

## R3 Framework Evaluation Brief: District-wide Equity Initiative

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Prepared by Measurement Incorporated

This edition of the R3 Framework Evaluation Brief focuses on the experiences of educators and personnel at Pitt County Schools (PCS) who participated in two equity-focused programs that are aligned with the PCS Strategic Plan 2021-2026<sup>1</sup>: the Equity Advisory Council, and Equity Partners. The study sought to answer three key questions:

1. What was participants' understanding of the goals of the equity-focused program?
2. What are the perceived successes, and what has been accomplished so far?
3. What are the challenges and areas for improvement?

Data collection to address the research questions included interviews with four Equity Advisory Council members, and two one-hour focus groups with a total of 14 Equity Partners, all of which took place in Spring 2023.

The brief begins with an overview of PCS' equity programs and is followed by a presentation of findings that are organized by the key questions. The brief ends with a summary of key findings.

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.pitt.k12.nc.us/cms/lib/NC01001178/Centricity/Domain/8/Pitt%20County%20Schools%202021-2026%20Strategic%20Plan%2012.14.2021.pdf> The equity focused initiatives align with Goal 1 of the plan.

## *Overview of PCS' Equity Programs*

PCS leadership has recognized that inequities exist in the district at both the student and teacher level, as they do in most other districts in the country. The Department of Excellence, Equity, and Leadership (DEEL) is leading a district-wide effort to identify and address inequities, which began in January 2021 with the hiring of two Co-Directors of Equity and Excellence<sup>2</sup>. Under the direction of the Equity Co-Directors and DEEL leadership, and with the support of TSL funding, several equity-focused programs have been developed.

The **Equity Advisory Council (EAC)**, which was established in the summer of 2021, is a district-level program. Its mission is “to ensure that all people are represented, respected, and valued, while expanding mindsets, assessing and recommending practices, policies, and procedures that support equity and inclusion.”<sup>3</sup> It is made up of 14 members from every attendance area in the district including principals, teachers, classified and certified staff, social workers, district office personnel, as well as the Equity Co-Directors. Members were identified by district leadership and invited to join the council.

Each school year district leadership identifies an area of focus (e.g., inclusion and belonging, discipline practices, etc.) that is aligned with the PSC Strategic Plan for 2021-26. The EAC meets every other month to examine data on the cause of inequities and to develop potential strategies to address them. Recommendations from the EAC are brought to district leadership for consideration. Members of the EAC have received training to increase their understanding of unconscious bias and historical inequities, and to develop the skills and confidence to have difficult conversations about issues related to equity.

At the school level is the **Equity Partner (EP)** program. The role of the EP is to “build capacity in school-based teams...so those teams can effectively collect, review, and analyze data in order to discover and address systemic disparities and disparate outcomes.”<sup>4</sup> The EP role was first introduced at PCS in the spring of 2022 through a DEEL session offered to all principals. Principals who were interested in having an EP at their school submitted a request to the district and applications were posted for their school. Candidates were screened at the district level and then interviewed at the school level. By the fall of 2022, 15<sup>5</sup> EPs had been hired: seven at the elementary level, three in K-8 schools, and five in high schools. Three of the EPs were

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<sup>2</sup> As of 7/1/2023, the DEEL office has consolidated the responsibilities of two part-time Co-Directors of Equity and Excellence into one full-time Director of Access and Opportunity.

<sup>3</sup> [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1bNEbj2Q4eLgXlBeuyownxr\\_4NNxN\\_Z48YwHY6Zxo4hw/edit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1bNEbj2Q4eLgXlBeuyownxr_4NNxN_Z48YwHY6Zxo4hw/edit)

<sup>4</sup> [https://docs.google.com/document/d/10s5T0\\_xYMIKYgA11qR\\_mjk2IULQokf75chQaF2SVWiQ/edit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/10s5T0_xYMIKYgA11qR_mjk2IULQokf75chQaF2SVWiQ/edit)

<sup>5</sup> 10 additional EPs were added in the fall of 2023, bringing the district total to 25.

instructional coaches, three were guidance counselors, and the rest were classroom teachers. EPs earned an annual stipend of \$2,500 for their role.

Each EP addressed a school-based equity issue identified by the principal. EPs could form a new Equity Team, or join an existing school-based team, to address the issue. EPs were trained in how to think critically, use data to look for root causes, ask questions, test hypotheses, and facilitate difficult discussions. EPs also received coaching from a district-level coach and had opportunities to collaborate with other EPs. The EP was not expected to “solve” the identified problem by the end of the year, but to build capacity, relationships, and buy-in at their school around the importance of uncovering inequities and working to address them.

