

# Interrupting Business as Usual: A Principal's Reflection on the Equity Project in His District and School

David Summergrad, Massachusetts

There's an old saying: "If we keep doing things the way we have always done them, then we will keep getting the same results we have always had."

And that is fine, if the results we have always had are what we want them to be. But – if they are not what we want them to be, then we have to be willing to change our way of doing business; in the words of educator Victor Cary, we need to interrupt business as usual, to create change and to achieve a different kind of result.

The issue of racial equity and achievement is simply too important for us to push aside, even if we have talked about it before; even if it makes others uncomfortable.

So what are we to do about it in Brookline School District and at Runkle School?

In the three years since Brookline began its equity project, with a goal of eliminating the racial achievement gap, we have looked at clear and compelling data that tells us that not all of our students are making a successful academic journey through our schools. Black and Latino children are disproportionately underrepresented in the upper tiers of our classes whether it is on measures like MCAS, DRA's, or classroom-based teacher-developed assessments. And, these same groups of students are over-represented in special education programs and on the list of students sent to the office.

Many of my colleagues have heard me use the analogy of a class field trip: If a teacher takes a class of twenty children on a field trip and at the end of the day returns with just nineteen of them, he or she could say: "I brought back nineteen out of twenty – that is 95% – that's an A so that's a pretty good result."

I think it is safe to say that none of us would find it acceptable if we lost even one child on a class trip.

Yet, year in and year out, we are losing more than one child per class on the academic journey from grade to grade. In order to change this result we must interrupt business as usual. We must challenge an underlying, often unspoken, belief that

may be held by some teachers that it is okay if some children don't learn, that it is not realistic to think that they will all get it.

The racial achievement gap in America's schools today can be, in the long run, every bit as life-threatening as the idea of losing a child on a field trip. If you believe, as I do, that education is the key that opens the door to a more fulfilled and satisfying life, then our failure to educate well the children of color in our classrooms effectively determines for many of them the downward trajectory of their lives.

Doug Reeves at Harvard has put this to us directly: If a student needs help in math or reading, what difference does it make what the student's race is? There is not "African-American math" or "Hispanic geometry" -- let's just give all students GOOD math and GOOD writing. Therefore, when the issue is planning curriculum, assessment, and effective teaching strategies, the only "subgroup" that matters is who has met the standard and who needs additional help. This is the first part of a two-part conversation.

But the second part of this conversation is one that goes to the heart of equity: If we do not acknowledge that there are differences based on gender, race, economic status, and language, then we will never admit that there is a problem.

Call it "Educational 12-step" – the first step is admitting, "I'm Doug, and even though I'm not a bigot, I've got to admit that poor and minority kids in my classroom are performing at a level well below their Anglo and economically advantaged counterparts. I'm not saying that this is my fault, but I am admitting that it's a problem, and that I've got to be part of the solution."

The result of this two-part conversation will not, I hope, be to create separate math programs for minority kids. Rather, we should create specific interventions for ANY student who needs help. And by conducting the gender, economic, and ethnic analysis, we should admit that if we fail to intervene, our failures disproportionately hurt poor and minority students.

As we enter  
the fourth year of

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Brookline's Equity Project, we step back and consider the courage required to undertake this effort. First of all, it takes courage for a school system like Brookline's to publicly acknowledge this glaring area of weakness. We continue to collect data that reflects a sizable racial achievement gap. For example, nearly 400 points separate the average SAT scores of Brookline's white students from those of our black and Latino students. The results on other standardized measures, like the MCAS, reveal similar gaps.

It is also courageous to state that we will take on this achievement gap and, over time, change the results in our schools. The title of our effort is: Brookline's Equity Project – Taking Action, Getting Results. Our challenge this year is to continue to move from a study of the problems causing the achievement gap to an action-driven approach. Last year, we formed equity teams at each school so that we could help ensure that the kinds of changes we need to make will reach the classrooms. Courageous conversations about race and the sharing of best practices are only effective if they con-

nect with individual teachers and their students.

Do we have the guts and the fortitude it will take to challenge our own practices and to change the way we do things? Do we have the political will to take on the challenges of this effort in the face of the resistance we will encounter? In the movie *An Inconvenient Truth*, Al Gore reminds us that political will is a renewable resource; we will need to tap into this resource to develop the momentum required to create sustainable change.

Dr. James A. Williams, Superintendent of Schools in Buffalo, New York, suggests that we must ask four essential questions to help us close the gap:

- 1) What do students need to know and be able to do? That will guide our instruction.
- 2) How do we know when they have learned it? That will guide our assessment.
- 3) What will we do when they have not learned it? That will determine whether we interrupt business as usual to help us close the gap or whether we continue to accept the results we have now.
- 4) What will we do when they already know it? That is our call for appropriate differentiation that is so crucial to sustaining support for this effort.

If this were an easy task, teachers in schools like ours would have solved it long ago. Only if we are willing to face down a deeply entrenched problem and go at it with the resources and the persistence it requires will we get different results than we have been able to get in the past.

The challenges that face us today as educators do not lend themselves to quick fixes or isolated workshops. They require us to deepen our understanding as we develop new ways to build upon and expand the successes of the past. Whether we are working on closing the achievement gap, reaching out to include children who are on the autism spectrum, ensuring a safe and respectful learning environment for all of our students, or using the tools of technology to improve instruction and learning, we need to be willing to learn from each other in order to grow and to improve our practice.

We will continue to open our doors to all students, and we will continue to support the staff in acquiring the skills needed to teach all children effectively. We will work hard to ensure that we all have the training and resources necessary to do our jobs well.

### Bumper Sticker Activity

In the best tradition of political campaigns, I invite you to take a few minutes now to develop a slogan for a bumper sticker to represent your commitment to this effort.

- How can we expect equity when we don't live in an equitable world?
- Keep Pace, Respect Race.
- Understanding Individuals.
- I'm the Solution.
- Equity = Commitment + Discomfort => Change
- Every child can succeed. Every child deserves the chance!
- Go the distance... Equity for ALL!
- Success for all... not for most.
- Equity Equals Excellence.
- Fairness means you get what you need.
- Equality in the Classroom
- Equal Educational Access
- Change is good
- Coexist
- Affirm identity - Build community - Create leaders