



Equity and Inclusion

By Dr. Tamara Uselman, Director of Equity and Inclusion

Finding Common Ground

At its simplest, *diversity* means, “count the people.” Fargo Public Schools is rich with diversity. We have students who are BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) as well as students who are White. Our students represent more than 85 culturally/linguistically diverse groups. In addition to cultural diversity, students come to us from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. Some students call home wherever their family is located that evening while others have stable housing. Our students may be male, female, or transgender. They may be straight or LGBTQ2A+. Our students represent neurological diversity, too, with many students being closer to what may be termed “neurologically typical” while others are neurological atypical. The same is true for physical diversity. Some students walk in, others role in, others may be carried in. **The important thing is, once they come to us, they are all our students. Each day, we have a tremendous opportunity to make a positive impact on the experience of youth.**

Whereas diversity means, “count the people,” *inclusion* means, “the people count.” Inclusion has a higher standard than does “welcome” (to greet or positively receive someone). An inclusive environment is one in which students feel more like family than guests. They see mirrors of themselves – representations of themselves in the posters on the walls, in the books and curriculum resources, and in the lessons. Mirrors of one group provide windows to another – that is, a chance to learn about cultural groups unlike one’s own. Democracy is strengthened, not threatened, when the students learn to work with and value people like them and different from them.

If diversity means, “count the people”, and inclusion means, “the people count”, then equity measures the degree to which the system delivers on those terms. Equity is expressed by parity and disparity. For example, if 25% of our students are BIPOC, then at least 25% of students in advanced classes should be BIPOC. By the same token, BIPOC students should make up no more than 25% of discipline referrals. Disparity shows us where the system can improve. Where the system lacks parity, there is an opportunity for work – to figure out what is working well for whom and what is not working well and adjust.

Even though I have offered a lean definition of equity, it can often be a misunderstood term. Some conflate equity with “win-lose” thinking. That is to say, if one student demographic group

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begins to benefit, then another will lose. Ironically, just the opposite is true. Equity is a win-win. For example, if graduation rates are disparate for some student demographic groups, then our work is to increase the graduation rate for the underrepresented group, not to lower the graduation rate for those who are succeeding! Ensuring students graduate is good for the young adult, now with greater choice about the future. Graduation offers benefits to the students' current and future families; people with high school diplomas earn on average \$10,000 more per year (for life) than non-graduates. Thus, graduation is an important step out of chronic, inter-generational poverty. Society benefits with more employable citizens who pay more income tax. As people gain more income, they tend to find more stable housing, resulting in neighborhoods that become more stable.

We all play a role in equity work. Students have a role to play, as do teachers, support staff, administrators, the School Board, families, and the community. In short, finding common ground to improve outcomes for all students serves as an example of how democracy works when it's working well for all of us who are part of Fargo Public Schools.

