GEORGE S. PERRY, JR.
WITH JOAN RICHARDSON   FOREWORD BY LARRY LEVERETT

EQUITY WARRIORS

CREATING SCHOOLS THAT STUDENTS DESERVE

CORWIN   learningforward

A JOINT PUBLICATION

Thank you

FOR YOUR INTEREST IN CORWIN

Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from Equity Warriors, by George S. Perry, Jr. and Joan Richardson.

LEARN MORE about this title!

CORWIN

Build an Equity Agenda: Student Data

INTRODUCTION

The problems of the world cannot possibly be solved by skeptics or cynics, whose horizons are limited by obvious realities. We need leaders who dream of things that never were and ask why not.

John F. Kennedy, 1963

The victories of good warriors are not noted for cleverness or bravery. Therefore their victories in battle are not flukes. Their victories are not flukes because they position themselves where they will surely win, prevailing over those who have already lost.

Sun Tzu, about 500 B.C. (Cleary, 1988)

Advancing equity requires vision and strategy. Equity warriors begin by having a vision of school systems as they want them to be. The vision drives them to ask questions about *what is* in order to take themselves and others on a journey to *what can be.* Equity warriors also know that it takes more than ideals to change the world. They begin by examining and understanding the situation they face, their assets, and their challenges. They act!

> *Equity warriors begin by having a vision of school systems as they want them to be.*

Equity warriors use their vision as a lens through which they examine systems by collecting and using qualitative and quantitative data. They examine data that tell the experiences and reality of students—who they are, what they know, what they see, how they are treated, and what they need. Equity warriors use data as the primary tool for naming the problem or describing the current reality. Doing so helps set the direction and share the vision that equity warriors hope to achieve. The willingness to see students in the data enables leaders and others to be ready and prepared for change and to surface potential allies and

(Continued)

(Continued)

opponents in the journey toward the vision. Knowing the allies and opponents equips equity warriors to identify strategies that will be effective in advancing equity.

Equity warriors use data as the primary tool for naming the problem or describing the current reality.

In naming the problem, equity warriors become more effective when they engage others in verifying the strengths of current efforts and challenges in facing existing problems. Data essentially say, "Don't take my word for it, see for yourself." Equity warriors use data to make a path and protect their vision from cynics and apathetic protectors of the current reality.

Data illuminate each situation and enable all stakeholders to understand the mission. Examining data enables educators to apply resources and talents where they will have the greatest effect, and it helps measure progress toward goals.

But getting to a place where data can play a significant role in moving toward an equitable system of learning involves far, far more than merely knowing which test scores to examine. Foolishly rushing in to erect data walls and dashboards without laying an appropriate foundation is a recipe for disaster.

There is no single vision of equity that can be applied uniformly across districts and schools. In Part I, equity warriors gather data to understand student experiences; learn how to analyze and name problems, allies, and assets; and identify tools for engaging in various contexts and assuming responsibilities. Using data effectively to assess current conditions requires knowing which politics, diplomacy, and warfare moves are available to equity warriors at the district and school levels—and to make moves in concert.

CHAPTER 1

District leaders define equity by knowing students and finding allies

👉 POLITICS: BALANCE CONFLICTS TO BUILD AN EQUITY AGENDA

Equity warriors know that to address systemic inequities deeply embedded in their organization—whether intended or not—they need to balance inherent conflicts among internal and external groups, and manage a change process. It is unrealistic in most cases to set the bar at resolving conflicts. Politics is an unending process, not a destination. We earlier defined politics as balancing conflicts to govern humans effectively. In the context of building an equity agenda, politics creates a balance that makes advancing equity possible.

Harvard Business School professor John P. Kotter (1996) studied change in large corporations and cautioned leaders to refrain from identifying solutions when starting a change process. Too often, the message is "here is the problem, and here is what we are going to do about it." District and school leaders are often assumed to know the solution and/or are expected to demonstrate leadership in order to direct the outcome. When leaders introduce the solution up front, they do not engage and do not convince. They do not build the trust necessary for those who are skeptical to think differently. They have not asked for help. They have asked for something to accomplish their objectives. They have not led—they have dictated.

