

# ELEVEN

## Eden Prairie Schools

### *A Case Study*

*The closer you get to equity, the sooner the rules change.*

—Dr. Melissa Krull, Former Superintendent,  
Eden Prairie Schools

In the *Courageous Conversations* field guide, I profiled Del Roble Elementary School in San José, California, and the extraordinary leadership of then-Principal Yvette Irving and her mighty Equity and CARE Teams. At that time, while no district had shown promise of systemic transformation with respect to the Pacific Educational Group's (PEG's) Systemic Racial Equity Framework, many individual classrooms and schools throughout the nation exemplified promising practices that were coherent, consistent, and faithful with respect to our designed equity theories and practices. Seven years later, not only have several districts demonstrated such systemic and sustained focus on achieving racial equity, but some, at least for a period of time, have also posted the expected state and regional pacesetting performance results—when many educators have grown skeptical over that very possibility. One district that has impressed me in this way is Eden Prairie Schools, located in suburban Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Superintendent Melissa Krull led her district with courage and conviction. When her racial equity leaders' passion, practice, and persistence were insufficient to withstand mounting resistance from the community and internal detractors, she discovered her Personal Racial Equity Purpose (PREP) and pushed on, holding site and central office leadership accountable to her vision. Dr. Krull lived in the Zone of Productive Disequilibrium where she sought adaptive solutions to unanswered national racial equity challenges like shrinking fiscal resources, protection of (White) neighborhood schools, all-White school boards and executive leadership teams, and rapidly declining results for children of color in secondary education. She and other key Eden Prairie Schools leaders at all levels stared down fundamentalists' attacks, launched from within their community as well as from

around the nation, often having to choose what works for *all* children over what will earn them public admiration and keep them employed. The following is their story of systemic racial equity transformation, told through the lens and in the words of the superintendent, Dr. Melissa Krull, and her equity coordinator, Ms. Nanette Missaghi, M.A.

## EDEN PRAIRIE THEN AND NOW

Eden Prairie is a dynamic and thriving, third-ring suburb of Minneapolis, Minnesota. It is an attractive, mid-size city, home to the Minnesota Vikings football team, the Super Valu grocery store chain, the C. H. Robinson Company (trucking), ADC Telecommunications, and 2,200 other businesses. Rates of crime and unemployment are low: 0.03% for violent crimes, 2.03% for property crimes, and 4.8% unemployment (as of 2011). With its several lakes, numerous curving paths and hills, and 170 miles of scenic trails and prairies located on what was once part of the Dakota Nation, Eden Prairie was named *Money* magazine’s “#1 Best Place to Live in America” in 2010.

The land on which the city now stands was taken by the U.S. government in an 1851 treaty with the Dakota and opened to American settlement immediately thereafter. The town of Eden Prairie was established in 1858 and, until the 1980s, when the area exploded with new housing developments, it was mostly a rural farming community. Today, this thriving suburb offers a diverse array of housing options, from the affluent Bear Path gated community to solidly middle-income neighborhoods to areas where most of the homes and apartments are Section 8-subsidized units.

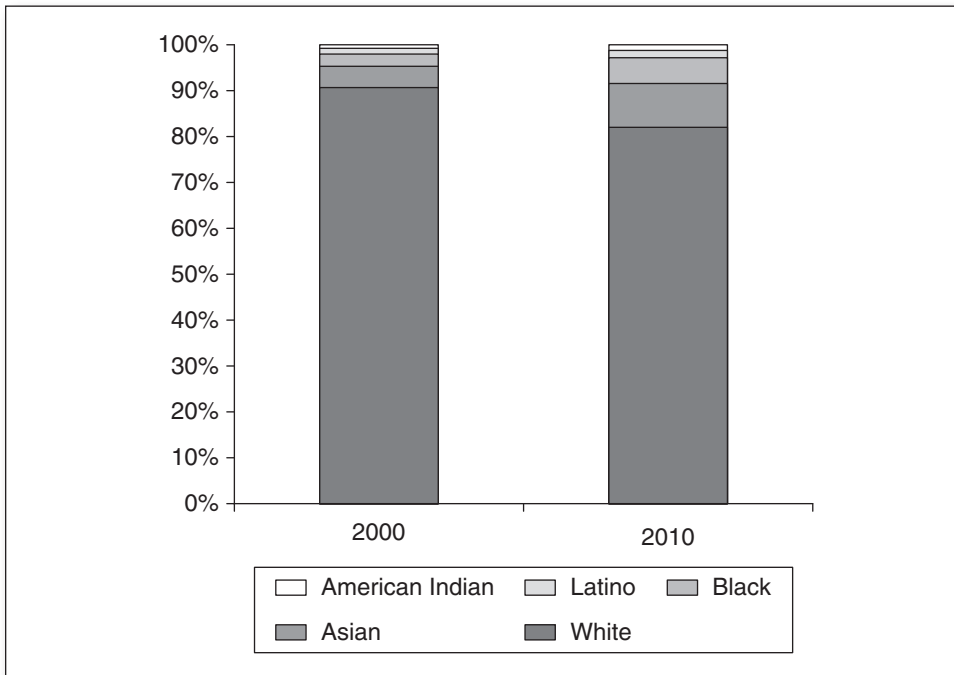
Eden Prairie reached its highest population in 2005, at about 65,000 residents. According to the 2010 Census, the city grew from 54,901 in 2000 to 60,797 in 2010. The 2010 racial breakdown was as follows: 81.7% White, 9.5% Asian, 5.6% Black, 3% Latino, 2.3% mixed (two or more) race, and 0.2% American Indian. Figure 11.1 presents census data for the city of Eden Prairie for the years 2000 and 2010 to illustrate the changing demographics over time.

Just over 10% of Eden Prairie residents reported speaking a language at home other than English. The city also counts a significant number of people of Somali (East African) descent among its population. The exact number of Somalis has not been tabulated, but Minneapolis and St. Paul reportedly are home to the highest Somali population in North America.

Given this increasing diversity, Eden Prairie is also experiencing increasing extremes of wealth and poverty within its borders. Sarah Schewe, who, as a high school senior, wrote the winning entry in the 2006–2007 American Planning Association High School Essay Contest, titled “Affordable Housing Plan for Eden Prairie, Minnesota,” details this divide as follows:

Eden Prairie is a city of families, and 71.27% of housing is currently family housing. Yet an income divide exists between Eden Prairie’s wealthier, predominantly white community (90.66%) and [its] immigrant families. While for whites the income per capita is \$40,510, for Asians it falls to just \$24,649 and for “Other” (which includes Somalis), it is only \$12,687. This gap is growing—in the Twin Cities from 1989–1999, “the average household income of the wealthiest 20 percent of Twin Cities’ households rose 24 percent . . . the poorest 20 percent rose

**Figure 11.1** Eden Prairie Census Demographic Data



at just 16 percent.” ... Eden Prairie food shelves saw a dramatic increase in need from 1,500 visits in 2000 to nearly 10,000 in 2005. Meanwhile, with a median rate of \$1,166 per month, Hennepin County has one of the highest mortgage costs in Minnesota. More affordable housing in Eden Prairie could help the city better support its growth and serve our immigrant families.<sup>1</sup>

Eden Prairie is unique in that its school district (Eden Prairies Schools, or EPS), which generally has been described as thriving, is contained within the city boundaries. The district was also viewed as fiscally responsible. It operated several large school buildings, which are cheaper to run than many smaller, neighborhood schools. It was widely presumed that *all* of the city’s students were doing well, and the community was satisfied and proud.

However, student results were not disaggregated by race or service program. When those data were analyzed and revealed, the achievement and participation gaps were alarming. Not *all* EPS students were really doing well. Changes were needed for students of color and others not achieving to their highest potential.

### Demographic Changes and Challenges

In the 1990s, multiple events began to challenge the status quo in Eden Prairie Schools. Community members of color were feeling dismissed by the district. An incident

occurred in which two African American women stopped by the EPS central office to inquire about principal and teacher positions. After several exchanges, the women were informed that only custodial positions were available to them. They left the office feeling that they had been insulted and mistreated. As a result of this and other incidents, a number of meetings were held to address the non-White Eden Prairie community's belief that the school district did not respect diversity. One of the demands emanating from these meetings was that the district should hire a diversity coordinator. Another called for the district to hire more teachers of color.

Around that time, Minnesota's State Department of Education enacted its multicultural gender-fair rule (MCGDF), which mandated all school districts in the state to create a committee and plan to ensure that their curricula include lessons detailing the contributions of women, American Indians, Latinos, African Americans, Asian Americans, and people with disabilities. The rule also required that diversity training be provided for all district staff. In Eden Prairie, this training began as an optional, 2-hour MCGDF class for staff. Eventually, EPS, like many other school districts throughout Minnesota, got serious about making sure that its teachers understood the many facets of diversity and multicultural education.

