

## Participant Feedback from the Sixteenth McKee Learning Lunch

# Equity in the Schools

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This learning experience is co-sponsored by UnifiEd  
and the McKee Chair of Excellence in Learning,  
University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

### Introduction

Equity, the deliberate focus on addressing historical injustice through the pursuit of fairness in our political and social institutions, has been a core value of the United States since the country was established. Not surprisingly, then, the City of Chattanooga and the Hamilton County School District—as well as the nation at large—continuously deal with the issues of racial, cultural, economic, and educational equity.

We know, as a community, that we must improve on meeting the equity-related needs of our citizens. But how do we do so? Addressing educational equity was the focus of the sixteenth McKee Learning Lunch, when a number of civic, educational, and political representatives came together to discuss the steps that need to take place in order to improve equity in our schools.

At the session, participants explored issues, concerns, and opportunities related to equity in Hamilton County schools. The session began with a presentation by the UnifiEd directors. Then, in accordance with the process used at every McKee Learning Lunch, three general feedback opportunities—or Assignments 1, 2, and 3—took place. The participants, who are listed at the end of this report, provided their insights and questions about the topic. Those responses and comments are presented below.

### Assignment 1

**Pre-discussion Questions: Participants listed their  
questions about Equity in the Schools  
The questions are listed below.**

#### A Deeper Understanding

- Does the broader community understand the term *equity*? How does that understanding compete with opportunity-hoarding? Is equity a zero-sum concept? In other words, if you win, I lose?
- Do we know the difference between inequality and inequity? How do we address these issues in the schools?
- Does equity mean equal? If not, what does it mean for our students?
- Who determines the “level” at which every student should be? Can we create equality without answering this question?

## **Challenges**

- What's the biggest obstacle to [achieving] the goal of equity in our schools?
- Why is it difficult to see the inequities that require our actions?
- Transportation, access to opportunity beyond the classroom, great teachers, and reading levels are all issues to address.

## **Going Forward**

- How can we rebuild American communities or build them for the first time?
- What are we currently doing to address racial and socioeconomic segregation in our schools?
- How will equity in schools be addressed with respect to students with disabilities, and how will this be measured?
- We need to think outside the box (innovatively) to address problems. What part do we all play in this work?
- Is now the time? How do we make it the time?

## **Economic Factors**

- What are some ways that we can address equity and decrease socioeconomic inequities without spending [limited] funds?
- Since the county commission is the funding source for the schools, how do you convince them to support equity across the county?

## **Legal Factors**

- How is the current extent of segregation within our school system legal?

## **Assignment 2**

**Discussion Question: After the presentation, participants, in groups of four, discussed three assigned questions. Questions and responses are listed below.**

### **Question 1. What is the history of inequity in our community across sectors (housing, transportation, and so forth)?**

- Chattanooga is a divided city, racially and socioeconomically
- Jim Crow Laws
- Redlining for investment
- Current issues with transportation
  - Mass Transit would fix this
  - CARTA
  - School transportation system
    - Unintended forced segregation
    - Student mobility an issue
- Racist housing policy, redlining [denying services]

- Political history
  - Non-representative government: sued to change
  - Boundaries to contain/limit minority representation
- Racist, patriarchal culture inherited from a manufacturing economy
- Environmental issues impacted poor communities; adverse health outcomes
- The firing of African American teachers
- No history of disrupting poverty, which magnifies the inequalities
  - You can treat people “the same” without disrupting poverty
- Overlapping inequalities (housing, jobs education, etc.) create the perfect storm of inertia, which ultimately leads to decay.
- We have different definitions of what’s “good enough”
- We still don’t know how to “tap into marginalized communities”

**Question 2. What elements of past initiatives have worked? What lessons can we learn from them to inform our current and future work?**

- Magnet schools
  - Worked when first launched
  - Schools were not held accountable to the initial process
  - Ex: Battle Academy was zoned as Magnet
- Community-school approach
- CSAS and CSLA are both examples of diverse student bodies and are schools of excellence
- Higher-education “bridge” program
- Support for college access counselors
- In some cases, differentiated pay plans (pay for performance)
- Using “title” funds for parent engagement programming

**Question 3. Given the current landscape, what steps can we take in order to ensure that our work to achieve equality is sustainable?**

- We have to have relationships!
- “You can not bring equity to a family if you don’t know the child in front of you!”
- Empathy
- Monitor to make sure our actions match our intentions
- Must get the community involved in holding our school system accountable
  - Grassroots public input
- Create policy to create equity for transit students
- Housing policies, affordability
- Models of choice (i.e., Louisville, Kentucky)
- Competitive teacher pay

### Assignment 3

**Post-discussion Questions:** After the discussion, we asked participants to respond, in writing, to two additional questions. The questions and responses are listed below.

**Question 1. What is the most important thing you learned today?**

#### **Opportunity Hoarding**

- Being conscious and aware of it
- The need to stop it
- Hardship passes and how economically advantaged (wealthy) students are getting them

#### **Community**

- We can become one, for the sake of the children!
- We must consider these students as “our” children rather than “those” children
- Equity requires not just organizations creating programs, but also individuals in the community understanding how these benefit everyone
- The community must be willing to address these issues
- Meeting fellow participants from the community was helpful

#### **History**

- Understanding more about Chattanooga’s history has helped to better understand the current culture

#### **The Importance of Empathy and a Cultural Shift**

- A cultural shift and empathy would both be necessary for change
- Top-down policy efforts may not be fruitful apart from empathy. A bottom-up approach with empathy may be better.

#### **Final Thoughts**

- We know what to do. As Ron Edmondson said, “we have to ask ourselves how we feel about not doing it.”
- We need to bring our successes to scale. We need to share our successes without worrying who gets credit.
- The public feels strongly about the magnet schools
- This topic is way more complex than I thought!
- I learned so much more about the APEX project!

## **Question 2. What unanswered question(s) are you leaving with?**

### **Next Steps**

- Where to start the conversation, considering the politics within this community?
- How to encourage individual involvement?
- What's next?
- How do we address the issue of culture shift and opportunity hoarding?
- How do we solve the affordable housing crisis?
- How do we create more community schools?
- How do we force the county commissioners to fund these initiatives?
- What is the biggest obstacle to creating equity in our schools?
  - How can we be consistent with funding sources and allocate funds to support these ideas?

### **Empathy Building**

- Students with disabilities are already represented in our schools. How can we use this population to build empathy towards students with special needs and other diverse student populations?
- How do we penetrate the veil of apathy?
- How do we support families in the community who are deciding where to send their children to school? How do we promote and advocate for equity and diversity in education?
- How do we scale empathy and choice?

### **Leadership**

- Who will be the leader? Who will champion this issue?
- Who is going to be the political leader to bring our successes to scale?

### **Action**

- What is the action [or actions that] everyone in this room will take?
- Now that we've had this discussion, what will we do next?
- What is the plan to attack inequities in the community?

## Participants

We would like to thank the following participants for their interest in and contribution to this McKee Learning Lunch.

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