Equity warriors work toward building a bold vision that may not unify all internal and external stakeholders but will set a direction for the work to move forward. Building a vision requires maintaining the "just right" balance between guiding and distancing themselves from the process. Equity warriors know not to try to impose their vision. After all, they are not solely responsible for the schools, districts, and communities where they work. They are part of a whole. At the same time, equity warriors are not seeking consensus. Too often, leaders find that waiting for everyone to be on board allows a small minority to stand in the way of advancing equity. Creating momentum with the intent of building a critical mass is enough to launch a meaningful equity agenda. Equity warriors move to a bold vision by creating the opportunity for each of us "to be touched, as surely they will, by the better angels of our nature" (Lincoln, 1861). To begin, equity warriors must understand the parameters of the situation in which they operate.

YOUR MOVE: KNOW THE DANGERS INHERENT IN USING ACHIEVEMENT GAP DATA.

Effective governance requires balancing conflicts and is key to political success. Decisions about using limited resources

introduce inherent conflicts between and among groups. Nobody can have everything all the time, which means that leaders make multiple decisions about who receives resources and when.

In public education, a fundamental conflict that plays out continuously is answering the question about the best way to accelerate student success—particularly the differences in closing achievement and opportunity gaps. Equity warriors use data to shine a light on problems. But they analyze the community's readiness to receive the data and then decide where to point the light and whether the light is a spotlight (pointed at specific data) or a floodlight (examining all data). They understand the importance of crafting their message along with data to shed just the right amount of light on the right problem at the right time. Not for the faint of heart!

National efforts have failed to avoid the dangers of not balancing conflicts effectively. Starting with the enactment of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965, there has been a political tension around measuring the effect of federal dollars on student achievement for children who live in poverty. Congress and presidents have questioned whether federal funds—although rarely more than 10 percent of total spending on public education—yielded results. Through succeeding decades, political parties embraced either an opportunity gap or an achievement gap approach to federal policy and spending decisions. The difference is important.

Those who see *opportunity gaps* believe federal dollars would be best spent leveling the playing field for students. Students living in poverty should have access to conditions for success—instructional resources and high-quality instructors—just as much as their more privileged peers. Federal funding would provide for professional learning, libraries, school meals, and additional services to multilingual learners and students with disabilities.

Those who see *achievement gaps* believe federal dollars would be best spent identifying the problem, applying resources, and holding people accountable. Testing would identify the learning needs of students, which would enable teachers to attend to the gaps. Government would set the standards to be met, provide tools to measure progress toward the standards, and help schools—through state education agencies—use the tools to define the learning needs of students and create a plan to address the needs. Government would apply sanctions (a softer term than punishments) to schools that fail to close the gaps.

The 2002 reauthorization of ESEA that was No Child Left Behind (NCLB) brought together the opposing views by providing an additional $14 billion or a 34 percent increase in federal funding for testing, high-stakes accountability, and teacher development. NCLB made more money available for improving the conditions for learning while also ramping up accountability measures. In essence, the federal response was to forge a compromise and attempt to close opportunity and achievement gaps. Generations will live with the results of that compromise.

Certainly, NCLB cast a spotlight on schools that did not serve students well in a way that had not happened in many places previously. Around that time, the principal of the largest underperforming middle school in an urban district told me her superintendent had not visited her school once during her five years as principal. The superintendent confirmed that he devoted his time to issues at schools serving politically savvy middle- and upper-middle-class parents and communities. He knew they were holding him accountable. He also understood that NCLB changed the game by giving voice to underserved families that did not have political capital.

The NCLB compromise created many problems for advancing equity. Let's look at two fundamental political problems.

The first political problem is that closing achievement gaps pits winners against losers and creates conflicts over limited resources of attention, time, and money. Closing achievement gaps assumes the government will provide objective measures of proficiency on grade-level, standards-based work. But the achievement standard is typically set by the performance of Asian and white students. Educators can close the gap in only two ways: by increasing the performance of students at the bottom or decreasing the success of students at the top. In some places, there is real fear that equity warriors are actively contemplating the latter. That fear sometimes manifests itself in arguments claiming that resources will be diverted from those who are doing well to those who are not. Sometimes, the arguments include blaming or claims that resources are wasted on the undeserving. But, if more money is not the answer, then what is the point of arguing?