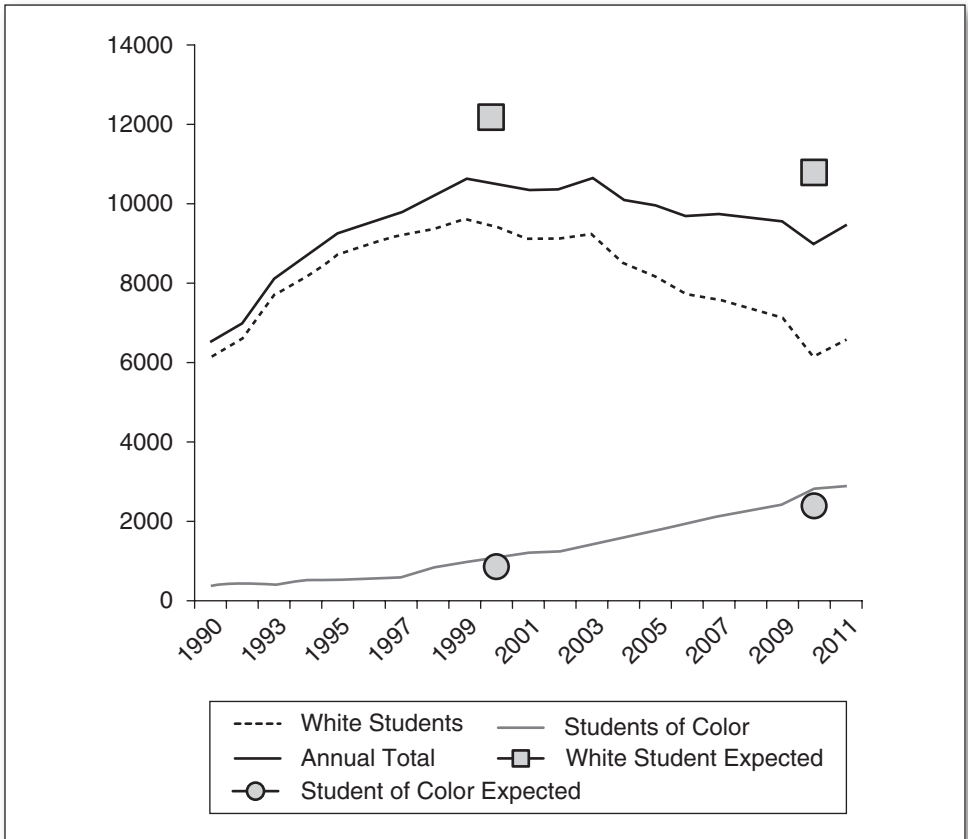
After attending a state-sponsored Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity (SEED) training, several EPS staff members were inspired to start a local chapter of that initiative. They created the Eden Prairie SEED staff academy with the initial goal of instructing 100 EPS personnel about diversity and diverse perspectives via weekly, after-school classes. Participants could obtain credit for their attendance if they so chose. EPS's SEED classes continued for 7 years and served about 1,000 participants.

In 1990, nearly all (95% or 7,025) of EPS students were White; the 409 students of color accounted for only 5.5% of the public school population. During the 2011–2012 school year, White students made up 69.5% (6,579) and students of color 30% (2,883).

Figure 11.2 presents two other types of demographic student enrollment data. First, it shows an overall picture of student enrollment by race over a 21-year period from 1990 to 2011. Second, it shows a projection from the U.S. Census Bureau of the number of students between the ages of 5 and 19 who will be eligible to attend public schools in Eden Prairie for two Census periods (2000 and 2010). For example, in 2000, a total of 13,050 students were projected to attend: 12,190 White students and 860 students of color. In actuality, however, a combined total of 10,513 students including 9,438 White students and 1,075 students of color attended EPS district schools. In 2010, the projected total was 13,191 students: 10,797 White students and 2,394 students of color. The reality was that of the 8,983 students who enrolled, 6,158 were White students and 2,825 were students of color. In 2000, the gap between projected and actual White student enrollment was 2,752 (that is, 2,752 fewer White students enrolled than projected). That same year, students of color enrollment exceeded the projection by 215. In 2010, the projected-versus-actual enrollment gap for White students increased to 4,639 while 431 more students of color attended EPS district schools than projected. Thus, for two Census periods, the number of students of color who attend Eden Prairie Schools increased beyond the projected enrollments. However, the number of White students expected to attend declined in both periods.

Although it is difficult to be certain of the explanation, a few conclusions can be drawn as to why the White EPS student population declined while the students of color

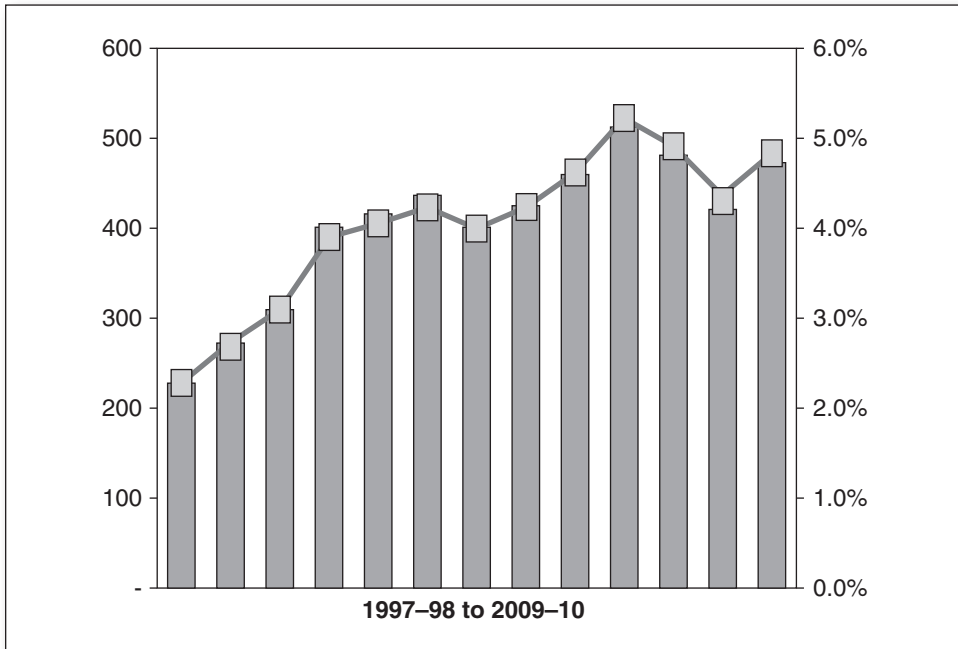
**Figure 11.2** Eden Prairie Schools Student Enrollment Analysis



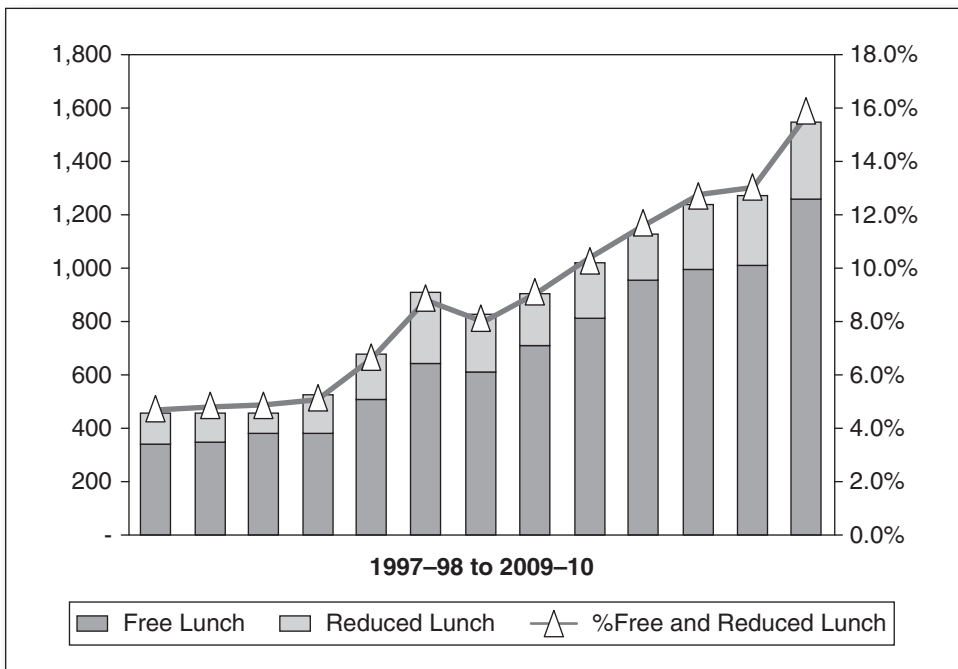
numbers remained constant and grew. Clearly, White families, more than families of color, made choices to attend schools other than Eden Prairie public schools. As in many other districts, other school options were available. Figure 11.3 illustrates the growth of the EPS district’s English-language learner (ELL) population. In the late 1990s, the district’s ELL population largely consisted of Russian and Vietnamese refugees. Over time, that population shifted to include mostly Somalis and Latinos from Mexico and a few other Latin American countries. The district currently serves students who speak more than 51 different languages other than English at home. The size of the district’s ELL population (number of students served) has remained stable, however.

Figure 11.4 shows the trend of significantly increasing numbers of students requiring free and reduced lunch in the district. Although it is generally important that we not conflate the rising number of low-income students with the dramatically increasing number of students of color, in the case of EPS, the vast majority of students of poverty are also students of color.

**Figure 11.3** District K-12 Limited English Demographics



**Figure 11.4** Eden Prairie Schools Free-and-Reduced-Price-Lunch Demographics



## The District Responds

In 1994, EPS created a human resources and diversity coordinator position among its personnel ranks to carry forward the vision of Dr. Bill Gaslin, the superintendent at the time, who had commissioned a new strategic plan for the district in 1996. “Educating for Success in our Diverse and Changing World” was the mission statement for the district under Gaslin’s tenure. His strategic plan evolved into 10 strategic initiatives that were designed to move the entire EPS system forward.

An organizational improvement committee (OIC) was established to oversee the implementation, measurement, and evaluation of the plan. Equity and diversity were embedded into two of the OIC’s initiatives. Within a year, the committee launched a comprehensive, districtwide diversity assessment to establish baseline data on student achievement, program participation, staff hiring and retention, and school climate.

As the Eden Prairie workforce began to diversify and as the student of color population in the district grew, EPS worked hard to increase the number of staff of color within its ranks. District administrators knew that a diverse workforce meant better results for all students. From 1990 to 2011, while the percentage of students of color grew from about 4% in 1990 to nearly 30% in 2011, the percentage of non-administrative EPS staff of color grew from about 1% to 7% in 2011. Among the administrative staff, the percentage of people of color increased from 0% in 1990 to 16% in 2011.