### *Understanding of Goals for the Program*

Equity Advisory Council members and Equity Partners expressed similar views on the overarching goals of their programs, which, according to them, were to: raise awareness and facilitate conversations about inequities with colleagues, dig into data and uncover what was causing inequities at the school and district level, and ultimately reduce inequities for students. To achieve these goals, both groups utilized the cycle of inquiry to examine data, explored root causes, and developed a potential plan or strategy to address the inequity. Proposals from the EAC were passed on to district leadership for consideration, while EPs worked with their school leadership to implement proposed changes or strategies.

Several EPs talked about their role in encouraging and facilitating conversations with their teams and offering other educators the opportunity to view things through an equity lens, which they saw as an equally important goal of the EP program. Both groups recognized that developing their personal understanding of equity and an awareness of unconscious bias was an important first step which allowed them to feel equipped and prepared to encourage conversations about equity with others. A few EAC members also felt a responsibility to bring back some of what they are learning in meetings to their school community and to raise awareness of equity issues with colleagues. However, this was not seen as part of their official capacity in the EAC.

A few EPs talked about a longer-term goal for their program which was for the equity lens to ultimately become ingrained in the school culture and be adopted as a natural part of problem solving in education. This would essentially eliminate the need for an EP role because all educators would operate as EPs.

## *Initial Successes and Accomplishments*

Both programs are in early stages of implementation, yet respondents shared indications of impact and are encouraged by the progress made to date.

The most commonly mentioned success, recognized by both EAC members and EPs, was the district's acknowledgement of existing inequities in PCS, and its commitment to addressing them by creating these programs. EAC members and EPs agreed that starting the conversation was a big step, especially considering the political landscape both locally and nationally. One EAC member stated, "We're all sitting at the same table and that to me was the start of it being equitable - that everybody's opinion - no matter where they worked in the district - was brought to the table."

*"I think the biggest thing I'm proud of is recognizing that it is an issue, and at least putting something together to start trying to do something about it. It'll forever be continuous work. But seeing some things done just in one area, even though it was a lot of work to get one small thing done, it's still progress."*

*~EAC Member*

Members of the EAC identified their work in developing a mission and vision statement for their Council as a major accomplishment. There was no guidebook, as one EAC member stated, since this was a brand-new initiative. Members read literature, listened to speakers, and attended

training sessions, to immerse themselves in the work and determine together what they wanted the EAC to accomplish and how it would function. They now have a committed group that has been meeting regularly for two years.

*"We have to keep in mind when we're talking about equity, inequities, disparities, and things like this, it is something that is not just happening. It's been happening for years, and those are things that people have sort of pushed to the side. But we're moving in the direction where people are willing to come to the table regardless of their differences and at least talk about it."*

*~EAC Member*

Participants from both groups identified positive changes in themselves and how they approached equity, since becoming involved in the programs. A key component was to work on yourself before you can help others, and participants appreciated the time they were able to spend on self-reflection and developing awareness. One EAC member said that she is intentional about using an equity lens in areas that she would not have previously thought of, such as ensuring that all students had transportation to an off-campus school dance. One EP stated that

being part of the program has allowed her to become a more creative thinker and a better problem solver, as she is aware of a wider range of possibilities and perspectives.

Positive changes were also noted in colleagues, according to several EPs. Put by one EP, “I think a success for me has been, my team is very committed, and what comes out of their mouths during the meeting is so amazing. It's just wonderful to see these thoughts and these ideas come from people that I just wouldn't ever have these conversations with otherwise. We really work so much better together than we ever could individually.” Overall, participants were grateful for the rich discussion they had with equity team members.

*“Everyone in the group is committed, and they believe in what we're doing. We now have data that we can say, hey, look at this, it's starting to work. And I think we're slowly closer to winning everybody over, seeing that this does make sense. It is showing small gains, but it's going in the right direction.”*

*~Equity Partner*

Lastly, several EPs talked about the impact of the training sessions they received. They appreciated how the process was broken down into very clear and manageable steps which the facilitators reviewed in detail over multiple sessions. One EP said, “It's not just, ‘figure out

*“Every time we come to train, we feel a little bit more prepared going into our next steps. At first we were all very unsure of what we were getting into, but these trainings have been really helpful - just the fact that there's no right or wrong place that we need to be, and that this is not going to be overnight change, but that every little thing that we're doing is going to have an impact.”*

*~Equity Partner*

what's wrong and go for it’, it's very structured, and we're coached through protocols. That's been the most helpful, the whole layout of what to do, and even within each of the tasks, how to actually accomplish that thing. It takes the stress off, because we know exactly what the expectation is, and how to go about it.” EPs also appreciated the opportunity to practice skills of dialogue and discussion during training, which offered a safe space to get comfortable with the protocols and allowed them to feel more prepared to utilize the skills when they return to their school. Finally, EPs valued the chance to collaborate and network with other EPs during training sessions. They enjoyed getting the perspectives of colleagues going through similar processes at their own schools, bouncing ideas off each other, and sharing experiences.