The second political problem is that identifying racial/ethnic groups at the top and those at the bottom can reinforce established stereotypes and undermine trust in data and those who provide them. Let us be clear: Exposing racial predictability in systems is critical to naming the problem to solve. Equity warriors must not back away from exposing systemic racial or class bias and

must continue to name each student group by disaggregating data. Educators and policymakers must not revert to a time—as was the case before NCLB—when disaggregating data was against the law in some states. That practice was intended to hide the reality that public schools were not serving all students equally.

Stereotyping based on performance data is present when it confirms our biases or perspectives that students of color and students living in poverty underperform, and that white and Asian students perform at higher levels. It is a stereotype consistent with what has been taught or learned. Reactions to data that confirm stereotypes include acceptance, guilt, blame, and anger—to name just a few. Equity warriors should anticipate different and multiple reactions even when results confirm accepted stereotypes.

Depending on our lens, disaggregating performance data also can result in mistrust of the performance measures themselves. If the results confirm our perspective, we accept the legitimacy of the measures; if not, we challenge the results. For example, educators express very legitimate concerns about test administration. Did students take the test seriously? Is the assessment valid? Were students taught the assessed content or skills? What is the cut score, and how was it determined? What can we do after we learn the results? Will we receive them in a timely manner and be able to act on them? In other words, educators often believe that assessments don't measure what students know.

What happens when performance results do not match our perceptions of who "should be" at the top? Psychologist Donald T. Campbell (1976) captured this idea in what came to be known as Campbell's Law: "The more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor" (p. 49). In other words, when the target is wrong, people will game the system. In service of equitable outcomes, well-intentioned federal, state, and district leaders set targets for graduation rates, grade point averages, and suspension rates. The higher the stakes, the more likely that processes used for positively affecting the results will be corrupted. We have seen this law play out in states and districts when the results were considered wrong. Either the test is flawed or cheating occurred.

Atlanta Public Schools, a school district of 51,000 students in Georgia, exemplified these fundamental problems.

Equity warriors must not back away from exposing systemic racial or class bias and must continue to name each student group by disaggregating data.

The central office of Atlanta Public Schools is housed in an exceptional building completed in 2005. Called the Center for Learning and Leadership, the building is designed to be functional and efficient. It is home to central office functions that were once scattered across the city and is a central location for professional learning. Fostering collaboration and learning are key themes reflected in the design throughout the building. Each floor contains work and meeting rooms where cross-functional teams can meet, plan, and work together. The building design is one of the symbolic ways that Beverly Hall, superintendent from 1999 to 2010, made her priorities known.

Large posters with bar graphs adorned the walls of the cabinet meeting room on the top floor of the building, adjacent to the superintendent's office. Each poster displayed information about one of the superintendent's performance targets and showed how each school in the district did against the district performance target over the past three years. This is the room where Hall met with principals and teachers and with visitors from outside the district.

These prominently displayed posters were intentional. First, the posters let all visitors, particularly those within the district, know that the superintendent valued school performance on the targets established by the district. The posters were kept up to date, which also demonstrated that the superintendent was carefully watching schools and their performance. In case visitors were not clear, Beverly Hall was known to refer to the posters to make a point during a meeting. She was conversant about each school and each performance target and expected the same from those who worked in the district—particularly those who worked in the schools displayed on the walls. Finally, the performance targets were present to remind visitors that the superintendent was being transparent. Those in the district—central office leaders and managers and principals—were well aware that their performance and their annual bonuses were tied to the performance of schools on the wall, as was the superintendent's performance and bonus. There were years in which Hall did not receive a bonus because the district's performance had not met expectations. There were many more years when she did. Improving student performance was not only business, it was personal.

Atlanta became a success story, and Beverly Hall was recognized as a champion of underserved students. She was named National Superintendent of the Year in 2009 and credited with transforming the school district. Student performance on state tests increased. Principals had three years to ensure that their schools met the

growth target set by the district. If the school did not meet the target, the principal was removed.

