



COMMITMENT TO EQUITY AND JUSTICE: WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE IN ACTION

At Astra, we believe that strong relationships—what we call Radically Reimagined Relationships—are the foundation of a healthy school culture, engagement, and achievement. In schools that put Radically Reimagined Relationships at the center, we see evidence of five indicators: Culture of Belonging and Well-Being; Dispositions of Humility, Care, and Curiosity; Agency and Trust; Shared Purpose and Responsibility; and a Commitment to Equity and Justice.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY EQUITY AND JUSTICE?

Equity is a term that's often defined by different people in different ways, so we want to begin by being clear about our own understanding of equity.

Every one of us is a collection of unique characteristics. These include, but are not limited to, race, ethnicity, home language, immigration status, and religion; each of us is also unique in our family structure, family income, exposure to trauma, neurodiversity, development, abilities, gender expression, and sexual orientation.

These unique characteristics mean that we bring different assets, world-views, and experiences—and in particular, historical and present-day experiences with systems of power and privilege—into the communities to which we belong.

Equity recognizes these unique characteristics. It honors the dignity of each person and their right to find challenge, joy, and purpose in their lives.

Justice is the active pursuit of full equity by behaving according to what is morally right and fair. When we are just, we provide to the fullest of our abilities what each person needs to realize their full potential. We challenge beliefs and practices that disadvantage individuals and groups on the basis of some aspect of their identities and dismantle systems that formalize and perpetuate those disadvantages.

Education is a system, one that unfortunately is still grappling with systemic disadvantage and discrimination. If education is to live out its fullest promise—to engage, develop, and lift up all students—then it must demonstrate, in word and deed, that every student deserves to be loved, heard, and counted. This is impossible without a commitment to equity and justice.

Based upon our conversations and school visits, we believe a commitment to equity and justice involves *Opportunity*, *Inclusivity*, and *Individual Fit*.

Opportunity: We believe that all students, regardless of zip code and other factors, deserve relationship-based, engaging, and relevant learning experi-

ences. This is a social justice issue, and one that transcends politics. Across grade levels, a number of studies show that teachers are less likely to have asset-based attitudes towards and strong relationships with students of color and low- and middle-income students.¹

Inclusivity: Inclusivity means that all students and their families feel welcome and valued at school, and that diverse viewpoints among members of the school community are respected and thoughtfully considered. This requires the ability to respond to others in ways that convey interest and respect for their emotions, perspectives, concerns, and ideas, with empathy and an appreciation of diverse identities. Members of the community develop their ability and willingness to examine, reflect on, and challenge their own implicit biases and mental models—and change their own perspective and/or actions accordingly.

Individual Fit: If we believe that the goal of education is to help each student thrive, now and in the future, and if we accept that each student comes equipped with a unique set of needs, interests, and abilities, then we need to chart different paths towards ‘success’ for different students and provision ourselves accordingly. The alternative is the familiar refrain that “school works for some kids, but not for others.”

WHAT DOES THIS COMMITMENT LOOK LIKE IN ACTION?

Schools with a commitment to equity and justice are determined to provide all students with the opportunity to experience a nurturing, meaningful education. Jeannine King, director of student support at the Bronx Community Charter School in The Bronx, NY, says, “We are rooted in progressive pedagogy. And we are rooted in that pedagogy for families that are underrepresented in that world—bringing independent and private school experiences to kids who would never be able to afford them. Kids are having profound and rich experiences. Also, every adult in the building is invested in the work and helping families navigate through the system and beyond.”

The school’s 508 PreK-8 students, three-quarters of whom receive free and reduced-price meals and nearly all of whom are students of color, engage in the kind of inquiry-based and community-oriented learning that research suggests is more often experienced by wealthier and whiter students in other schools.² For example, each fall at Bronx Community a schoolwide interdis-

1 Muller, C. (2001). The role of caring in the teacher-student relationship for at-risk students. *Sociological Inquiry*, 71(2), 241-255.

2 See Valentino, R. (2018). Will public pre-K really close achievement gaps? Gaps in prekindergarten quality between students and across states. *American Educational Research Journal*, 55(1), 79-116; also Windschitl, M. & Calabrese Barton, A. (2016). Rigor and equity by design: Locating a set of core teaching practices for the science education community. American Educational Research Association.

ciplinary investigation of the nearby Bronx River culminates in an outdoor museum exhibition for the community. As part of that effort, on the day we visited the school fifth grade students were designing and testing bridges. First they learned about common types of bridges in a mini-lesson, then they created blueprints for original bridge designs. Following that, they built models from their blueprints using straws, string, and masking tape. Student teams were so engaged in this activity that when instructional assistant Anna Lugo announced it was time to pack up, her announcement was met with multiple protests.

Bronx Community stands in stark contrast to no-excuses, zero-tolerance schools and practices for urban students, which are driven by a mistaken belief that these practices are somehow necessary to 'get through' to students with certain demographic profiles.³ Jeannine King observes, "We have lots of teachers whose own kids go to our school, and that speaks volumes... We've built a place we believe in and want for our own kids, too. That says so much about who we are."

When we visited Bronx Community, we also saw student-created posters displayed inside and outside the school with slogans declaring "We are all immigrants / Dominicans / strong women / LGBTQ /" and so on. This is one manifestation of the practice of Inclusivity, making sure that all students and their families feel welcome and valued at school. This happens from the moment students and their families enter the Bronx Community building, as the security guard warmly greets each person by name, and as families, staff, and students congregate in common areas before the first class begins. Additionally, on First Fridays every month, the school encourages family members to join students in classrooms to observe and help with activities.