Although the pace was slow, the effort was sustained. Even so, EPS survey results indicated that continued work was necessary to ensure that staff of color would be not only hired but retained. Despite all its efforts, the district faced challenges such as lack of buy-in from key staff and inadequate resources for diversity training and support. EPS staff of color continued to indicate that they did not feel welcomed by White peers and that they were being held to a higher standard. Teachers of color with foreign accents received many complaints from White parents. Principals strived to navigate the challenges of their new, more diverse workforce with little training or support. As a result, most staff of color left EPS for other opportunities. The district struggled to hold on to its remaining staff members of color.

Despite these challenges, a stream of new faces of color came and went over the years as EPS persisted in its efforts to hire and retain staff of color. Over time, two specific approaches emerged as EPS’s primary strategies for diversifying its workforce. The first, called the Teacher of Color Plan, was developed to track the hiring and retaining of staff of color on a school building-by-building basis. Later, a more comprehensive approach was used, wherein the district established 5-year goals for each school, with annual benchmarks to assess the expectations for increased staff of color.

At least twice a year, all EPS building principals met with the superintendent to review their progress toward their specific hiring goals. Still, the district needed a system-wide approach, not only to address staff hiring but also to ensure academic success for *all* EPS students. If the district was serious about its equity work, it would need an overarching plan for all aspects of the system. Enter Dr. Melissa Krull.

In May 2002, the EPS board hired a new superintendent, Dr. Melissa Krull, who embraced the district’s ongoing equity work and was determined to continue it. The continuing gaps in learning between White students and students of color in EPS were

obvious and unacceptable to her. Thus, ensuring that all EPS teachers and other staff received professional development designed to help them eliminate those gaps became an urgent top priority districtwide.

The next year (2003–2004), Eden Prairie joined a voluntary integration district called the West Metro Education Program (WMEP), even though it did not abut any school district that was racially isolated, nor did it have a racially identifiable school. WMEP is a voluntary consortium of 11 urban and suburban school districts in the Minneapolis area. It was formed in 1989 to promote voluntary integration among the Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS) and school districts in its surrounding cities and suburbs. Its mission is to build the collective capacity of its members; to raise the achievement of all students; to eliminate the racial achievement gap; and to prepare all learners to thrive in a diverse world through regional leadership, integrated learning opportunities, shared resources, and mutual support.

The opportunity to join WMEP offered many benefits for the EPS. These included access to additional state resources (called “integration revenue”), professional development, and enrollment exchange opportunities for EPS students to attend two MPS magnet schools. Another benefit was the participation of several key EPS staff in a seminar titled *Beyond Diversity*, which was offered by PEG in May 2004.

A few EPS administrators decided to check out this seminar, and it proved to be especially meaningful for them. Through it, they discovered a new vehicle to propel the district’s diversity mission forward. The seminar also introduced them to the *Courageous Conversations About Race Protocol*. Since the advent of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), they had been collecting their student achievement data, disaggregating those data, and trying to understand the huge gaps the data revealed between their White students and students of color. For years, they had struggled with the district’s racial educational disparities but lacked a method to talk about it. Truth be told, they did not truly understand the disparities or the reasons behind them. Nor did they understand what the data were really telling them. Could there be something about their beliefs, their practices, or their values that was causing these challenges?

EPS administrators became increasingly curious and decided to continue on their journey by following a path not yet charted. The district recruited Glenn Singleton, PEG’s CEO, to facilitate the discussion during an August 2004 retreat. Glenn’s presentation was well received, and the retreat evaluations indicated that staff wanted to learn more.

But the EPS leadership understood that transformation would not happen with just administrators working on their beliefs. They knew that teachers played a big role because they were the ones delivering direct instruction to the students. About 90% of Eden Prairie’s teachers were White, and most were female. Few of them had been trained to teach students from cultures and races different from their own. The leadership knew they would need new skills to teach students of color effectively. An additional benefit to WMEP membership was WMEP’s partnership with the National Urban Alliance (NUA).

The NUA is a professional development company that provides onsite training for teachers. Its major focus is providing research, direct instruction, demonstration, coaching, mentoring, and feedback to teachers to help them better engage students of color in reaching their potential. NUA’s focus on teacher development served as a useful complement to the early PEG work with EPS administrators. Eventually WMEP authorized PEG



to design a regional equity effort called LEARN (Leaders in Equity and Anti-Racism Network), which became the initiative in which regional equity leadership teams from most member districts would be developed to craft and execute a systemic equity transformation framework, which Dr. Krull recognized as critical to her district's success with staff, students, and families of color.

## THE DISTRICT DEVELOPS A CLEAR VISION OF EQUITY

After completing Beyond Diversity and six subsequent PEG-led LEARN seminars focused on developing racial equity leaders in the initial year of work, 8 of 11 participating WMEP districts were tasked to develop 5-year equity transformation plans. EPS's District Equity Leadership Team (DELT) wrote its plan over a 1 1/2-year period. The following are a few of the key points of this plan, which was formally adopted by the Eden Prairie school board in June 2007. These points illustrate the district's vision of equity:

### EXCERPTS FROM EPS'S 5-YEAR EQUITY TRANSFORMATION PLAN

#### Eden Prairie's Commitment to Achieving Equity and Excellence

Eden Prairie Schools has always focused on the pursuit of excellence. In keeping with this tradition, we joined several neighboring districts and became active members in the WMEP (West Metro Education Program) Equity Initiative. It is the beginning of our 5-year collegial commitment to systematically address institutional racism in our schools. The goal of our work is to achieve equity; eliminate the achievement gap; and create a welcoming, inclusive, antiracist environment for everyone touched by our school system.

All of our work is rooted in solid, scientific data and research. We have carefully studied our test scores and have interviewed numerous students, employees, and parents about their experiences in our school system. In addition, we have diligently studied national findings about inequity, the achievement gap, and racism. We have found that although we have high-performing schools, not all of our students and families are reaping the benefits. And indeed, even our highest-performing students are losing out on the opportunities that come from being part of an equitable learning environment.

#### Background - Current Conditions - The Wake Up Call

How did Eden Prairie Schools arrive at this point of reflection by isolating race as a key factor in the achievement disparities? Data is the answer. We have had the capacity to review and analyze student achievement data for a couple of years, but had not sorted the data by race. When we did so and saw the extent of the racial disparities in the classroom, our transformation for equity began.

We now believe that we cannot rightly call ourselves a high-performing district when some of our students are “left behind” due to the color of their skin.

The district could choose to rest on its laurels of its high academic achievement average, but instead Eden Prairie has chosen the path toward equity. The gap is twofold in Eden Prairie. The first gap is program-related, whereby there is a disproportionately high number of students of color in special education and a very low number in the gifted and talented services. The second gap is between the achievement of the lowest-performing students of color and the highest-performing White students. The district is committed to eliminating that first gap of racial predictability in program participation and the second in academic achievement.

### **Why Are We Having Conversations About Race and Racism at Eden Prairie Schools?**

The major reason we have isolated race, as an important conversation to begin at Eden Prairie Schools, is because our district student achievement data shows conclusively that students of color, especially African American students, are achieving at a significantly lower rate than white students.

We believe that we will consciously and deliberately act to eliminate the disparity between our mission of achievement for all students and the policies, practices, and structures in our school system that perpetuate inequities based on race and class. We will change the culture that is based on White privilege to be multicultural and antiracist.

We believe we will be successful at eliminating the achievement gap when every employee examines their own individual practices for ways they contribute to an environment that supports and sustains learning differences in our students of color.

### **The Importance of Leadership**

Effective leadership is critical for the culture of an organization to change from one state of mind to another and to be sustainable over time. For Eden Prairie Schools, that means creating a new culture in which the cultures and races that differ from the dominant culture are integrated and accepted. The outcome of creating a new culture would be closing the racial achievement gap and eliminating racial predictability from the district. In order to initiate this and create a climate and environment where the conversation can begin and then take root, leadership needs to understand the critical elements involved in changing a culture.

## **The Important Work Begins**

Early on, Eden Prairie’s school board supported this equity work, so the superintendent and administrative staff moved to begin the systemic equity work with ease and

clear intention. The notion of systemwide change was widely supported. The district's partnership with WMEP was under way. The superintendent was leading the effort. The principals were initiating the learning, and the entire administrative team was participating each year and throughout the year in equity training. PEG was a new innovative partner, and the NUA had joined WMEP and EPS in carrying out the equity principles in the classroom.

The longer the district kept this focus, the more systemic it became. Its intention was to systemically embrace the issue of race so that everyone who touched students and their families worked with a common language and understanding. The administrators and staff knew that the key to improving results for students was first to acknowledge that race was the common denominator; second, to engage in high-quality professional development to deeply understand race personally; and third, to take action in every aspect of the organization. They knew that systemic racism was interfering with student learning and that the need to unearth the racist practices and processes was the moral imperative. As a result, all of the district's work was viewed through the lens of race and equity. Whether it was transportation, food service, schools, administration, or board policy, everything was reviewed so that the systemic nature of the organization could be aligned with equity—ultimately serving *all* children equitably.

### **Creating Structures of Equity Support**

Once the systemic approach modeled after PEG's Framework was under way, it became important to create structures of support for staff at all levels. It began with the DELT, formed to provide overarching leadership and accountability for the district's systemic equity transformation. Simultaneously, the NUA coaching model was designed to train teachers on NUA pedagogy and strategies. NUA coaches provided site-specific training and modeling of instructional strategies to support a cultural frame of reference for teachers and students, including strategies for student engagement and high intellectual performance. Then, Equity Teams (or E-teams), composed of a principal or department head and school staff members, were created by PEG staff to deliver equity training to all staff on topics ranging from Courageous Conversations and critical race theory to systems thinking and adaptive leadership.