Then, in 2011, special investigators found that 178 teachers and principals at 44 schools had cheated by changing student answers on state tests; 82 ultimately confessed to cheating during the investigation. The Fulton County prosecutor indicted 35 educators on charges stemming from the cheating scandal. Twenty-one Atlanta educators reached plea deals, and 11 were convicted of racketeering charges in 2015 (Kasperkevic, 2015).

In the beginning, Atlanta was a beacon of hope for those of us who believed in the power of standards-based systems to improve opportunities for underserved students. It was the exemplar of an achievement gap–closing district that used accountability systems to benefit students. Gains made by students began to debunk the myth that poor, inner-city Black students could not overcome conditions and achieve at high levels. The symbolism of making progress in Atlanta, so influential in the civil rights movement and the burial place of Martin Luther King Jr., was not overlooked. Its promise was that a tough-minded leader who believed it could be done with a "take-no-prisoners" approach was all that was needed for success.

The Atlanta story is sad on many levels. In fairness, Beverly Hall, who believed strongly in creating an accountability-based system in service of underserved students, passed away before she had the opportunity to defend herself against charges that she knew cheating occurred. Nevertheless, the Atlanta story and similar stories on a smaller scale in other school districts seemed to support Campbell's Law and the political pressures that can occur when groups are pitted against each other. When corruption was found in Atlanta, it further reinforced the myth that students in that district could not be successful unless cheating was involved. As we will discuss in later chapters, competition or setting the dichotomy of winners and losers does not advance equity.

Community members and parents continue to be interested in achievement data that can show a return on their investment. Yet, interest seems to be waning. Take the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), known as the nation's report card. The NAEP is administered in every state that receives federal Title I funding. The test identifies representative

samples of students at random, and authorized monitors in controlled environments administer assessments that measure student knowledge against national frameworks. Nothing compares to the objectivity and comparability of these results. Nevertheless, even in districts that have shown and tried to celebrate growth compared to other districts, there is little fanfare. There are other examples. Massachusetts students have some of the highest scores on what is considered a rigorous state assessment—results that compare favorably on international metrics. Yet communities and parents continue to complain about the student performance of Massachusetts public schools.

Even though community interest in the achievement gap is diminishing, it is still a political problem for equity warriors to manage. When to use a spotlight or a floodlight depends on a calculus of anticipated reactions. Waning interest in understanding achievement data provides an opportunity for rebalancing the achievement gap conversations. We will discuss how equity warriors can reframe the conversation after we examine opportunity gaps more closely.

YOUR MOVE: DEFINE EQUITY USING OPPORTUNITY GAP DATA.

Knowing how much the community believes in closing the achievement gap or how much it believes in closing the opportunity gap is important to the equity conversation and ultimately the political survival of district initiatives.

Those who advocate for closing opportunity gaps perceive the problem as a glass half full. They believe the equity agenda for student success is achieved by applying resources where there is the greatest need. Doing so gives all students access to conditions for success. As with closing achievement gaps, closing opportunity gaps creates problems for equity warriors. Let's look at two fundamental political problems: creating consensus on what we mean by equity, and adopting strategies that advance an equity-of-opportunity agenda. Let's start with defining equity.

Defining equity through opportunity gaps is even more difficult than defining equity through achievement gaps. That's because opportunity gaps are more subjective and contextual. There is agreement on baseline conditions necessary for student success, such as teachers, learning materials, and time. Baseline conditions vary widely across the country and among communities within each state and region. So, the hard questions about closing opportunity gaps are these: What are the opportunities that matter? And how much opportunity is enough?

Equity warriors take on the challenge of answering these questions by leading the community in defining equity. Writing a definition of equity is about more than just reaching consensus about a goal. Defining is about understanding and building common language to facilitate discussion, listening, and being able to alter one's perspective. The process of writing the definition also surfaces a range of perspectives about equity. Having that information is crucial to move forward.

In every district we know, reaching consensus on a definition of equity takes time. One of the great challenges in defining equity is that stakeholders who are trying to write a definition are aware of how that definition will affect the expectations for their work. In other words, people often anticipate the implications of a definition before they settle on the definition. As a result, conversations become circular—almost like having a meeting to schedule a meeting about the need to have a meeting. Equity warriors persevere to push through the definition phase. Writing a definition is exhausting work and will be doomed to failure unless equity warriors are committed to seeing it through. What hope is there to advance equity if people can't even agree on a definition?

