Transitioning to a New Future with Equity-based MTSS

Based on *Equity-Based MTSS: Transitioning to a New Future* with Dr. Hollie Peterson and Dr. Amy Jablonski, presented at Impact Learning and Leading Group's *Reopening America's Schools: Seizing the Opportunity to Reimagine K-12 Education* Virtual Summit

Introduction

School closures due to the COVID-19 virus have presented schools with the responsibility to make unprecedented decisions, and have brought many deep-seated equity issues in the U.S. education system to light. Now, more than ever, it is evident that outdated, one-size-fits-all approaches to education exclude the most vulnerable students, creating an education system where student outcomes can far too often be predicted by race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, language, and ability.

Schools' reopening creates a unique opportunity to examine school practices, policies, and protocols, to let go of what isn't serving students, and to focus efforts on planning with equity at the center of the work. Students, families, communities and staff have changed. The system and supports must change.

The Equation for Equitable Schools

In order to create a future that is more equitable for everyone, educators must understand who is in their schools, what they can do based on their strengths and needs, and how they can do it.
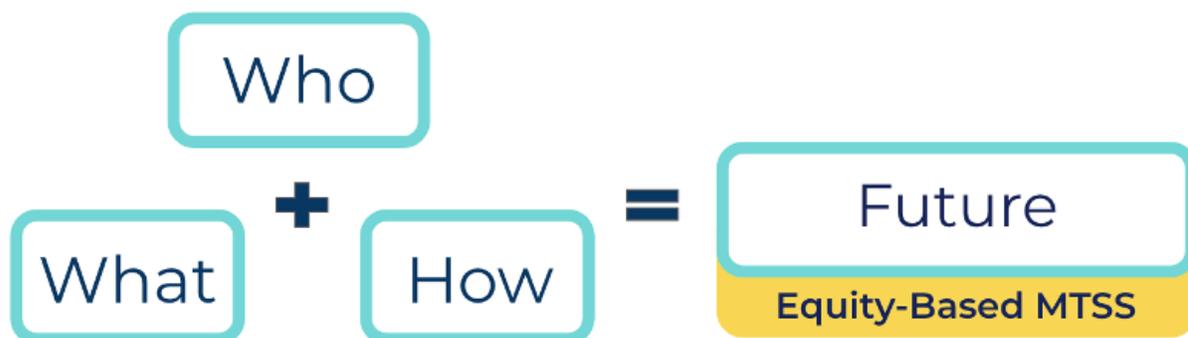
Who

Students, staff, and parents in today's schools span four generations, each with their own strengths, needs, and lived experiences.

Adults
Adults who provide school services include "Boomers" (aged 55-73), "Generation X" (aged 39-54), and "Millennials" (aged 23-38). Each generation experiences unique social and historical events that shape their collective values and ideals, and today's students are no exception.

Students
Presently, all students belong to "Generation Z" (aged 7-22). Their generation is accustomed to the internet, information and entertainment available on demand, and communication and connection through technology. They are a politically active generation, and attend protests for causes they believe in. Unfortunately, they also experience intensified stress about topics in national news. In school, they have been subjected to intense preparation for standardized tests and, as a group, have witnessed more gun violence in schools than any other generation. Data from the 2007-2017 National Youth Risk Behaviors Survey shows that students are stressed, with reports of risk behaviors associated with mental health increasing each year. Equitable schools must meet the mental health needs of students, including those who have experienced both individual and collective trauma.

U.S. schools are built on historical concepts and traditions that no longer align with what today's students are accustomed to. Generation Z has distinct strengths that must be leveraged to best meet their needs. They are the most diverse generation yet, and for them, diversity is an expectation. They are entrepreneurial thinkers who value evidence, having always had information at their fingertips. Despite having access to such technology, human interaction matters to Generation Z, and they are motivated by the opportunity to be a part of the human experience.

What

Equity-based multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) creates a school environment where all students, staff, and families are invited, welcomed, understood, and feel a sense of belonging. MTSS is proactive, strengths-based, and builds the capacity and stamina of the entire school community to persevere in problem solving and advocating for equity-based policies and practices until race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, language, and disability no longer predict learning and life outcomes for students. Equity-based MTSS involves implementing policies, practices, and protocols that increase opportunity, access, voice, and representation and engagement of all stakeholders, and creating systems of learning to which all students have access. Multiple tiers meet the needs of all students, and a system of support allows for the organization of instructional resources to create a school in which students, staff, and families thrive.

How

As schools prepare to re-open for the new school year (virtually or in person), there is a unique opportunity to rebuild the education system with the most vulnerable students at the center. Retrofitting the outdated system to meet their needs is impractical, unsustainable, and inefficient. Examining resource allocation,

environmental supports, and curriculum and instruction is imperative for school leaders who wish to seize this opportunity.

Resource Allocation

Time is one of the most valuable and underutilized resources. Developing an equitable master schedule helps school leaders to ensure this resource efficiently meets the needs of all students. Using attendance data (e.g., late arrivals, early dismissals) and student voice to determine how much time is needed for different activities, school leaders can create a master schedule that fits the population they serve, based on both their strengths and their needs. The schedule should reflect time students need to transition, not just at arrival and dismissal, but between activities. It should be built around what students need when they come into the building, planning services and activities to most efficiently meet their needs. Returning to school, leaders must examine master schedules and determine how the extant schedules are serving the school community, and what adjustments can be made to increase equity, putting the most marginalized students at the center.

Environmental Support

Traditionally, school behavior policies are based on deficit thinking, where adult responses to unwanted behavior are aimed at "fixing" the student rather than changing the environment. Equitable environmental support involves adjusting the environment to prevent behavior, leveraging restorative practices and the strengths of Gen Z, and encouraging engagement and safety. When negative student behavior does occur, adults intervene with a continuum of restorative practices, resulting in increased positive outcomes for students, staff, and the community.

Curriculum and Instruction

In order to best meet students' needs, curricula must be culturally-sustaining, and should acknowledge the contributions of students' communities. Equitable supports and practices build students' languages and cultural ways of being meaningfully and consistently in teaching and learning. They require schools to engage with communities to determine what the community desires, and what it hopes to sustain through schooling. Curriculum and instruction should, by design, connect present learning to histories of racial, ethnicity, and linguistic communities locally and nationally. Text options should be expanded to include global experiences and non-traditional texts, such as blog posts, podcasts, or memes, and educators should utilize a variety of language styles, various dialects, and both formal and informal language in instruction.

Conclusion

School closures in response to COVID-19 illuminated deep-seated inequities within the U.S. education system. As schools prepare to begin servicing students again, whether in school buildings or through distance learning, there exists a unique, urgent opportunity to rebuild the school system so that all students and families thrive. School leaders can capitalize on this opportunity by implementing Equity-Based MTSS. With an understanding of the unique generational strengths

and needs of adults providing school services and students receiving them, school leaders can engage with their school communities to allocate resources, provide equitable environmental support, and implement curriculum and instruction which leverage adult and student strengths to meet the needs of the entire school community.

Suggested Citation

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