.

These four cases show how public schools can both raise the bar and close the gap—increasing learning for *all* students. “The schools featured in these cases are front runners for what is possible at every school,” says Gleason. “We saw that public schools are able to personalize learning for every student, and all achieve at high levels.”

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