



# ADDRESSING EQUITY in our Schools

*By Dr. Nicholas D. Wahl, Superintendent-in-Residence, Equal Opportunity Schools (EOS)*



**A**pproximately three-quarters of a million incoming juniors and seniors are not being afforded access to rigorous academic programs, such as Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB). These students are ready to be enrolled into rigorous academic programs and are capable of succeeding, they just need the opportunity, access, and encouragement to reach their potential. Unfortunately, across the United States, students of color and low-income students are not being engaged at the same rate as their peers.

After 31 years of service in the public-school system, I transitioned to my current role as a Superintendent-in-Residence for Equal Opportunity Schools (EOS). My role allows me to follow my passion of helping students achieve their high school academic goals, which also prepares them for college, career and life. EOS focuses on doing the right thing for high-school aged students by giving them keys to doors of opportunity that they did not know existed.

## RECOGNIZING THE OPPORTUNITY

I learned early in my teaching career, in Lafayette, Indiana (Tecumseh Middle School), that many students needed an advocate for them to unveil the opportunities they have before them. I had economically disadvantaged students in my classes that did not realize their academic and social emotional potential. This meant getting to know them and their families while coaching them on the specific classes and extra-curricular options afforded to them.

Years later, my car broke down in Lafayette, with my two toddler children on board. I pulled into a car dealership service area and as I was asking for assistance, one of my former economically disadvantaged students from Tecumseh came forward and thanked me for taking the time to help him realize his potential in middle school. He informed me that he has been working at this dealership as a master mechanic, was married, and had a child.

As educators, we rarely know where our former students end up with their lives. We want them to be productive members of society. As Christa McAuliffe stated so eloquently, “I touch the future, I teach.” We must continue to realize we are touching the future and can change the trajectory of these students and their families by expanding the opportunities for all of them.

In my sixteen years as a Superintendent of Schools, eleven of those in Illinois (Westmont Community and Hinsdale Township) and five years in Indiana (Carmel Clay), I have been afforded numerous opportunities to make decisions about what’s right and how to engage students. These decisions were grounded in student-centered decision-making with a focus on equity of opportunity for all students in the districts that I served.

In December of 2005, those decisions became real as Hinsdale Township changed the complexion of a high school on the South side of the district. A Chicago Section 8 housing project was virtually shut down before winter break. This resulted in numerous families being displaced from their old neighborhood schools into new, predominantly white, suburban schools. As superintendent, I had to make real-time decisions on how to welcome these students into our classrooms.

We quickly learned that the students were not equipped academically for Hinsdale Township’s environment, nor were they accustomed to the norms of a suburban high school. In addition, the faculty and administration were not equipped for the academic and emotional needs of these students, let alone the adjustment period needed to feel part of their new community.

The students impacted were socio-economically disadvantaged

students of color, and they had every right, as new members of the school’s community, to have the same opportunities as their peers. I wanted to provide an equitable access to the academic and extracurricular programs.

I worked with the building principal, leadership team and teachers to identify and develop supports for our new students during the winter/spring of 2006. The team developed a mentoring program that consisted of each transfer student being paired with an adult in the building to help them navigate their new school. An academic bridge program was built for the students and classes were held at the new Section 8 apartments, alleviating transportation restrictions. The program was so successful that we also built an AP bridge program specifically for these displaced students. These decisions, in the middle of the school year, were very successful and continued beyond my tenure. Unfortunately, with leadership and staff attrition, combined with outside political and economic change, maintaining the program was unsustainable.

## SUSTAINABLE SYSTEMS WERE NEEDED

The challenge with what I oversaw was that it was not sustainable. Creating processes to test and place mid-year displaced students was difficult, but possible as a one-time initiative. Besides, we had no choice because the students were assigned to our campus. Repeating this process each year was very taxing on all involved. The district and school only had a finite amount of resources available to operate the building and meet the academic needs of all students. Repeating the cycle of testing and enrolling students, at an equitable level, was just not fiscally nor functionally sustainable. District resources needed to be allocated so that policies and practices could be systemized to be better service students and streamline processes.