Drawing once again on the PEG Systemic Racial Equity Framework and its theory of transformation, teachers were grouped into CARE (Collaborative Action Research for Equity) teams to receive support in culturally relevant teaching, which included direct instruction, curriculum selection, observation, lesson planning, and feedback from a PEG trainer/coach. The CARE process enabled teachers to address the learning needs of specific focal students of color who were underperforming in their classrooms. Finally, a DELTA (District Equity Leadership Team Advisory) group was formed to provide cultural knowledge and multiple perspectives and act as a sounding board for the DELT on specific systemic issues of equity. The work of the DELT was eventually passed on to the district's executive cabinet members. All of these structures together created an infrastructure of support and accountability in EPS, so that the equity work could directly and positively impact all students, families, and staff.

## Embracing Professional Development

Both PEG's and NUA's training focused on embedding within teachers and administrators the belief that *all* children can learn with the right pedagogy. Both also focused on getting teachers and administrators to challenge their beliefs about the virtues and mythologies of color blindness and thus emerge as antiracist, culturally competent school staffs. PEG and NUA offered a radically different way of feeling, believing, thinking, and acting; and EPS's teachers and the administrators responded positively. Serious change was now under way. Over time, the entire school system, meaning every employee, would participate in PEG's Beyond Diversity training, ensuring that everyone learned a common language and protocol for negotiating race.

The district's senior-level administrators were early training targets. This meant that the superintendent; district executives, directors, and coordinators; and principals all engaged in Beyond Diversity and PEG's comprehensive equity leadership development training. Members of the school board also participated in customized training led by Glenn Singleton. As all these personnel became knowledgeable about race and internalized the language and common themes in the Beyond Diversity curriculum, their actions followed. They were then able to support their staffs, which had also begun to participate in Beyond Diversity trainings.

Superintendent Krull had asked all EPS employees to participate in Beyond Diversity. She knew that this ambitious plan would take time, but remarkably, after 7 years nearly 70% of all employees had done so, even as the district was weathering dramatic state and local cuts to education funding.

Ongoing, in-district professional development came in the form of monthly administrative team meetings focused on equity leadership, provided by the district's integration coordinator, Nanette Missaghi. Missaghi was hired in 1997 to carry out the diversity vision of then-superintendent Bill Gaslin. In her role, Missaghi also assisted in the planning and design of annual administrative retreats, school site "equity walks," and administrative year-end reflections on the equity work, facilitated by Glenn Singleton—all key professional development strategies that effected change.

Missaghi was central to the district's professional development effort. She kept district personnel consistently engaged in the equity work and brought numerous reports to the board's and superintendent's attention about how to spread this work systemwide more effectively. She kept a close eye on the training programs and ensured that EPS leaders were always at the table for WMEP regional conversations about the engagement and achievement of students of color. She kept records and data points related to progress and routinely brought forward to the superintendent and top leaders missing perspectives that were reflective of the viewpoints of staff, students, and families of color.

There was no turning back. The results would follow.

## A CHANGING CLIMATE

As the system and its employees became more knowledgeable about the principles of racial equity leadership, aspects of the climate began to change. More staff of color were

hired at all levels, providing new ways of thinking and doing. Discussions about race were more prevalent, and intentional changes started taking place.

Superintendent Krull engaged in frequent focused support, coaching, and guidance with Glenn Singleton. Her cabinet members spent lots of time examining all aspects of the district's functioning through the lens of racial equity, discovering how systemic racism appeared, and devising solutions for eradicating inequities. In the 2007–2008 school year, the board crafted new and revised district policy to address equitable outcomes for all students more intentionally. Superintendent Krull also began meeting with administrators of color about four times each year to hear directly from leaders of color, who offered diverse African American, American Indian, and Latino viewpoints—voices often lost in large systems that are predominantly White. She gained insights from them about how the changes, and the backlash resulting from those changes, affected them. They indicated that sometimes the effect was negative and sometimes positive, but they still encouraged her to move forward. Their inputs and multiple perspectives changed how Krull ran the district and made decisions. In turn, the administrators of color felt heard and worked in partnership with the superintendent to support the district's equity efforts.

Over time, the effects of a changing EPS climate and culture ebbed and flowed. Sometimes the change efforts seemed aligned and appeared to be advancing forward; other times, it seemed as if the whole system was slowing down or only stumbling forward. The administration learned that it would have to take bold and thoughtful approaches to make important strides toward equity. At times, these bold and unsettling strategies produced both slowdowns and setbacks, but they were precisely what were needed to make the next important shift forward.

For example, in 2010, when the state standardized results were released, an EPS elementary school, Forest Hills, was found to have made significant gains. Forest Hills was the elementary school with the largest percentage of low-income students and students of color. The gains at Forest Hills were so remarkable that many believed its successful strategies should be shared and even replicated to other schools. The 2010 data also showed that middle school results had gone down rather significantly. In fact, they had dropped to an all-time low in the district after so many years of attention and effort to bring their scores up.

During an administrative retreat that year, Singleton and the EPS equity planning team engaged in a “fishbowl” exercise to help bring to light the significance of the important gains and dramatic losses that had taken place within the system. This exercise involved creating an inner circle of discussion among administrators of color and White administrators and the two principals from the highest-performing (Forest Hills Elementary) and lowest-performing (Central Middle) schools in the district. The entire administrative leadership team was able to observe the fishbowl conversation focused on how the gains were made at Forest Hills and what factors contributed to the uncharacteristic declining achievement at the middle schools.

Tensions emerged on completion of the exercise. Even weeks afterward, the emotions of team members were found to range from fear, anger, and distrust to excitement, joy, and relief. The very thought of exposing failure was far more worrisome than many of the district's predominantly White administration felt appropriate or necessary. In follow-up discussions, a few White principals expressed anger over the way the exercise had exposed

or singled out one of their colleagues. Some administrators of color, on the other hand, felt that the fishbowl exercise was the authentic and right thing to do to bring about real change in a system where losses for students, especially students of color, were so apparent.

In the year that followed the notorious fishbowl exercise, Central Middle School's administrators and staff embarked upon serious equity-improvement planning. They formed a transformation team, partnering with district racial equity leaders and the principal of Forest Hills. That team met regularly and drafted a plan that was significantly different than what had been in place in former years. They designed a strong, student-centered model that unearthed the many aspects of systemic racism and other institutional biases that perpetuated unequal opportunities for *all* students.

Later that year, when state standardized results came in, Central Middle Schools made unprecedented gains in both math and reading. The following year (AY 2010–2011), the school sustained those results and made additional small gains. Clearly, the fishbowl exercise and the district's efforts to move Courageous Conversations from theory to practice, as uncomfortable as they were, brought light and attention to a school in need of support and intervention. The key climate insight—navigating through tension transparently and openly, as opposed to isolating and shielding it—contributed to increased accountability, support, and results. In the 2011–2012 school year, Central's principal requested that his school be considered for the district's Beacon Program, so that it could be included among the schools that would receive focused support from PEG trainers to accelerate equity transformation. He was certain that his powerful and purposed E-team and CARE teams could bring on board the additional teachers and take advantage of the concentrated support and training to institutionalize their successes. That request was granted.

## A Focus on Data

The intensive training taught the district administrators and staff that another key to success and change was a disciplined approach to reviewing data. Student results, discipline data, transportation data, and survey data—were all disaggregated by subgroups (race and service groups). Even though this highly scrutinized approach to data review was new to the district, it was useful—and it worked! The district continued and improved both its summative and formative assessment practices. Staff took time to study all subgroups' progress throughout the year and at key points during the year.

A concentrated study of statewide assessment results became routine. The district began using the Northwest Education Association Measurements of Academic Progress assessments for Grades K–6 and reviewing progress for students three times a year. Teachers had current data in their hands regarding student progress all year long. As a result, they were able to adjust their teaching to further affect student results. Principals began hosting “teacher talks” about data in each and every classroom. Every teacher began meeting with his or her principal at least twice a year about the results they were seeing for their focal students. Principals had firsthand knowledge of each teacher's results and knew which students were targeted for improvement. Principals were also meeting two to three times each year with the superintendent and with the district assessment director, scouring school data and establishing short-term and long-term goals for school improvement.

Subsequently, the superintendent knew which schools were moving forward rapidly and which needed more support. In the end, all schools made gains, and some made serious and significant gains. Elementary schools, in particular, made leaps and bounds forward.

EPS embraced its administrative assessment leadership, and the assessment director, Ishmael Robinson, was asked to become a central figure in its organizational leadership. Without him, many of the needed reports and data points would have been lost. He strongly valued academic achievement for all and recommended strategies for each school principal and staff that would lead them toward better results. He spent hours in schools with staff and principals teaching them how to read, use, and understand data. Robinson, a former Twin Cities integration district student himself, developed a unique way of wrapping his own compelling personal narrative around the EPS data and engendering site leaders to embrace their responsibility to support their students on the margins.

The Mental Model of Equity was created in August 2011 to illustrate graphically the foundations, connections, and benefits of the equity work being done districtwide in Eden Prairie to eliminate the student achievement gap and the predictability of racial disparities in school. This model is presented in Figure 11.5.