DEFINE EQUITY FOR YOUR DISTRICT

The process for defining equity depends on the district context and experiences.

Use your equity lens to

- Identify a guiding coalition of key stakeholders and influencers, including students

- Deepen understanding of the system's strengths and obstacles by selecting and reviewing data that tell the story of student experience

- Name the problem to be solved and strategic opportunity gaps

- Define an equity outcome that is clear, sensible to the head, and appealing to the heart

- Name metrics as part of your definition that measure progress toward your outcome

Educators often defer to how external players define equity of opportunity. The definition that says students need more to succeed is a definition that gets more play in state and federal decision making that results in more funding for students based on income, language proficiency, and disability. Decision makers accept that it is more costly to educate students who require more time or specialized services, or who are otherwise dependent on school for learning, enrichment, or basic needs of food and safety. More funding and supports are available to students designated at-risk. Compliance with state and federal requirements is not the only reason district leaders make more resources available to designated students. District leaders recognize a sense of obligation to do the right thing for students. School board members in more affluent districts, for example, often provide additional services to students with disabilities from a sense of obligation to doing the right thing, rather than from compliance—and often in response to activist parents able to tell their story.

But, similar to our achievement gap discussion, this approach pits groups against one another. Where there is a "how-about-me" ethos, more advantaged families advocate for special considerations for their children. Sports, arts, cocurricular activities, and gifted and talented programs are the result of balancing interests. It is not just families. Educators often resent Title I schools because they have more discretionary resources than non–Title I schools. Some school boards "adjust" funding formulas to include more schools in the Title I pool, which decreases dollars for schools with the neediest populations. Fair student funding formulas that are weighted toward school-dependent students are not universally in place. Even in middle- and upper-middle-class communities, when economic times are tighter, generosity tightens too.

Equity warriors have been successful using two strategies to advance an equity-of-opportunity agenda. Both strategies begin with gathering data on opportunity gaps, and both propose outcomes that are measurable. Implicit in each is how they define equity of opportunity.

The first strategy is universal access. To counter the resentments and increase the odds for sustainability, opportunity gaps measures are more likely to remain in place when there is universal access. Federal and state laws and regulations and local programs providing supports to students with disabilities are sustained even though the costs continue to consume higher percentages of district budgets. Of course, there is pushback on increased spending that affects opportunities for general education students. Opponents of increased spending focus on controlling expenses, improving efficiency, and demanding full funding from state and federal governments—they rarely say they want to deny services.

Similarly, universal pre-kindergarten (preK) programs, like those in New York City, are built on the political reality that sustainability is more likely if all parents have a common interest, even those who could afford such programs. It makes sense that children, particularly those whose first language is not English or who do not have access to enrichment activities, are better prepared for success in kindergarten if they have attended a preK program. Making pre-kindergarten available to all increases the odds that it will be considered a right, not a privilege, and will be available to those most in need.

The second strategy holds harmless and advances opportunities for more advantaged families while providing additional supports to school-dependent students. The Montgomery County (Maryland) Public Schools (MCPS) *Our Call to Action: Raising the Bar and Closing the Gap* provides an example.

Our Call to Action took a comprehensive look at the academic performance of students and showed the disparities within one of the wealthiest and largest school districts in America. As Superintendent Jerry Weast framed the question:

> [W]hat do you do if 75–80 percent of all [Black and Latinx] students live in a well-defined geographical area, 75–80 percent of all poverty is in that same area, 75–80 percent of all students learning English are in that same area, and disproportionately lower student performance occurs across the same geographical area? What do you do when that same geographical area includes more than 67,000 students, the equivalent of the 53rd largest school district in the nation, and the poverty rate of kindergarten is 50 percent and growing? (Childress et al., 2009, p. 34)

One part of the strategy was to structure a win-win situation by setting a universal target that resonated with the community. The target, referred to as the North Star, was readiness for college and high-wage work. While many leaders frame aspirational goals, Weast and his colleagues defined the milestones along the way that students would need to meet to be ready. The milestones, *Seven Keys to College Readiness*, were

- advanced reading in grades K–2;

- advanced reading on the Maryland State Assessment in grades 3–8;

(Continued)

(Continued)

- advanced mathematics in grade 5;

- Algebra 1 by grade 8, "C" or higher;

- Algebra 2 by grade 11, "C" or higher;

- 3 on AP exam, 4 on IB exam; and

- 1650 SAT, 24 ACT (Childress et al., 2009, p. 128).

