Constructing Capacity for Equity

By Carl Bruner

On September 7, 2004, the Mount Vernon School District, located 60 miles north of Seattle, welcomed 5,300 students to the 2004-05 school year. As the new superintendent, I was focused on the completion of a construction bond, a top priority for the School Board and community. While my team and I were ready for the challenge, we were not prepared to face the underlying racial tensions that began to surface in the district within a few short months. Although difficult at times, the journey to identify and address these tensions resulted in new initiatives supporting more equitable treatment for students within the district.

A Short History of the Mount Vernon School District (MVSD)

During the five years leading up to this moment, the Mount Vernon School District experienced a 50% increase in their Latinx student population, a 22% decrease in the white student population, and a 63% percent increase of the student population eligible for bilingual services. With this demographic shift came troubling academic outcomes. Upwards of 40% fewer Latinx students met standards on state assessments in Math and Reading than students who identified as white. Additionally, the gap in on-time graduation rates was estimated at 30% in favor of white students. Despite a broad and growing awareness that the District’s Latinx student population was not achieving at rates commensurate with their white peers, many educators were not sure how they could influence these outcomes, pointing to poverty and language barriers as reasons for declining academic scores.

In the fall of 2004, several Mount Vernon High School (MVHS) alumni began working with the high school’s longstanding Latinx service club. By the spring of 2005, students from both MVHS and the alumni began to challenge the District’s narrative that our teachers and schools were doing all we could for our Latinx students. When one of the former students was trespassed from campus due to the administration’s perception that he was directing the student group in violation of Board policy, tensions between the administration and current/former students escalated quickly and soon, students, families, and members of the Latinx community were calling for change.

In March 2006, the Board directed me to form a Diversity Advisory Committee (DAC). After meeting for 18 months, they presented their action plan to the School Board. Their plan identified five goals: increase learning supports; build rapport between teachers and students; community engagement; recruiting/retaining diverse teachers; and increasing student ethnic self-esteem.

The DAC plan influenced the District’s work, and resulted in:

1. A pipeline to teaching certification for MVSD Latinx students via Skagit Valley College and Western Washington University;
2. MV Parent Academies taught by native Spanish, Mixteco, and Slavic speakers;
3. District collaboration with the Latino/a Educational Achievement Project;
4. A focus on teaching strategies for English Language Learners.

The District realized some positive outcomes in family engagement and student leadership. However, despite large investments in instructional coaching, the gaps in
academic achievement between Latinx and white students, as measured by state assessments, remained at an average of between 25% and 30% in favor of white students.

A group of teacher leaders suggested that the root cause of the gap was a disconnect between our staff’s cultural/racial backgrounds and those of their Latinx students and their families. They argued that even powerful instructional strategies could be rendered ineffective by District, school, and classroom practices that implicitly and explicitly conveyed a deficit ideology of Latinx students’ abilities to learn at high levels. If the District was serious about creating equitable learning opportunities for all students, we would have to address our educators’ implicit attitudes and bias toward our Latinx students.

The Shift Towards Equity and Social Justice

For over a decade, several different approaches were implemented to address the concern about disposition, but eventually the lack of internal capacity to lead this effort became apparent. In 2017, the District partnered with the University of Florida and the School Reform Initiative (SRI) creating a three-year teacher-led professional development program linking conversations about classroom strategies to staff dispositions about equity and social justice. Several months of co-construction resulted in the Leading for Equity Initiative (LEI) facilitated and led by Dr. Rebekah Cordova & Pedro R. Bermudez. The LEI set three goals for the Mount Vernon School District:

- To develop knowledge and awareness of the impact that individual, internalized, institutional and structural racism has on students of color.
- To apply knowledge about racialized experiences in education that impact students’ educational experiences individually and collectively.
- To enhance and practice skills associated with facilitative leadership to support equity-focused Communities of Practice.

The initiative was informed by three adult learning principles, drawn from the features of successful professional development for teachers discussed by Darling-Hammond, Hyler, and Gardner (2017) and Drago-Severson (2004):

1. Professional Learning should be relevant and pertinent to educators.
2. Professional Learning should be rooted in educator choice and agency.
3. Professional Learning should be on-going and embedded in the daily work of the educator.