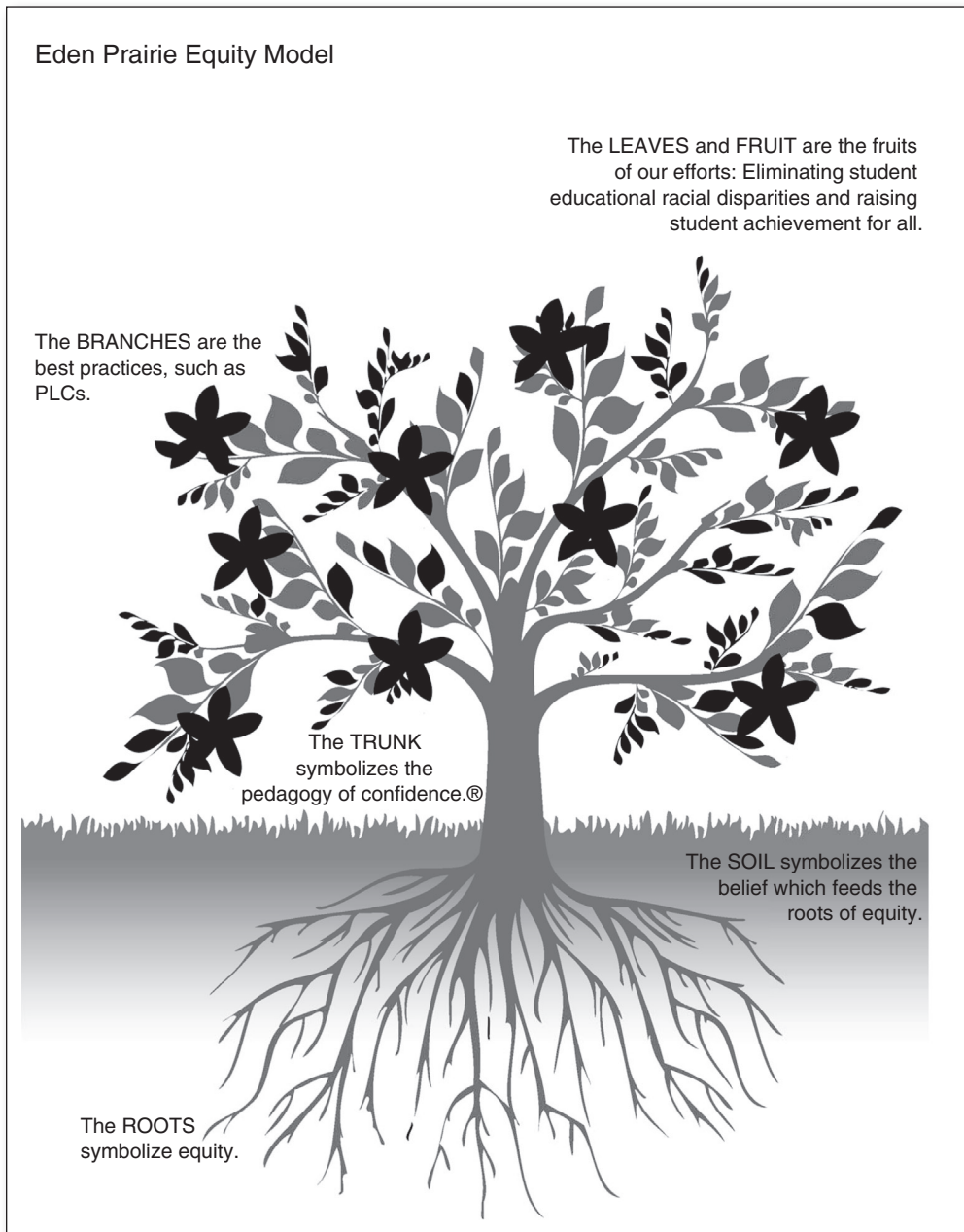
## THE RESULTS ARE IN: PROGRESS WAS MADE

After 7 consistent years of focus and attention, the district began to see results, and the results began to show growth for *all* EPS students—and a significant narrowing of the achievement gaps between students. By the 2011–2012 school year, the gap in reading between White and Black students had narrowed by 42 percentage points. Other notable gains were a 28% gain districtwide in reading for limited English-proficient (LEP) students, with specific elementary LEP gains of 37% in reading. Simultaneously, White students' proficiency continued to grow by 4%, putting them at 90% proficiency rates overall. Nearly every subgroup saw gains and progress in achievement.

The superintendent began intentionally talking about these results openly with members of the EPS staff, board, and community. She wanted staff to know that they could seriously improve the learning of the students they taught, and she wanted the board to know that their policies were indeed transforming the system. She wanted the community to know that their school district was making gains that had not yet been seen anywhere else in the country and that Eden Prairie was one of the top districts in the state to show progress toward the elimination of achievement gaps for students while also ensuring growth for *all*.

Figures 11.6 through 11.9 are important because they reveal that nearly every subgroup saw gains and progress toward the elimination of the achievement gap. They showcase the data results from the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCA), the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment-Modified (MCA-MOD), and the Minnesota Test of Academic Skills (MTAS) for reading and math. Each graph illustrates growth for each group. These summative measures were a means by which the district could determine if the instructional changes were making a difference in students' learning in math and reading. They also ensured that the entire system was held accountable and focused.

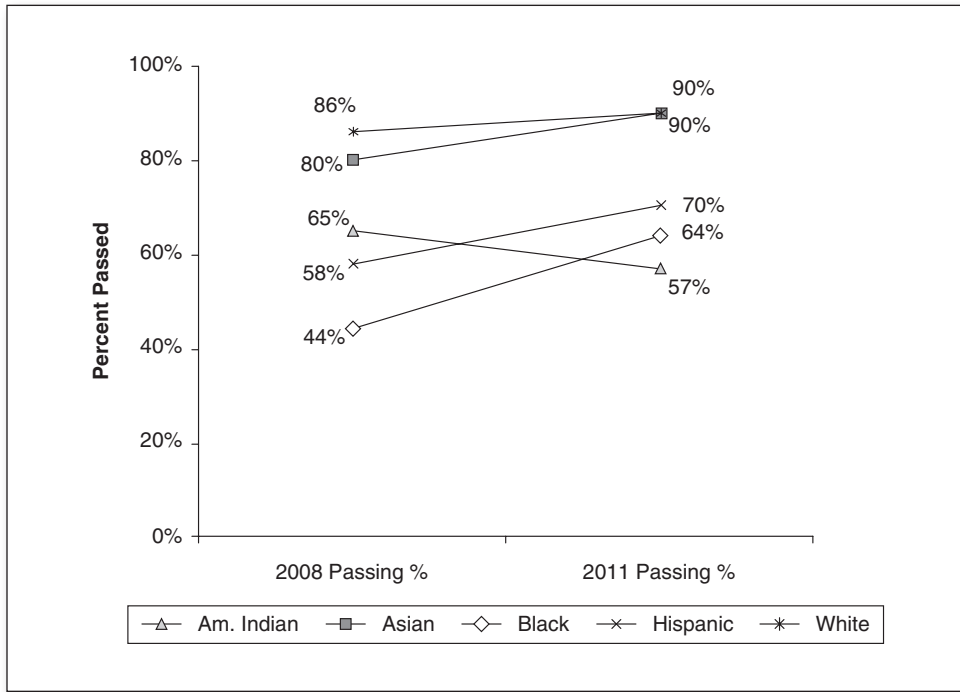
**Figure 11.5** Eden Prairie Schools Mental Model of Systemic Equity



Source: Created by Nanette Missaghi with illustration by Shaghayegh T. Missaghi. "Pedagogy of confidence": Jackson, Y. (2011). *Pedagogy of confidence: Inspiring high intellectual performance in urban schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.