This part of the strategy was intended to increase accountability vertically and horizontally across the district. Being explicit about the benchmark served to arm parents—those able to be more actively engaged in supporting their children as well as those who are more school dependent—with knowledge that can push conversations with educators about whether students are on track for success. This approach assumes that more actively engaged parents would push their children's schools, and that teachers and schools would push accountability vertically. For example, if a district expects all students to participate in advanced mathematics in grade 5, grade 5 teachers are more likely to push vertically to ensure that teachers prepared students to be ready for advanced work. Counting on parents and more effective schools to do their part, district staff could focus attention on schools that served school-dependent students.

Another part of the MCPS strategy was the superintendent and board's guarantee that district per-pupil spending levels would remain the same for students outside of the high-poverty areas (Green Zone). While schools in the Green Zone would be in effect held harmless, the district would increase per-pupil spending to schools in the high-poverty area (Red Zone), along with increased accountability. At least in the short term, the district had addressed the fear of loss among more affluent families.

Reaching consensus and acting on resource distribution so that students have what they need to be successful is not enough. It is not enough because that approach operates from a deficit model: It suggests that district leaders are doing for students who can't do for themselves. Of course, students need support. Students who don't enter kindergarten able to read need more support than students who do. Students who live in temporary housing need more support than students who do not have obstacles preventing them from attending school each day.

However, equity warriors must be vigilant in defining equity to challenge the implicit and explicit messages that students and their families who attend our schools are "less than"—that we are here to take from ourselves in order to save them from miserable and horrible conditions, and give them a chance. Although well-intended, those of us who entered the field of education—as we did—to provide all students the same opportunities we hoped to provide for our children miss the point that students need to be understood for who they are, not who we want them to be.

This is a tricky proposition. K–12 education may be the only social system Americans experience in common across our nation. Its intent from the beginning is to inculcate—some say indoctrinate—generations of Americans into a common culture by providing opportunities to encounter, respond to, and be appreciated by others. Schools articulate what we should know and how we demonstrate our knowledge and skills, and they reinforce behaviors appropriate to living in a democratic society. Educators and everyone else have argued over who should control learning, but communities still end up in control by default.

Defining equity is about how the district chooses to talk about students. District-level equity warriors recognize that any deficit model creates winners and losers and therefore is not sustainable. Equity warriors recognize and celebrate each and every student—and mean it. Yet, that is one piece of the puzzle. Actions matter. Leading the community through the process of defining equity creates an opportunity for educators, families, and students to learn together as they develop common language.

Equity warriors recognize and celebrate each and every student— and mean it.

It is not easy, in the day-to-day of teaching and working with students, for educators to reflect on biases—everyone has them—and to engage others. Yet by doing so, students and families have the opportunity to be partners in learning and in advocating for a system that works. By valuing students and families, we know them.

YOUR MOVE: CREATE METRICS THAT MATTER.

There is a lot to learn from the successes and stumbles of other equity warriors. Our starting point included a heavy emphasis on achievement data. We used data to ask questions about the data and hoped the answers would yield solutions. District and school leaders, over time, convinced us that while data are important, they really did not want to spend a lot of time

on naming the problem. They thought they knew the problem. They certainly knew they had a problem, or we wouldn't be talking.

We have come to understand that the right data set the direction, and we should focus on programs and practices that are yielding the results we desire. Frankly, we know that many of the programs and practices employed to address achievement gap measures do not have the desired effect. Yet, we keep doing them. What is the reason? There is no simple answer. Maybe we are pleased with the results because they align with our expectations, although they are not the results others are measuring.