Most schools do not have these resources available for data analytics, nor do they have the ability to maintain the traction of the initiatives when there is district and building leadership change. During that 2005-06 transition period and beyond, it would have been a tremendous asset to partner with Equal Opportunity Schools (EOS), a nonprofit organization focused on ensuring students of color and low-income students have equal access to academically intense high school programs. EOS collaborates with districts and schools to not only identify students for advanced level courses, but to work with administration on structuring policies and practices that are equitable and sustainable.

## CONTINUING EQUITY WORK

Fast forward to 2018. I was attending a conference and had the opportunity to meet with a former colleague. We shared stories about our time as superintendents and he shared with me the equity journey of his district. Over our conversation, I learned more about his organization, the premise behind their model, and the evidence of success from 540 individual schools across 29 states.

He continued to talk about the work EOS was engaged in, and I kept flashing back to Hinsdale Township and how this would have been a game changer. I realized that EOS had systemized much of what we had “called an audible on” (i.e. - made decisions based on current conditions) in 2005. Additionally, their structure included dedicated Partnership Directors assigned to each district, to help guide a school through the challenging work. EOS would evaluate students not solely on GPA and test scores but on Learning & Growth Mindsets, aspirations, and adult recommendations. They have a ‘Student Insight Card’ that visually contains survey and academic data, teacher recommendations, test scores, and Learning & Growth Mindset assets and skills that are indicators of AP/IB readiness.

The additional tools, reports and resources, accessible through the EOS Client Portal, would have enabled my district to continue our outreach & support effort, at a fraction of the cost, to underrepresented students, all of which would have enhanced and sustained the great work done in Hinsdale Township in 2005.

## DEFINING EQUITY

As a superintendent, I often challenged my building principals by asking them to define what equity in their high schools looked like. I would follow that up with my definition: an equitable high school provides access to the courses students want and the opportunity for enrollment into these courses.

Taking this further, it meant that I, as an administrator, or any of my staff, have an open and honest conversation with the student and their guardians about their academic requests. It’s about me not letting my personal bias become a distraction nor being a barrier to that student’s success. It’s about addressing and removing systematic barriers and biases to position the students to achieve at the highest levels.

I also asked my principals about their perceived challenges in creating an equity program. I quite often heard “associated costs, resource limitations, leadership commitment, and students don’t want to be challenged.” This was unacceptable to me, as I felt my

districts needed to create equitable opportunities for all students and needed to work to eliminate these perceived barriers.

Unfortunately, districts generally do not have enough time to dedicate towards a meaningful equity initiative, nor the knowledge or expertise to formulate such a program, and the financial resources required to build a sustainable approach. This is where EOS can truly benefit a district committed to equity and closing their AP/IB opportunity gaps.

## ABOUT EOS

Equal Opportunity Schools’ mission is to ensure students of all backgrounds have equal access to America’s most academically intense high school programs—and particularly that low-income students and students of color have opportunities to succeed at the highest levels.

Our partnership model is consultative, collaborative, and requires a commitment to specific and measurable results. EOS has helped more than 540 schools in 180 districts across 29 states identify and enroll 50,000 low-income students and students of color who qualify for, but are missing from, AP or IB classes. Working together, we support their academic success, prioritizing the notion that opportunity precedes achievement.

## EOS SCOPE

EOS provides expertise, knowledge, industry research with data analysis, and the tools and technology for partner districts to address and close their equity and achievement gaps. Many of our partner districts and schools continue to build upon what is already working in their buildings, and find that EOS nurtures a path to equity that transforms the mindsets of teachers and administrators about what’s possible for historically under-served students. By customizing the EOS model, following consultants’ guidance, and using the tools and analyses EOS provides, schools have significantly increased enrollment in their AP/IB programs for students of color and low-income students while maintaining or improving AP/IB program quality.

Partnering with EOS will build bridges for students to achieve at their full potential as they become the leaders of tomorrow in the classroom today. 🌟

*To learn more about this year’s application for grant-supported technical assistance form Equal Opportunity Schools, please contact me at Nick@EOSchools.org.*