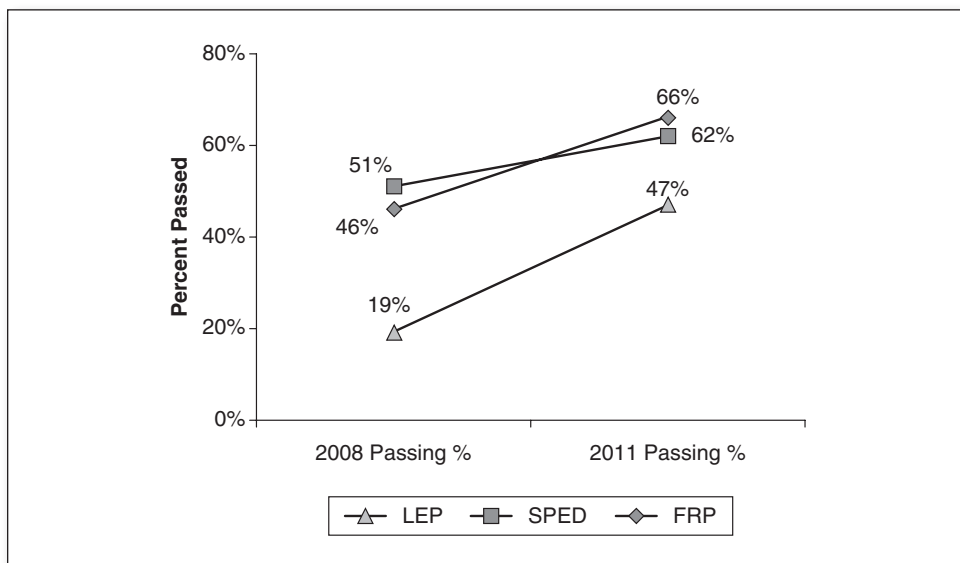


**Figure 11.6** Reading Results From 2008 to 2011, by Race



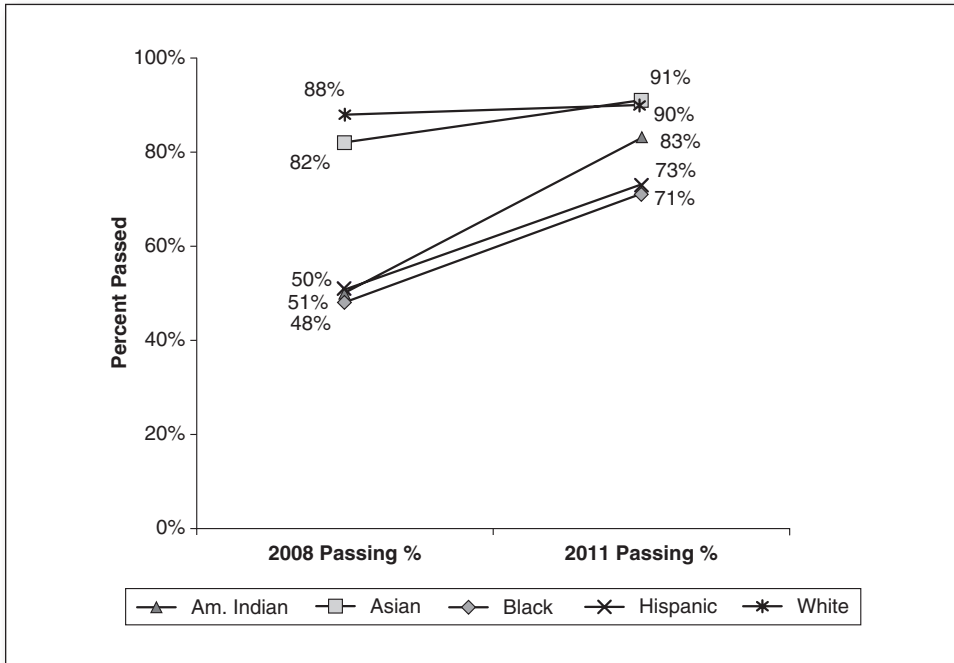
Source: Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCA), the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment-Modified (MCA-MOD), and the Minnesota Test of Academic Skills (MTAS).

**Figure 11.7** Reading Results From 2008 to 2011, by Service Group



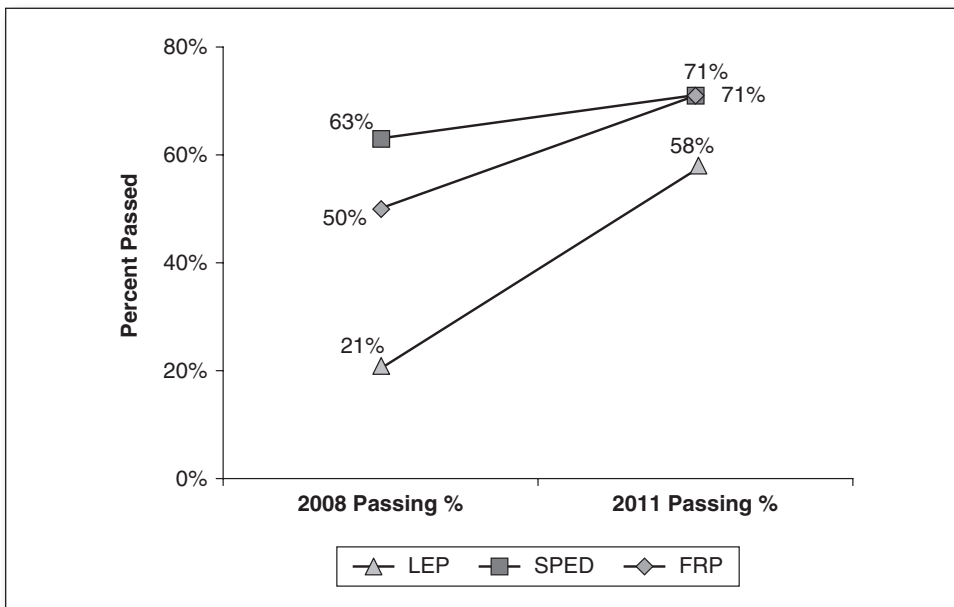
Source: Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCA), the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment-Modified (MCA-MOD), and the Minnesota Test of Academic Skills (MTAS).

**Figure 11.8** Grade 3–4 Reading Results From 2008 to 2011, by Race



Source: Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCA), the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment-Modified (MCA-MOD), and the Minnesota Test of Academic Skills (MTAS).

**Figure 11.9** Grade 3–4 Reading Results From 2008 to 2011, by Service Group



Source: Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCA), the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment-Modified (MCA-MOD), and the Minnesota Test of Academic Skills (MTAS).

## Final Step: Elimination of School Segregation While Navigating Resistance

Although serious progress was being made, new and important demographic changes continued to cause the superintendent and her staff to look closely at the racial and income balance in the district's elementary schools. Some elementary schools had low-income student enrollments between 9% and 12%, while others had numbers of these students nearing 50%. The difference between schools within the district was stark. The administration knew that the current rates of progress were noteworthy, but they also knew that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to sustain results like that without intentional elimination of the growing segregation.

Some EPS schools, they realized, were becoming increasingly segregated by student income level, while others were becoming largely White, segregated schools. Neither was good for learning. Students in schools with a high preponderance of low-income students were bound to suffer academically. The important progress that had been made was at risk unless the schools could be balanced by income.

In response, the superintendent and her team initiated a 2-year process to redraw the district's elementary school boundaries to balance the schools for space efficiency and student income level. Parents and staff were involved in this process; surveys were circulated, completed, and analyzed; and a systemwide communication plan was launched. After 2 years of study, communication, board involvement, and policy changes to support designation of the new boundaries, two maps recommended by the parents on the joint team were presented to the superintendent.

One of the two maps was chosen to present to the public for input. That map balanced the schools so that no more than a 7% difference in the number of low-income students per school would be allowed. About 1,000 students would have to change schools and attend schools that were no more than two or three miles from their current schools. Transportation costs would go down, not up, as a result.

Yet, in a community of no more than 6 square miles, where the bus rides resulting from this proposal would be, on average 22 minutes long, resistance emerged. The opposition to the plan, which was surprisingly significant, took the form of protests, petitions, lengthy board discussions, restraining orders, hostility, and lack of civility on the part of some community members. The Somali community offered a strong voice of support for the plan, however. They wanted their children to be in schools that offered the greatest opportunity. They knew that segregated schools meant less quality education for their children. The Somali voices were prominent, thoughtful, centered, and peaceful, and they persisted in expressing to the board their full support for this recommendation. The American Indian Parent Committee also wrote a letter of support to the superintendent after reviewing the map and transformation plan.

After months of board debate, media attention, lengthy public input sessions, and modifications to the proposal, the board voted 4–3 to support the decision to go forward with it. Following the vote, the superintendent and administration began the labor-intensive process of preparing for new schools that would mean greater opportunity and success for *all* students.

The boundary map went into effect fall 2011. The students were moved to their new schools without incident. Early reports indicate that the move has been a success. The kids are doing very well, and the students and families who needed the support the most won.

## Key Insights

The learning gained by the EPS superintendent and administrative team about equity transformation has been invaluable. The first imperative was leadership for racial equity, which must emanate and be exercised at all levels and ranks in the system, from the board of education and superintendent all the way to the beginning teacher and clericals. The second imperative was top-notch, antiracist principal leaders, who must drive the needed changes directly into the schools. Third was establishing a strong and dedicated district equity leadership team and an equity-focused staff to keep the entire system in antiracism perspective at all times. A fourth imperative was the district's investing in outside, credible, equity consultants as partners. These included PEG and NUA, whose skilled staffs provided guidance and direction when the predicted resistance was at its most fierce. Districts that engage in such partnerships have a serious chance at transformation. A fifth imperative was keeping a constant and persistent eye on the data at every level—district, building, and classroom—to keep a watchful eye on progress.

Sixth, it was critical to ensure that the entire system was involved and that a systemic approach was applied. Every single employee was touched by and held accountable to the district's equity transformation plan. Seventh, all of the key players kept the main thing *the main thing*. That is, all saw advancing equity as the primary goal, year after year, thus contributing to the plan's long-term sustainability. Eighth, it was critical to generate as much community support and outreach as possible, especially among White parents and stakeholders, to build a safety net and added layer of engagement for equity success.

And finally but important, we never forgot, *nor will we forget*, that, as Glenn Singleton said, "This work of achieving racial equity in education is an act of love."

## ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

After reading Chapter 11, which invites understanding of the progression and key processes of equity development in Eden Prairie Schools (EPS), consider these questions:

1. What insights did you gain about the dynamics and development of racial equity leadership, learning and teaching, and family/community of color empowerment?
2. In what ways does the racial equity work currently under way in your system align or disconnect with what you now understand to have taken place in EPS?
3. What lessons learned about leading for racial equity are now apparent to you, having become familiar with the work in EPS?

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## Voices From the Inside: Connie Hytjan

The story I am going to tell is about the school where I am principal, Forest Hills Elementary. Forest Hills is located in the northeast quadrant of Eden Prairie, a suburban community in the western suburbs of the Minneapolis metro area. Its location lends

itself to serving students in many lower- and middle-class, single-family homes as well as families who live in multi-housing complexes and rentals. In some social circles and in some instances, community members might say that the district transformation process occurred *because* of Forest Hills. In this fairly affluent community, Forest Hills was noted as “that school.” We were the school identified as being the most racially and socioeconomically integrated in the district. Last spring, our demographic information indicated our population was made up of about 55% students of color, mostly Black and Brown students, and 52% students who qualified for free or reduced-price lunches. We also served a very high number of Somali students. In the 16 years I have been at Forest Hills, we likely had the highest teacher turnover and the highest number of families who chose to “open enroll” in other districts around us; we were the school that had a “tainted” reputation among neighborhood residents and community members.

I began working in Eden Prairie Schools 16 years ago—and, to be honest, I didn’t even realize that I was beginning equity work when I moved here. I was hired in the district as the principal of Forest Hills.

On my first encounter with our district, I knew it was one that promoted an image of excellence and high achievement. I felt fortunate to be joining a district with such a strong and positive reputation. I soon learned, though, as I participated in administrative and other meetings that . . . we never expose the struggles or the difficult times. It was a known norm! In EPS, much like Lake Wobegon, all children were above average and life was almost perfect. There was definitely a “Minnesota Nice” culture of “When I’m angry at someone, I don’t let them know. I just smile pleasantly to his or her face and then proceed to talk about them behind their back. I will most likely hold a grudge, too.”