Relevant Professional Learning that Privileges Educator Choice and Agency

The design of the LEI incorporated content supporting the District’s goal of addressing behavior rooted in implicit bias and deficit-thinking. The structure of the learning experiences asked teachers to engage with texts and videos and hold dialogue surrounding social justice and education equity content. Of equal importance, teachers practiced collaborative tools and processes to support Equity-Focused Communities of Practice at their schools.

Toward this aim, the LEI was launched with an institute specifically designed to:

- Build background knowledge on equity issues affecting students of color;
- Expand critical consciousness and develop an individual and collective equity lens;
- Establish equity-focused communities of practice throughout the school district; and
- Apply knowledge about racism and education that impacts students’ educational experiences.

In addition to gaining a greater understanding of how implicit bias shows up in classroom instruction, teachers worked collaboratively on ways to identify and dismantle harmful actions within their schools. As the learning became more specific to individual school-based work, it became clear to teachers there was a lack of parent voice in the discussions and that caregivers had pertinent feedback essential to creating an equitable school culture.
Thus, content and experiences were designed to support increased dialogue between schools and the communities they served.

Ongoing Support for the Job-Embedded Equity Work

In its first year, the LEI introduced teachers to social justice content and professional collaborative processes. Participants examined their social justice disposition at a personal and collective level; conducted teacher inquiry around equity-related questions of practice; and grew an equity-focused community of practice within their school setting.

In an effort to build local capacity to sustain the LEI, the second year saw the selection of teacher leaders, Building Equity Leads (BEL), to participate in a two-day training experience focused on site-based equity-focused professional development; including creating brave spaces, collaborative examination of student and teacher work, and equity-problems of practice. BELs also co-designed and co-facilitated on-going Leading for Equity work sessions for faculty and staff.

Participants at the district and school level also engaged in regularly facilitated follow-up work sessions throughout the school year. In these sessions’ participants worked as members of an equity-focused community where they continued to learn, apply, and assess instructional methods and strategies, as well as receive feedback from peers.

The Impact of the LEI

The impact the LEI had on teachers and administrators was significant. Feedback was collected from participants through a series of individual interviews conducted during September 2019, by a third party consultant. Four themes emerged:

1. Trust and Collaboration
2. Focus on Student Experience
3. Willingness and Vulnerability
4. Supporting Teachers of Color

Trust and Collaboration

The Mount Vernon School District LEI was designed to nurture equity-focused teacher leadership, which had a direct impact on the way teachers interacted with each other. Dave Riddle, Principal at La Venture Middle School, describes the culture before and during the LEI (D. Riddle, personal communication, August 26, 2019):

*Before the LEI there were some people more attuned with equity work, but they didn’t really have the forum. But most of us didn’t really know how to talk about it. Now, I think it has flipped. I think most people have the vocabulary. We talk about the elephant. It is not something we don’t talk about anymore; we are much more intentional about talking about the things we need to talk about.*

One of things I really liked about how Pete and Rebekah worked with us was that they put the work on us. And then, in the same way, we tried to create a culture where people are responsible for their own work. We get resources for them, but they learn through the contemplative work.

Robert Hand, a Family Sciences and Consumer Studies teacher at MVHS and the 2018-2019 Washington State Teacher of the Year, describes the collaboration required to advance the work through the BELs (R. Hand, personal communication, September 4, 2019):

*We need to be casting a critical lens on every aspect of our schools and asking: are they really set up in a way to serve every student equitably? We will find areas of opportunities for growth for us. And we must end up putting some solutions into place.*

Focus on Student Experience

While much of the LEI work focused on teacher disposition and awareness of implicit bias, the outcomes were always with the student experience in mind. When asked about the work ahead district-wide, Robert Hand states (R. Hand, personal communication, September 4, 2019):

*We need to be casting a critical lens on every aspect of our schools and asking: are they really set up in a way to serve every student equitably and in a culturally...*
responsive way? Right now, the answer is no, and we need to address that. Equity work is of the utmost importance.

Angelica Garcia, a veteran staff member at Mount Vernon High School and BEL agreed (A. Garcia, personal communication, August 28, 2019):

Due to my work with ELL/Migrant/Bilingual students and many students who come from low-socio economic families it is unjust for me to not have their best interest at heart and the equity work for me goes hand in hand, but at this time we are not serving our students to the best of our ability, especially in regards to equity.

Garcia added the LEI “allowed equity leads to discuss solutions to the explicit barriers to student success” (i.e. student tracking systems, discipline policies, and outdated curriculum).