At many of the schools we've visited, restorative justice has been an important element of inclusiveness. Research confirms that teachers who are highly committed to restorative practices have more positive relationships with their culturally diverse students (as reported by students) than their counterparts who implement fewer restorative practices; additionally, teachers committed to restorative practices have fewer disciplinary referrals overall and issue proportionally fewer disciplinary referrals to students of color than other teachers.⁴ At Harvest Collegiate High School, a public high school in New York City serving 457 students, a group of juniors and seniors called Circle Keepers regularly lead restorative circles for students and staff. The school's music teacher and restorative justice coordinator Martin Urbach transferred

3 Zirkel, S., Bailey, F., Bathey, S., Hawley, R., Lewis, U., Long, D., Pollack, T., Roberts, Z., Stroud, R.S., & Winful, A. (2011). "Isn't that what 'those kids' need?' Urban schools and the master narrative of the 'tough, urban principal.'" *Race, Ethnicity, and Education*, 14(2), 137-158.

4 Gregory, A., Clawson, K., Davis, A., & Gerewitz, J. (2016). The promise of restorative practices to transform teacher-student relationships and achieve equity in school discipline. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, 26(4), 325-353.

leadership of the program to students in 2018 and coaches the Circle Keepers in restorative justice practices.



SaMI students celebrating together.

Across the country from Harvest Collegiate, two Tacoma Public Schools we visited promote inclusivity through their bridge program. At the Science and Mathematics Institute (SaMI) and the Industrial Design and Engineering in the Arts School (IDEA), for 1-2 semesters

each student is expected to serve as a “bridge” for others, meaning they provide support in one way or another. A student may be a bridge for another student, a group of students, a class, or the school in general. The bridge assignments are tailored to individual students’ strengths and interests; they serve to support students in need and recognize everyone’s value to the school community.

When we asked about the possible stigma of being a student who has been assigned a bridge, school leaders told us they work hard to emphasize that everyone has strengths and weaknesses: everyone needs help, and everyone can give help. Jon Ketler, who founded three of Tacoma’s high school programs, has a daughter with cerebral palsy; she had a bridge who helped her, and she in turn was a bridge for another student who needed help. “Having and being a bridge has become a very normal part of the school experience,” says Liz Minks, SaMI’s co-director, “so much so that many students who do not have special needs request bridges.”

What we saw in Tacoma also highlights the importance of Individual Fit, which involves recognizing and supporting each student’s unique set of needs, interests, and abilities. As the bridge program beautifully demonstrates, accommodations originally intended to benefit special education students quite often benefit other students as well. We saw this at Parker Charter Essential School in Devens, Massachusetts, where each of the school’s 395 students has a Personalized Learning Plan--a document that both highlights a student’s abilities and identifies goals the student wants to work toward. Together with their parents and advisor, students share these goals and develop strategies to help them be successful. In many schools, this kind

of process is reserved only for those who qualify for special education services and an Individualized Education Program (IEP).

A school's commitment to equity and justice also very often extends beyond the school walls and into the broader community(ies) to which students, staff, and families belong. At Vancouver iTech, a public school serving 343 students in Vancouver, WA, principal Darby Meade observes, "When you give middle and high school students choice and freedom in their projects and learning, and when you encourage students to focus on authentic real-world problems, many tend to gravitate towards social justice and equity issues, because the most complicated real-world problems tend to be issues of social justice and equity." Thabiti Brown, head of school at the Codman Academy Charter Public School in Dorchester, MA, adds, "The world is one that isn't just and fair for low income folks, and it isn't one that supports black and brown students... Let's ensure that we are educating so that we can produce graduates who are able to use their knowledge to change the world."

QUICK TIPS

1. Pursue opportunities for school staff members (and ideally, students and families as well) to recognize their own implicit biases and explore how these may affect the school community.
2. Consider Restorative Justice and other programs and policies that will engage and integrate members of your school community. Ensure you're not explicitly or implicitly communicating that certain individuals and groups don't belong or can't succeed.
3. Identify ways to explicitly recognize the assets that each individual brings to the school community, and to the best of your ability design teaching and learning experiences that leverage those unique assets.

RESOURCES

Abigail Wacker, [Closing the Engagement Gap: A Social Justice Imperative](#). Report from Center for Inspired Teaching, June 2018.

Melinda Anderson, [How Discrimination Shapes Parent-Teacher Communication](#). Article published in The Atlantic, November 2016.

Paul Gorski and Katy Swalwell, [Equity Literacy for All](#). Article published in Educational Leadership, March 2015.

Ursula Wolfe-Rocca, [Dangerous Discussions: Voice and Power in My Classroom](#). Article published by the National Writing Project, August 2018.

For additional resources, please visit our [Resource Library](#).

ABOUT ASTRA CENTER FOR INNOVATIVE EDUCATION

The Astra Center for Innovative Education affirms the critical role that relationships play in learning environments. We promote educational models that demonstrate Radically Reimagined Relationships - a commitment to creating and sustaining genuine, thoughtful, and meaningful connections between and among students, staff, and families in an environment of equity and racial justice. Our work centers around researching schools and school models, reporting on the impact of relationship-building, engaging schools and like-minded organizations that share this philosophy, and working directly with schools to build capacity. Learn more about our work at www.astrafoundation.org/center-for-innovative-education.

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On the cover: Students at Blackstone Academy Charter School in Pawtucket, RI, during Pride Week. Photo courtesy of BACS, one of the schools profiled in Astra's *Radically Reimagined Relationships* report.