In 1996, when I arrived, our staff was made up primarily of White females, with a few White male teachers sprinkled in. Only one staff member in our school was a teacher of color; she was Asian American. Most of the teachers had 15 or more years of experience, and most of them were my age or older (at the time, I was 40). Only a few teachers were not tenured. There was very strong union representation in our school; one of the teachers had been instrumental in the strike held in the early 1970s, and he was proud to share the story with me during one of our first encounters. Most of the nonlicensed staff members were either parents with students presently in the school or parents of past students. The hiring of most of the nonlicensed staff had occurred with a “handshake” rather than a formal process for interviewing. I could tell early in my tenure at Forest Hills that varied “camps” (made up of licensed and nonlicensed staff) existed with opposing views about leadership, education, and relationships.

Following good leadership, I got acquainted with the processes and practices, both in our district and at Forest Hills. I observed and I did my own informal assessment of the culture of our school. I watched how colleagues interacted with each other, how parents were invited and welcomed, and how students were treated. I waited and gathered more and more information about our school, talking with those who had been working at Forest Hills for some time and those who had arrived only a few years earlier. I inherited my predecessor’s practices and began to make a few changes that reflected my beliefs about learning, teaching, and professional responsibilities.

*1. Stay balanced and centered—know yourself and the hill you will die on.*

I discovered after some time that many practices and interactions in our school actually promoted low achievement and a culture of toxicity. When I arrived, our

school demographics consisted of a student population of about 10% students of color and 8% students who qualified for the lunch program. While that doesn't sound very integrated today, or even at the time, it was the most integrated school in the district. Demographics over the past years had changed (and it continued to change over the many years to come), morale was low, and staff seemed to demonstrate being "victimized" by the fact that our school looked so different (demographically) from the other schools in the district. They seemed unaware of the impact that the school culture was having on their interactions, their performance, and our students' achievement.

2. *Be cognizant of the present conditions.*

We were faced with serious adult issues: there was a lack of trust among colleagues, administration, and parents; there were "parking-lot meetings" held regularly after staff meetings; teaching was considered a "private act" (the norm being that classroom doors were closed); little collaboration or teamwork existed; and teachers were competitive and created programs that they marketed as "better than" those of their colleagues. They displayed blatant disrespect toward each other during meetings or social times, and they regularly found excuses for their students' lack of achievement or poor behavior. Instead, they regularly blamed parents for their lack of involvement, or they blamed the child's home life. At that same time, our school continued to experience radical changes in our student demographics.

3. *Be courageous . . . and don't avoid the difficult conversations.*

I persevered and continued to personally reflect about "what I could do differently." I attended workshops on dealing with a difficult staff; joined a local principals' collegial organization to obtain ideas and support; read many, many books on creating a positive school climate; and consulted with the superintendent and other district colleagues. I knew I was not doing something right . . . and I tended to focus on the technical aspects of the culture, thinking that the small things I did through relationship building, being visible, writing notes of acknowledgment, and offering professional development opportunities or resources would help transform the culture of our school from one of negativity and desperation to one of optimism and hope.

One day, however, I remember thinking: "This is *absolutely* not working! The culture of our school is hurtful to our students and families. Our kids deserve better than this, and it is time I get serious in addressing the 'real issues' at hand!" I began having difficult conversations with individuals at the school. I addressed specific behaviors, conversations, and decisions I had observed and described the impact these things were having on our students, their colleagues, and the culture of the school:

- I had individual and private conversations about how this affected students (specifically students of color) by sharing the number of discipline referrals for Black boys that were coming to my office from teachers' classrooms. At one time, I can remember a teacher responding to me that I had called her a racist when I shared the data about discipline referrals coming to me from her classroom (12 of the 14 referrals made in one month were all students of color).
- I addressed teachers' negative and hurtful statements, such as "'They' (often meaning children of color) can't be in my classroom," "If only you [meaning me]

would discipline them better and change their behaviors," "If only their parents would get involved," and "Your job as the principal is to 'allow me to teach.'"

- I shared my concerns about teachers' unprofessional behaviors I observed that were unproductive to any teaching and learning environment (e.g., lashing out at their peers in public disagreement, calling someone out in front of parents).
- I had meetings with teachers who found ways to not make contact with parents who desperately needed to be consulted. Often, these teachers' excuses were, "I don't know how to use the Language Line" (that is, the parents don't speak English); "I tried calling [the parents], but they didn't call back. They won't come anyway."

All of the behaviors I observed and statements I heard I viewed as demonstrations of our staff's frustration over not being as successful as the teachers they had once been when they were teaching an entirely different demographic of students. I did know, however, that a great number of staff members were appreciative and supportive of the culture change I was attempting to make.

#### 4. *Get comfortable with being unpopular.*

Needless to say, I was not popular with many staff members at our school, and there were complaints and rumors about me that seeped into the local neighborhood and parent community. Petitions for my removal were passed around, board members were called, anonymous letters were mailed to the superintendent, disrespectful notes were left on my chair, and so on. Our superintendent, Dr. Krull, and I met with parents and board members. I acknowledged that I had not done everything the "right" way, but I assured them that I was "doing the right thing" for students and staff and that students would be the primary benefactors of the culture change.

#### 5. *Challenge the systems that seem to be barriers.*

Life was not getting any easier, and I was beginning to have other observations about systemic things that seemed to be questionable. When addressing these things, I may have seemed cantankerous, asking difficult questions about the distribution of Title I funds (which at the time were distributed equally among sites although our demographics were much different), use of compensatory state revenue, incestuous hiring practices, and so on—not necessarily posturing myself to be the most popular with my colleagues. I questioned the resource allocation given to the sites (based on enrollment rather than need), as I knew that funds for schools with our demographic should be available both federally and statewide. At the same time, and while all these conversations occurred, our test scores continued to fall, leaving our staff members even more frustrated and angry. I was beginning to feel isolated and alone, wondering how district officials would help a potentially failing school.

Many of my difficult conversations with staff resulted in staff leaving. A couple resigned, but many of them asked to transfer to other schools where they thought they could be more successful and no longer bothered by a principal who had the reputation of "asking for too much." To this day, I feel bad that those teachers left, and I feel failure in that I wasn't able to lead teachers who are challenged with change or feeling

a lack of competency. I was not proud of the fact that I was not able to support them in a way that they needed.

The teacher transfers only increased the Forest Hills community's wonderment of me. Questions arose, like, "Who is this principal that no one can work for?" and "Why are all the *good* teachers leaving?" It was said that my expectations were "unreasonable, that I asked too much of my staff," and that I openly talked about conflicts and concerns (and even directed staff to try solving their own conflicts before coming to me). It was definitely a culture clash for Eden Prairie and Forest Hills, specifically, where things like this were *not* talked about at this time.

#### 6. *Surround yourself with excellence.*

That some staff left provided me with an opportunity to begin hiring. I sought to hire staff of color (not an easy task in this suburban community). My goal was to increase our staff of color in hopes of one day having a staff demographic matching that of our student demographic. I knew it was an ambitious goal, but I recognized it to be a very important one.

I hired a young Hmong teacher, and immediately, this action met with resistance. Both parents and the new teacher's colleagues soon reported to me that her accent was too strong and she wouldn't be a good role model for children learning to read; her grammar was not proper and she was modeling inappropriate language; and her classroom reflected her culture (beautiful Hmong art and artifacts hung in her room), which was interpreted by some as "not American." If I could only remember the number of parents who requested their children be moved out of her classroom as well as the number of staff who came to me with their "concerns" about this teacher, who said they were only trying to give me a "heads up" of what other people in the community were saying.

These concerns were not so secret to our Hmong teacher, and I was very worried that she would leave. With coaching from me and mentoring from our veteran Asian American teacher, she remained at Forest Hills and flourished. At the present time, she is considered a very high-performing teacher-leader in our district. Two years ago, she was one of ten finalists for the Minnesota Teacher of the Year award.

So, the story continues. As a next step and as a response to the community's concern about Forest Hills, Dr. Krull and the school board hired a consultant to help Forest Hills "get healthy." This consultant held focus groups and consulted with me, sharing with me all my flaws of leadership, suggesting to me that I "stay curious," and encouraging me to create "safe places" for staff members to share their perspectives. Our staff participated, I participated, some engaged, and many others not so much. The consultant helped in that she provided me with a forum to share my feelings and emotions. Although I knew I was doing the right thing, it did not seem all that right at the moment. My emotions were on edge and I was becoming very worried.

I contemplated leaving our district, wondering if I could really ever help our school community overcome the "adult mess" that had been created. I continued to be concerned about our students, specifically the students of color, and the impact all these adult issues were having on their achievement. Our test scores were at an all-time low and the worst in the district. Parents and community members were concerned. They were calling me, meeting with me, waiting for answers about what we were going to do to turn this cycle around.



During this time, only the “loyals” and the “believers” stood by me, watching, waiting, and supporting. Those who had, in the past, been formally silenced—started speaking out. They who used to enable “unprofessional behavior” stopped enabling it. Those who were lacking in understanding about why the changes were necessary started noticing some positive results from the few changes that had been made. They were beginning to become convinced. Unfortunately, there were still those who remained challenged by the changes or by the drama of it. They continued their quest to keep the culture the same as it had been.

More teachers voluntarily transferred, and the buzz in the community got stronger. During my performance review that year, Dr. Krull and I agreed that no more teachers would transfer. I even had a performance goal indicating that!

