



ACCESS & OPPORTUNITY

Addressing Equity in Our High Schools

DR. NICHOLAS D. WAHL, EQUAL OPPORTUNITY SCHOOLS

Approximately three-quarters of a million incoming juniors and seniors are not being afforded access to rigorous academic programs, such as Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate. These students are ready to be enrolled into rigorous academic programs and can succeed, but they need the opportunity, access and encouragement to reach their potential. Unfortunately, students of color and low-income students across the United States 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 regional director of strategic initiatives for Equal Opportunity Schools, a Seattle-based non-profit organization committed to closing the classroom equity gap. EOS focuses on doing the right thing for high school-aged students by giving them keys to doors of opportunity they didn't know existed.

Who are the gatekeepers to these doors in your high school?

I had the honor of serving three public school communities in my

16 years as a superintendent of schools. One of my guiding strategic goals was equity of opportunity for all students. But this goal was not always met with support by board members, principals and teachers. I found early on in my superintendent career that there were gatekeepers in my high schools that limited access and opportunities for students.

To lead with equity takes courage, persistence and a student-centered approach to decision-making as a school leader.

I had board members concerned

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— Dr. Nicholas D. Wahl

about property values when I would tout and celebrate diversity and equity. A minority of my principals pushed back, believing that that students who didn't fit the “school way” needed to adjust. Several teachers pushed back on allowing students to choose their courses, indicating that they believed that this would water down the curriculum in their courses.

As a former athletic coach, teacher, principal and superintendent, I strongly believe that individuals will live up or down to the expectations presented to them. My push back to this opposition was respectful and clear ... we would offer equity of opportunity and access to all students, and we would make student-centered decisions rather than adult-centered. Like a train leaving the station, most got on board, but some chose to stay behind.

Here are several questions to examine when thinking about the equity of access in your district:

- Are decisions made in your district/school student-centric or adult-centric?

- Are students in your high school allowed to enroll in rigorous courses (AP, IB, honors) based upon their interests and motivation? Or do they require teacher/guidance counselor recommendation to enroll in rigorous courses?

- Are students' GPA and standardized test scores significant determinants in their ability to enroll in rigorous courses?

In all three districts that I served, students initially were only able to access rigorous courses if they had the appropriate GPA and standardized test scores coupled with a recommendation from a teacher or guidance counselor, the “gatekeepers,” to enroll them. I am proud to say we “blew up” that adult-centric system and allowed students to enroll in courses in which they had interest and motivation. We didn't use their GPA and standardized test scores against them when they wanted to pursue rigorous courses.

Please don't mistake this point as a knock on guidance counselors or teachers. In many of our high schools, a guidance counselor may have a caseload of 300-plus students. There is

no way we can expect them to know the interests and motivations of every student assigned to them without a change in process as well as additional tools and analytics to assist them. The same goes for high school teachers.

We changed from an adult-centric model to student-centric by doing the work with our guidance counselors and teachers — not to them. This involved teachers, guidance counselors and administrators working collaboratively to change the process whereby students were afforded access to opportunities on an equitable basis.

After surveying high school teachers, EOS found that the greatest predictors of success for a student in an AP course is the interest and motivation of the student in the course. This makes sense to me, as I perform better if I have interest and motivation in the work that I am doing. The lowest predictors of success of students in AP courses is GPA and standardized test scores. Please let this serve as affirmation for moving your high school to a student-centric environment. □

Dr. Nicholas D. Wahl is a superintendent-in-residence at Equal Opportunity Schools. Contact him at nick@eoschools.org.

About Equal Opportunity Schools...

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 600 schools in 180 districts across 30 states identify and enroll low-income students and students of color who qualify for, but are missing from, Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate classes. Working together, we support their academic success, prioritizing the notion that opportunity precedes achievement.

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 EOS nurtures a path to equity that transforms the mindsets of teachers and administrators on previous belonging beliefs. By customizing the EOS model, following consultants' guidance and using the tools and analyses EOS provides, schools have increased enrollment in their AP/IB programs for students of color and low-income students. □

Open Gates and Create Opportunities for all Students

PAM HAMMEN, PRINCIPAL, VERONA AREA HIGH SCHOOL

At Verona Area High School, we're committed to opening gates and creating the best possible opportunities for all students. It hasn't always been this way. In order to transform our AP program to emphasize inclusivity and excellence, we had to be honest about the role we've previously played as gatekeepers — teachers who decided who could take an AP class. Making this transition was not easy, and we were helped immeasurably by our partnership with Equal Opportunity Schools.