Before NCLB, Hayes Mizell, a friend and mentor, once asked a room of Corpus Christi, Texas, educators, if there were no state assessment, what measures would they use to demonstrate student progress to the public (Mizell, 2002). Across the room, you could hear anxious muttering. Mizell went on to ask, would educators ever do the right thing for the right reasons? The room was tense. He went on to explain that schools and districts would need to begin to accept responsibility for student outcomes if they wanted to be free of external agents setting the outcomes and the measurements. In addition, schools and districts would need to make tough choices and take action when they failed to make progress toward the outcomes. Only when schools were responsible and showed they would take action would educators gain public confidence.

Can equity warriors rally the community to support an equity agenda?

Mizell's question came from one who was well informed. As a civil rights leader, he operated with a moral compass evident to everyone he touched. As the education program officer for the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, he directed the spending of nearly $90 million in a few large urban districts for more than a decade to promote middle-level school reform. He spoke with confidence of leading a major initiative over time in different urban districts. But, after a decade of helping schools with large percentages of underserved students, he was also frustrated that educators were not taking the lead to be responsible.

This remains the question. What metrics and data will convince the public that public schools are successful? For equity warriors, the politics of determining the measures is the nub of the question. District leaders know that with community planning and a clear strategy, they can rally the majority of voters to support funding for school building or technology upgrades, even in tight economic times. Can equity warriors rally the community to support an equity agenda?

This all points to the role of district leaders in creating the narrative by framing what is most important for the district and why. Rather than telling the story in student performance data, *equity warriors tell the story in terms of conditions of success.* What messages are compelling to parents and the community? What promises is the district willing to make to each and every student about the outcomes of a preK–12 education? What data can best tell the story? Here is where elevating student data is most effective.

We learned a lesson several years ago, in working with district leaders to create data dashboards to show students' progress on multiple measures. We convened a group of politically active parents who were engaged in the district. These were the go-to parents. We demonstrated the dashboard and how the community and families would access data on several indicators. We were convinced that we would build confidence in the district's agenda. The parents were engaged, respectful, and quiet. At the end, we pulled a parent aside and asked for her candid reaction. She said the data system was "nice," but all she really wanted to know is whether her son was on track to graduate and be prepared for college. The dashboard could not answer that question for her.

Similarly, when we were interviewing parents for a candidate in Boston's mayoral election about a contentious issue—expansion of charter schools—we heard clearly that charter schools were not an issue for families. Families wanted their children to attend a good school, but they didn't care whether the school was a charter school or a traditional public school or whether they needed to transport their children to another part of the city. They preferred to have their children in a neighborhood school, but "good" trumped distance or structure every time.

For too long, actually starting in 1983 with *A Nation at Risk*, many players have approached change by creating disequilibrium. These players suggest that public education is a problem to be solved and that they have a solution to fix it. Proponents of various sorts of change have successfully generated significant increases in federal, state, and local dollars for public education. They have encouraged alternatives to traditional public schools. This strategy has not made us feel any better about our public school system, and it hasn't produced substantial or sustainable change. That is a shame.

Equity warriors know that they must be successful in balancing conflicts if they want to lead their community's equity agenda. To do so effectively, equity warriors understand the

Equity warriors know that they must be successful in balancing conflicts if they want to lead their community's equity agenda.

conflicts that arise through attempts to close achievement and opportunity gaps; they build strategies that are right for their communities and their agenda; and they create metrics and a narrative that is personal, relevant, and honest for their communities.

REFLECTION: *What are the conflicts you, as a district equity warrior, confront? What are the parameters in surfacing your community's achievement and opportunity gaps? What is your definition of equity based on your context and data?*

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

DIPLOMACY: BUILD A CRITICAL MASS OF SUPPORT FOR ADVANCING EQUITY

As important as it is for equity warriors to identify and collect the most compelling data and to resolve conflicts to frame the narrative, diplomacy—the processes of dealing with people in a sensitive and effective way—is essential to preparing an organization's culture to achieve the vision.

Diplomacy is the process through which equity warriors ensure that meaningful, long-term change happens. Two of the three tools of diplomacy—rewards and consequences—are fundamentally transactional. For example, district leaders use