

Participant Feedback from the Fifteenth McKee Learning Lunch

Equity in Schools

February 6, 2018

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 this McKee Learning Lunch. Civic, educational, and political representatives came together to discuss ways to increase equity in schools. Participants specifically explored issues, concerns, and opportunities related to the improvement of equity in Hamilton County schools.

UnifiEd directors introduced this discussion by describing the Action Plan for Educational Excellence Steering Committee, or APEX. 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: Following the discussion, participants posed 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, do *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?

Specific Challenges

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

Going Forward

- How can we rebuild American communities or build them at the outset?
- How are we currently addressing 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 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 and Legal Factors

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

Segregation

- Chattanooga is a divided city, racially and socioeconomically.
- Unintended forced segregation

Sociopolitical Issues

- Racist housing policy, redlining [denying services]
- Political history of a non-representative government limits minority representation.
- Environmental issues have an impact on poor communities, resulting in adverse health outcomes.
- There is no history of disrupting poverty, which magnifies the inequalities. You can't treat people "the same" without disrupting poverty.
- Overlapping inequalities (housing, jobs education, and other factors) create the perfect storm of inertia, which ultimately leads to decay.

Transportation Challenges

- Current issues with transportation exist. Mass Transit (CARTA) would fix this, as would a school transportation system.
- Student mobility is an issue.

Educational and Cultural Biases

- Chattanooga has a racist, patriarchal culture inherited from a manufacturing economy.
- The firing of African American teachers is an issue.
- 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 that will inform our current and future work?

- Magnet schools—such as Battle Academy—worked when they were first launched, although initially they were not held accountable.
- Community-school approach.
- Chattanooga School for Arts and Sciences (CSAS) and Chattanooga School for Liberal Arts (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 programs.

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 cannot bring equity to a family if you don’t know the child in front of you!”
- Encourage empathy.
- Monitor to make sure that our actions match our intentions.
- Develop community involvement to provide grassroots public input for holding our school system accountable.
- Create policy to create equity for transient students.
- Ensure fair housing policies and affordability.
- Follow successful models of choice (i.e., Louisville, Kentucky).
- Provide 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 equity issues.
- The need to stop inequity.
- That economically advantaged (wealthy) students are getting hardship passes.

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 programs benefit everyone.
- The community must be willing to address these issues.
- Meeting fellow participants from the community helps.

The Importance of Empathy and a Cultural Shift

- Both a cultural shift and empathy are necessary for change.
- Top-down policy efforts may not be fruitful apart from empathy. A bottom-up approach with empathy may be better.
- Understanding more about Chattanooga's history has helped me to better understand the current culture.

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 much more complex than I thought!
- I learned so much more about the APEX project!

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

Addressing the Specific Issues

- All responses in this category begin in the same way: How do we . . .
 - Start the conversation, considering the politics within this community?
 - Encourage individual involvement?
 - Address the issue of culture shift and opportunity hoarding?
 - Solve the affordable housing crisis?
 - Create more community schools?
 - Encourage county commissioners to fund these initiatives?

Empathy Building

- Students with disabilities are already represented in our schools. How can we use this population to build empathy with 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?

Taking Action

- Now that we've had this discussion, what will we do next?
- What is the plan to attack inequities in the community?
- Who will champion this issue?
- Who is going to be the political leader to bring our successes to scale?
- What action or actions will everyone in this room take?

Participants

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

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