



SPOTLIGHT ON EQUITY

Throughout this country we know that kids with access to healthy meals learn better. Unfortunately, communities of color and economically marginalized communities suffer disproportionately when it comes to food insecurity. We are highlighting equity practices and policies from school districts across our nation who are making efforts to eliminate disparities. By highlighting these districts and communities, we hope to provide a roadmap for those who are just getting started and for those who wish to do more.

“Using equity tools and commitments to equity was central in our decision-making processes. Some of the questions we asked for each decision made were, ‘What are the positive, neutral, or harmful effects on different demographic and interest groups in our community?’ And how does this decision advance equity? And how does this decision take down systemic and structural barriers for traditionally marginalized people?”

-Jeff Horton, Superintendent

When schools and districts think about creating meal programs that serve every child through an equity lens, they may not have a clear idea of what that means or what that looks like at the school or community level.

Does it involve using special glasses? What are those practices on the ground? As the Center for Best Practices launches our **“Spotlight on Equity”** in the *What’s New Now* newsletter, we are thrilled to highlight the mission of GFW Public Schools in Minnesota to provide an equitable and quality education that meets the individual needs of their students so they can thrive in the 21st Century.

Superintendent Jeff Horton was kind to share how their district efforts to lead with equity are improving their ability to reach students and families as individuals.

The Equity tool created by his former district team guides his work at GFW schools. One strategy from that tool is to start by creating a goal for GFW to develop and implement an equity framework and make sure it is included in their district strategic plan for the upcoming school year. Using this approach, they gathered data which revealed academic disparities among communities of color compared to white students in their district. Additionally, this process led to gathering input from the local community and hearing directly from Hispanic/Latinx families.

In addition to making home visits, Superintendent Horton created a forum titled “GFW Supt. Talks” where community members could have a conversation with him in Spanish facilitated by the district Cultural Liaison.

Some steps taken:

- Gathered data to understand true disparities within their community. Had community members (e.g., students, parents, city administrators, community members) review the data. Used data to drive interventions.
- Worked directly with the Cultural Liaison who facilitated conversations with Hispanic/Latinx families.
- Visited families, when COVID numbers were low, in their homes to get to know them, hear their perspectives about COVID and other concerns and share food/school meals resources.
- Met with Community administrators and community orgs to figure out how to get food to families.
- Participated in an Equity-In-Action Cohort made up of school board members, Superintendents, teachers unions and teacher leaders and asked others to join. The group worked to build capacity and increase awareness of equity challenges, meeting once a month.
- Created an Equity goal and made sure it was in the district’s strategic plan.

Superintendent Horton mentioned how each step and action became cyclical, leading to more work and more action. For example, their initial data-gathering activity led them to complete a comprehensive needs assessment of each of their sites, which will inform their strategic plan.

The local Hispanic/Latinx community shared feedback that “this is the first time they feel seen and heard.”

The plan is to develop a policy to ensure equitable access to programs, initiatives, and information for all families to successfully navigate GFW school’s system, implement it, and start to embed it within all district goals over the next three to five years. The process is now informed by community voices, which helps to shape priorities and strategies to secure the resources identified by key stakeholders.

GFW schools started with a simple idea: to center equity by thinking about each decision and how it would impact their community members. You don’t have to be an expert to do this work, but you do have to be able to listen to the experts within your community; those with lived experiences who have struggled with food insecurity and other disparities. Having many voices represented was key in guiding their work. It doesn’t matter where you are with your district equity initiatives -- the most important thing to do is to care and to plan.