We began our collaboration jumping into the deep end of a murky swimming pool, apprehensive about

the sweeping changes to some of our policies and practices. Still, our prime motivation, then and now, was to do the best for our students and to grow as a school community. As we begin our seventh year of work with EOS, we are no longer fearful. We are "all-in," dedicated to making further progress through a concentrated effort. Now when we see a gate, we don't wonder who will guard it, we wonder how to open it.

It took our work with EOS to realize that we had unintentionally created significant barriers that prevented many students from enrolling in AP classes, or discouraged them from successfully

completing AP coursework. As a school that prides itself on the level of education we provide to all students, this realization was difficult to process. We looked to our students to guide and teach us.

Through student surveys, we were able to identify the critical barriers that affect our learners. They included prerequisite courses, applications, essays, course and exam costs, summer assignments and the practice of requiring all students to take the AP exam if they signed up for the AP course. It was clearly a time for change. While not everyone agreed with the decisions, in year one, we jumped into the deep end by:

- Removing pre-requisite courses
- Removing all applications, including essays, for AP Language and Composition
- Providing AP textbooks and exam fees for students who qualify for free/reduced lunch
- Eliminating or greatly reducing summer assignments
- Allowing students and their families to decide whether they want to take the AP exam at the end of a course

Many of the systemic changes were logistical and relatively easy to implement. The more challenging work was addressing the mindset of some AP teachers who believed we were "setting students up to fail" by opening up the gates of AP coursework to learners who may not fit our notion of a student who is "AP ready." The teachers were guarding gates because they believed it was in the best interests of students, but their



Attend sessions focused on equity at the State Education Convention.

Dr. Wahl of Equal Opportunity Schools will be presenting a session on closing the opportunity

gaps for students of color on Thursday, Jan. 23 at the Wisconsin State Education Convention.

OTHER SESSIONS FOCUSED ON EQUITY INCLUDE:

Excellence, Achievement, Equity: No Excuses! on Wednesday, Jan. 22 by the Wisconsin Association of School District Administrators.

Elevating Achievement for All: A Focus on Equity on Wednesday, Jan. 22 by the Wisconsin Association of School Boards. *(This session will be recorded and available as part of the Virtual Attendee Access program. See the convention website for details.)*

These are just a few of the related sessions. Visit the convention website at wasb.org/convention for the complete agenda.

perceptions led to unintended consequences that were damaging student potential. Particularly at risk were students who had been excluded from rigorous coursework in the past. Changing the mindsets of teachers and students and aligning our actions with our values has been the most challenging and important work. It continues to be a focus of our partnership with EOS.

I am happy to share that our results speak for themselves. In 2013, we had only 29 underrepresented 11th- and 12th-grade students take and pass an AP class. In 2018-19, we had 96. Over the past seven years, this has equated to hundreds of underrepresented students successfully completing AP courses. In addition, we've had more benchmark students (medium- to high-income white and Asian students) enroll and succeed in AP

courses. In 2013, we administered 647 tests to 370 students school-wide. In 2019, we administered 1,062 tests to 566 students.

In Roman mythology, Janus presides over gates and transitions, beginnings and endings. Janus is depicted with two faces, one looking to the past and one looking to the future. Janus represents our journey as a school, from our past as gatekeepers to our future ensuring all willing students can transition into an AP class that challenges and changes them.

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. ■

Ethan Netterstrom, executive director of curriculum and instruction at Madison Metropolitan School District, contributed to this article.

WASB Equity Statement

We affirm in our actions that each student can, will and shall learn. We recognize that based on factors including, but not limited to, disability, race, gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status, not all students receive equitable educational opportunities. Educational equity is the intentional allocation of resources, instruction and opportunities to meet the specific identified needs of students and staff in the local school community.

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School boards across the state are actively working to eliminate disparities in student educational opportunities and access based on race, ethnicity, social-economic or other status, and have adopted local equity policies with those efforts in mind. Sample equity policies are available upon request from WASB Policy Services (tkimball@wasb.org).