Willingness and Vulnerability

Riddle acknowledges that the LEI “made La Venture grow.” Despite the process not being easy, he admits that his biggest learning on creating an equitable school “is it really begins and ends with humility.” Additionally, he describes (D. Riddle, personal communication, August 26, 2019) the LEI process as one where you have to:

...understand what you don’t know, have the ability to learn, take a risk, and realize your perspective might be limited or it might be out of date. I feel like it is personally what I had to learn, and I was grateful to do so.

In terms of how the work challenges staff to be more introspective, Robert Hand discusses the implications of the LEI (R. Hand, personal communication, September 4, 2019):

Staff are going to have to make the changes. I know often times people are resistant to change, especially when you are having to do things you are not used to...But that is part of what the work is. It is realizing where the gaps are and where the opportunities are.

Supporting Teachers of Color

Given the District’s small percentage of teachers of color, the focus on equity was never going to be isolated to the student experience. The systemic ways the district needed to better support and listen to teachers of color became evident. Angelica Garcia states (A. Garcia, personal communication, August 28, 2019):

...being one of the few teachers of color in MVSD, I had trust issues with peers, but this opportunity to be an equity lead has helped me find allies that I trust and appreciate more than words could express. I now know there are teachers that are willing to ask critical questions. We have created a safe space and that is very important to me.

Additionally, Robert Hand addresses the changes needed, specifically in district decision making (R. Hand, personal communication, September 4, 2019):

Because we can’t have a committee primary comprised of white people sitting around making decisions about equity in our schools. That doesn’t work. Proactively, we need to make sure those seats are at the table for the educators of color, so their voices are always at the front of the discussion.

The Third-Year of the LEI and the Implications for Future Work

At the start of the third year, the LEI is poised to deepen and expand school-based, job-embedded work in several ways, each of which were chosen by the BELs and implemented in the schools. These include whole-faculty equity work sessions designed and facilitated by BELs; book study groups on equity and social justice issues affecting schools; and facilitated job-embedded professional development sessions focused on teaching and learning from an equity lens. Taken together, these strands of work offer opportunities for all teachers and administrators to continue to both deepen background knowledge about equity and social justice and continue to work better together as they adapt practices to increase equitable experiences for all students.

The effectiveness of the BELs was evident during the 3rd Leading for Equity Institute in August 2019. Discussion among building teams toward the end of the Institute made it clear that, while work on understanding how white privilege and implicit bias impacts our practice and must continue, it is time to explicitly address equity
barriers through changes in classroom, school, and district practices and policy.

As difficult as discussing foundational equity concepts can be, applying those concepts to long standing practices will always be more challenging. However, the LEI created a large coalition of willing educators ready to drive the change. Goals now focus on sustaining the MVSD’s Leading for Equity Initiative and providing ongoing input for Building Equity Leads, resulting in the District’s commitment to:

1. Creating a shared definition of Equity for the MVSD;
2. Crafting and sharing specific instructional practices central to ensuring equitable experiences for students; and
3. Implementing a plan holding the school system accountable to these practices.

The MVSD Board’s charge now is to engage stakeholders in developing an Equity Policy capturing these three elements. They are clear that student, staff, family, and other community voices must inform the final policy and a teacher/community-led approach to policy development will result in a stronger and more sustainable commitment to equity work.

Angelica Garcia agreed that the district work won’t be fully complete unless it is supported long term, but she acknowledges the innovation within the region (A. Garcia, personal communication, August 28, 2019):

*Although it takes time, I am thankful that the Mount Vernon School District has taken on the issue of equity and that we have equity leads in each of our schools. This is something that many districts in the area can’t say they have.*

Our ultimate goal matches Robert Hand’s (R. Hand, personal communication, September 4, 2019):

*If we ask students: Do you feel seen, do you feel visible, do you feel like school is representing you and teaching you in a way that you need to be taught? If not, what do we need to do? My hope is that we are willing to listen and put in the time to make the change.*

The importance of including student voice to inform the District’s equity work going forward cannot be overstated (Hammond, 2015).

The change Hand, Garcia, and their colleagues are advocating for is essential if, “we are to avoid remaining trapped on a path that is not only generating greater inequality in academic outcomes but also contributing to deeper inequality within our society generally” (Blankstein and Noguera, 2015, p.3).

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References:


Dr. Carl Bruner has served as Superintendent of the Mount Vernon School District since 2004. He earned his Doctorate in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies from the University of Washington.

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