*7. Hire well and tell the new hires why they were hired.*

In the meantime, I continued the work at Forest Hills—the work that I knew would make the most positive difference for students. I worked to find and hire teachers and staff who wanted to be at Forest Hills. I searched for professionals who reflected the demographics of our student population, who had high expectations for *all* students, and who had the heart for the work. I sought candidates who had the experiences that would contribute to our school community's success, the beliefs that would foster positive relationships with students and colleagues, and the passion and persistence it takes to work with a multiracial and multicultural demographic of students. By this time, about 30% of our student populations consisted of students of color.

As I hired, I continued to look for the “right people” in all roles in the school who shared a vision and beliefs that all students can learn and that it is up to the teachers and staff to create the conditions to ensure that they do. I readily continued to share my expectations of our work, the staff's role in the work, and our student focus. At this moment, our work as a team really began. In addition, staff members within the district who had been watching from afar began asking for transfers into Forest Hills. They were ready to join in on our journey.

Staff members who remained at Forest Hills became more open to sharing their expertise, were more collaborative, and began to assume leadership roles. Ideas were shared willingly, and when there were different perspectives, they were accepted rather than challenged disrespectfully. We absolutely experienced growing pains, and things were far from perfect, but it was becoming evident to all who remained that the culture of our school was influential to the success of its members.

*8. Understand the power of people.*

Many of our staff persevered and stayed the course with me, believing in the power of collaboration, relationships, partnerships, and high expectations. Attitudes over time shifted from “we can't do this” to “how can we do it, and when should we begin?” Students truly became the focus of our work. Adults became selfless in their work, recognizing their role as stewards and servers of students.

The really apparent part in our “new direction” was that we didn't have all the systems in place to ensure that students had what they needed to be successful. It became clear that disparities in achievement between our White students and students

of color still existed. Equity became a focus of learning and conversation for our staff, and our work with Glenn Singleton became foundational. An Equity Team was established and “intentional conversations” about race, the achievement gap, and culturally responsive teaching started happening. Still working rather independently, we recognized that we needed to do something different to make a bigger difference.

*9. Staying the course: The courage to act.*

Forest Hills School did not “turn around” overnight. Our test scores remained flat, and our parent community was struggling—lacking volunteers, working hard to promote a school with a negative reputation, having conversations with their neighbors who were hesitant about enrolling in our school, worrying about our fundraising abilities as compared to the other schools—and they begged that boundary lines be redrawn so we could basically “start over.” When a new Spanish Immersion school opened in our district, more White families left our school believing that their children would have more opportunity to attend with other students who looked like them (and with whom they could relate better) than they would at Forest Hills. Our student of color population percentage continued to increase. In the winter of 2007, the school board recognized Forest Hills’s demographic differences and, under the superintendent’s recommendation, charged Forest Hills with redesigning itself; the board also provided much-needed resources to accomplish the task. Immediately, we began a strategic planning process.

*10. Know when to lead and when to follow . . .*

The last 5 years have been a whirlwind. Our staff has embraced more changes than one can imagine. They are more introspective and reflective than any staff I could ever aspire to have had the privilege of working with. They are innovative, passionate about our students, stubborn about ensuring their success, and energized. We have put into place unbelievable programs—for teachers, for students, and for parents—and developed an inordinate number of teacher leaders. We have spent the last 5 years engaged in professional development, honing our skills as learners first so as to better serve our students as teachers. We have researched best practices, collaborated with colleagues and parents, analyzed data, confronted our weaknesses, and focused on our relationships with students. We recognize the importance of teamwork and persistence. We don’t take “No” for an answer, and we won’t let students fail. We recognize the importance of student goal setting and high student engagement. We value literacy and numeracy and the importance of social and emotional learning. We ensure that no student is isolated, and we engage in courageous conversations about race and the influence of White privilege. We take our students and their parents as they come—with little or no judgment, providing them what they need to be successful. And, we are still learning! One more important thing to note: We know we aren’t perfect or doing everything right!

I can’t take personal credit for any of this, but I am more than proud to share credit. As an outcome of our strategic planning, Forest Hills now:

- Has a consistent literacy model in place with common language and practices (including progress monitoring, encompassing a Response To Intervention

(RTI) framework; access to nonfiction, leveled text; scientifically based interventions; technology-based instruction, etc.);

- Has common classroom and consistent schoolwide protocols and practices (based on Responsive Classroom and Positive Behavior Intervention Systems);
- Regularly participates in teacher talks with me, program specialists, and other teacher leaders to talk about their classroom data, interventions, and programs;
- Has a well-developed social and emotional learning program and aligned practices in place, along with a coordinator to oversee the program;
- Has a family service center in place for families to come to participate in ESL classes, book clubs, and volunteer opportunities. The staff in that center is intentional about welcoming families to our school, ensuring that they have everything they need to be successful and involved (including child care so they can come to volunteer);
- Has extended-day experiences (both academic and co-curricular) for all students—with transportation provided—to ensure that *all* students have access to programs and experiences;
- Engages in common practices for student goal setting and frequent celebrations for student's individual and collective success;
- Participates in frequent Equity Walks to help inform us of the work yet to be done, specifically for our students of color.

#### 11. *Be humbly arrogant.*

In the spring of 2011, morale continues to be high at Forest Hills, and our students are doing well. We knew that the topic of Forest Hills becoming a “racially identifiable” school in our district continued to be discussed by the school board. We also knew that the students at Forest Hills were greatly benefiting from our integration, and we knew from our work with Glenn and our Equity Walks that students in the other elementary schools, while doing well, are experiencing some isolation and lesser achievement gains. For that reason and many more, our superintendent and administration began advocating for a district transformation—meaning boundary changes—to better balance the demographics of our schools. After much controversy, debate, discussion, and education, our board approved the boundary changes and called for the replication of Forest Hills programs. The day following the decision, the work of preparing for the transformation began.

#### 12. *Students first . . .*

Our staff had very mixed feelings about this. While they recognized the value of our demographic, they were also a little worried and sad. They mourned the loss of our students, hoping that their success would continue in their new schools. We prepared our many students for the changes to their new school, supporting them and reinforcing how good this would be for them to meet new friends and how excited their new teachers and friends will be to have them join them.

Meanwhile, angst and a spirit of resistance was felt in our community, and many of the families scheduled to come to Forest Hills and other elementary schools left the district to attend other community schools. Our staff did an amazing job of marketing

our school, reaching out to the community (and our new families) to share our programs and meet our staff. Many of the families who agreed to come to Forest Hills from other elementary schools came with reservation, knowing of our past test scores and community's perception.

*13. Acknowledge, celebrate, and remain optimistic: The work is never done.*

In the end, we lost over half of our students to other schools. While excited to invite our new students into Forest Hills, our staff misses our former students. As a staff, we continue to be excited about our work, approaching this new school year as an opportunity for our new learning as well as that of our students. We continue to focus on relationships as a foundational component in our work and promote a culture of high expectations, collaboration, and respect.

State testing results recently were published. As expected, our students did well and our school made Adequate Yearly Progress in all cells (although we all know that test scores are only one part of true student success). From 2008 to 2011, our reading scores for students in Grades 3 and 4 increased from 49% proficient to 73% proficient for Black students. At the same time, all subgroups, including White students showed gains. At Grade 4, our reading scores showed only a 12% gap between White students and Black students (with 39 Black students achieving at 82% proficiency and 65 White students achieving at 94% proficiency). It's true—our scores look pretty good—but we aren't done!

It has been quite a journey. I have learned a lot about leadership when engaged in equity work and about the things that must be in place for students of color to be successful in *any* school.

Connie Hytjan is currently the principal of Forest Hills Elementary School in Eden Prairie (Minnesota) Schools. She is White American.

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## ADDENDUM

The following overview was developed in 2008 to convey to EPS district leaders a schematic representation of the vision of equity with its accompanying goals and structures of support.

### Eden Prairie Schools Vision of Equity: District Overview 9.28.11

District Mission:

**Eden Prairie Schools Goal:**

To ensure the high academic performance of *all* learners



**Eden Prairie Schools Board Results Policies:**

*All* students will achieve academic excellence without racial predictability and graduate prepared for postsecondary options.



**WMEP/LEARN—Lead Regional Equity Work**



**DELT: Eden Prairie District Equity Leadership Team**

**Executive Cabinet**

**Role:** To lead, oversee, learn, and manage the dynamic processes of system-wide transformational change.

**Purpose:** The guiding team ensures successful systemic transformation. The team examines district policies, practices, structures, climate, and culture that may be barriers to equity and excellence and leads systemic change efforts that result in high levels of achievement for students of all races. It is also responsible for aligning and embedding the framework into the existing strategic plan and board goals to ensure all efforts are streamlined for optimal student achievement results.



**DELTA: Eden Prairie District Equity Leadership Team Advisory**  
**Role:** Serve as an advisory group that provides multiple perspectives to DELT, innovative ideas/programs, and Equity Team support.  
**Purpose:** The advisory team to ensure successful systemic transformation.



<i>Site E-Teams</i>	<i>Department E-Teams</i>
All school sites	Facilities and Safety, Food Service, Technology, Transportation, and ASC
Members—Principal and site members	Members—Department directors and site members
Role—Antiracist school leaders, led by the principal, who design and deliver professional development activities, which shift the culture of the school toward embracing schoolwide equity transformation	Role—Antiracist leaders who design and deliver professional development activities, which shift the culture of the department/site toward embracing districtwide equity transformation
Tasks—To practice courageous conversations, analyze achievement data, school improvement planning, create vision and establish goals, staff meeting facilitation, faculty/staff study group facilitation, literature circle facilitation, parent/student focus group facilitation, equity walk-through participation, develop equity “local” team and provide mutual support and appreciation	Tasks—To practice courageous conversations, analyze department data, climate improvement planning, create vision and establish goals, staff training facilitation, faculty/staff study group facilitation, literature circle facilitation, develop equity “local” team and provide mutual support and appreciation