## Initial Challenges and Areas for Improvement

As with any new program, the PCS equity-focused programs have experienced challenges, and respondents identified some areas where they felt improvements could be made.

A sentiment shared by both EAC members and EPs was a feeling of wanting to move faster. Put by one EP, "At the beginning I thought we were going to come in, and a month or two in we were going to make huge changes. I think that the challenge for me has been seeing the little victories and not trying to measure only by a change in policy or a change at the building level." EAC members, in particular, were eager to address more difficult topics.

Nevertheless, both groups recognized and understood the reasons why progress had to be slow, including political considerations, as well as the reality that change is a slow and complex process, especially for an emotionally and historically charged topic such as equity. An EAC member stated, "We can't just jump into it. We need to have data, and we need to look at each of the different parts. We don't implement things into a district when we all don't have the data to back up what we're trying to do."

*"I feel like we are limited in the scope of our discussions and in the topics that we are talking about. I almost feel like we're not getting in to do the hard work and have the hard conversations about what really needs to change. And I get it, because we're operating in this political landscape. I think it's a great place that we're in that we have the Equity Advisory Council where we can have some conversations. But I think we can do more."*

~EAC member

*"I think it's the buy-in; the turnover of staff is a barrier right now, and that's always going to be challenging. But if we start changing the cultures of our school in whatever field or targeted area we're looking at, then we can start to turn over the leaves, figure out what's next, and how to keep it going."*

~Equity Partner

Another challenge mentioned by both EAC members and EPs was that each school in the district has its own culture. Part of the impetus behind these initiatives was to standardize the approach to addressing equity across the district, but the reality remains that schools vary widely in their willingness and readiness to have some of these conversations. Building relationships, gaining buy-in, and changing the mindset of educators who may not be open to changing their ways, were challenges for both groups. There is also the issue of teacher and administrator turnover which can set back progress when new educators must be trained or a new administrator sets a different course for the school.

EPs faced the unique challenge of either joining an existing school-based team to address their equity issue or creating a new team. Some EPs spoke about how they first tried one approach but after a time found it not a good fit and decided to try something different. They were thankful for the support of their administrator; however, time and momentum were lost with these shifts. The selection of the area of focus also created challenges for some EPs who did not have input into the selection process. A few EPs reported frustration within the equity team as they felt there were other more pressing inequities that they should have focused on, or they dug into the issue and discovered a root cause but were not given approval by their administration to address it. Other EPs, however, felt they had more of a say in the issue they were addressing, and they reported a strong collaboration with their principal and other leadership which allowed for flexibility throughout the process.

One EAC member requested that council members have more input into the equity issues that are selected for them to address. This member stated that council members would offer a range of perspectives on the most pressing inequities in PCS, since they hold various positions across the district. Another EAC member requested that the council be given more information about how the recommendations they have developed have been received by the Board. Closing this feedback loop would help to inform the council's continued work.

*"It would be really great to, maybe at each meeting, have a recap of what we talked about, and then what happened after. I would love to know what conversations were had, or what decisions were made, or what impact are we having. Or if things haven't changed, to have somebody just be honest and say, you know what, that was a great idea, but it didn't go anywhere, and this is why. Just to know that would be great."*

*~EAC Member*



## *Summary*

With the approval of the PCS Strategic Plan for 2021-2026, PCS leadership identified equity as an area of focus for the district. The two programs reviewed in this brief - the Equity Advisory Council and the Equity Partner program - represent concrete steps that have been taken toward meeting this goal.

The EAC members and EPs were clear about the goals of their programs which work in tandem at the district and school levels, respectively, to raise awareness and facilitate conversations about inequities, uncover the root causes of inequities by utilizing the cycle of inquiry, and ultimately reduce inequities for students.

Participants of both programs shared early successes including the district's acknowledgement of existing inequities in PCS, changes in themselves and how they approach equity, and increased awareness in their colleagues. EAC members also noted their work in developing a mission and vision statement for the council, and EPs recognized the impact of the training in preparing them for their role, as well as the benefit of collaborating and networking with other EPs.

Challenges were also acknowledged. Both groups expressed the desire for a faster pace of change, and also understood the complex nature of the issues. The unique school cultures and varying levels of readiness for equity conversations were also seen as a challenge. Some EPs and EAC members felt they did not have enough input on the selection of equity topics to be discussed, and some EPs faced challenges in establishing a consistent and appropriate team to work with.

Overall, participants felt strongly that the work they were doing as EPs and EAC members was very important to the district, and they were proud to be a part of it. There is a desire to dig deeper into the most difficult topics and to work with a wider range of educators and personnel, until using an educational equity lens becomes part of the culture across PCS.