

client case study



HOW AN EQUITY AUDIT HELPED ONE DISTRICT DISRUPT BIAS, CONFRONT CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM, AND SHIFT FROM PUNITIVE TO RESTORATIVE DISCIPLINE

"Once you operate with an equity mindset about one thing, it's hard to turn that off about other things. So you start to see the world in a different light. I've always enjoyed the act of finding barriers and figuring out how to remove them. The bottom line is that if you're in human work, there's always going to be equity work."

-Dr. Jordy Sparks, Executive Director for Diversity, Equity, Inclusion & Student Supports for Oceanside Unified School District

"To me, if you do nothing else around equity work, if you just interrupt bias and have some agreement around not letting ignorant comments go unchecked...that alone will create a safer space."

-Julie Vitale, Ph.D., Superintendent of Oceanside Unified School District

HIGHLIGHTS

Oceanside Unified School District in San Diego County is a coastal and diverse K-12 district with nearly 2,000 employees and 15,000 students. The district has a large multilingual student population and is 60.6% Hispanic, 21% White, 5.8% African American, and 12% Asian/mixed race/other. The percentage of socioeconomically disadvantaged students hovers around 68%, and the special education population is approximately 17%.

CHALLENGES

Julie Vitale, Ph.D., has been superintendent of Oceanside Unified School District (OUSD) for over seven years. Believing every organization needs a way to interrupt bias and create belonging—and as part of an overall initiative to create loving, inclusive schools for all students—she partnered with Dr. Jordy Sparks, Executive Director of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion & Student Supports, to find a better path forward for their district.



CHALLENGES (CONTINUED)

“I had been learning a lot about student experiences, and we were seeing a common thread of students feeling badly about the ways teachers spoke about them,” Sparks said. “Also, we had a racist and xenophobic incident at one of our middle schools that became public. This pushed us to look at how we might address these challenges systemically.”

“We were also hearing a lot of stories about people in education having a hard time talking about race and how that impacts some educators’ expectations of students, whether implicitly or explicitly,” Vitale added. “We wanted an outside look to help us address things like disparities in student discipline and problems with chronic absenteeism.”

Vitale and Sparks said they understand the arms-length stance that some districts take about audits of this nature—but believe it’s misguided.

“Prioritize this, fund it, and resource it,” Sparks said. “We go through audits for all other sorts of purposes that help us change policies and practices. Why not give the same attention to something like this? There’s this thought that if you have people internally who are responsible for this [equity] work, they’ll be able to take care of everything. The notion that ‘we don’t need this because we have a Director of Equity’ is a miss for a lot of districts. There are some things you just can’t see when you’re in it. Having someone come in and ask questions you might not know to ask is extremely helpful.”

Ultimately, Vitale and Sparks said they kept hearing some version of, ‘I hear some things that bother me, and I’m not really sure what to do or say about it.’ They were interested in bringing in an outside team to audit their current systems and policies, looking for areas for improvement. After vetting three agencies, they decided on Epoch Education.

“We could tell this wasn’t some pre-packaged thing from the team; it was specific to our needs” Vitale said. “More than that, we wanted someone who would stand by and help us with the real implementation work after the audit. Nancy offered professional development training around the RIR Protocol; a beautiful and approachable way for everyone in our organization to disrupt bias. And the recommendations from the Equity Audit pushed us forward.”

SOLUTIONS

In the beginning, Epoch Education’s Conversation Starter Cards, in particular, moved the needle for the district. Led by Sparks who first trained administrators to practice with the tool—followed by educators, other staff, and even some students—soon the phrase, “I’m going to RIR you” became a common (and not unwelcomed) one.

“The Conversation Starter Cards were huge for us,” Sparks said. “It gave us a safe way to practice in a low-risk situation. It’s so much harder to do in the moment when something happens, but now we can talk about why we miss those opportunities. The more you practice this sort of thing, the more natural it becomes.”

The Equity Audit, too, provided critical context to help the district assess student data and learn to ask better questions, especially in the pursuit of root cause analysis. For instance, a lot of the recommendations prompted the district to grow the team, specifically adding social workers and interns dedicated to getting down to the root causes of big challenges, one of which was absenteeism.

SOLUTIONS (CONTINUED)

Another key takeaway from the Equity Audit was a renewed focus on listening circles. Specifically, Vitale and Sparks wanted to find ways for staff in historically marginalized groups to connect with one another and come together. This has been a game changer for the district, as these groups—such as those of Black or LGBTQ Educators—have taken on mentorship initiatives and other community-building projects in the community.

But the listening circles aren't for staff only. The district has also prioritized student forums, empathy interviews, and other listening circles for parents. Attending these listening circles is a requirement for OUSD principals three times per year, allowing senior administrators to "take the pulse of the student experience" at their school.

RESULTS/IMPACT

The results of the Equity Audit and their work with Epoch Education have been transformative for OUSD:

- As of fall 2024, absenteeism shrunk from approximately 30% to 16%.
- The district has hired additional social workers and social work interns to help find and address root causes to big challenges.
- The district has hired two full-time restorative justice coaches who teach the RIR Protocol to teachers, staff, and even in classrooms to students as early as second grade.
- The district has shifted from punitive to restorative discipline practices, offering alternatives to suspension. For example, if a student does something that's a suspendable offence, they go to a "restorative reset" off-campus where they work to understand the impact of their actions on themselves, their fellow students, and their community.

The district continues to reflect and grow, tackling questions such as "Why are mutli-lingual learners sometimes held to a lower standard?" and "Why are Black students less likely to enroll in AP courses?" Sparks and Vitale report they are confident their root-cause and action-based approach will yield answers and progress.

"The thing I like best about Nancy's work and The Protocol—and the way she writes, talks, and does workshops—is that it's accessible to anyone. Whatever level you're at," Vitale said. "And that's important because to me, if you do nothing else around equity work, if you just interrupt bias and have some agreement around not letting ignorant comments go unchecked . . . that alone will create a safer space."

Sparks agreed on the importance of seeing the bigger picture.

"If we get proximate to an issue—whether that's a classroom teacher getting to know students and families well, administrators getting to know teachers well—the closer you get to the issue and challenges, the more you humanize and understand those challenges, the more you understand there are real equity issues facing people that you can actually do something about," Sparks said. "The same way we legislate policies that hold people back, we can also undo these things. I'm always asking: What are the barriers to getting the access we're supposed to be providing, and how can we remove them? Once you operate with an equity mindset about one thing, it's hard to turn that off. You start to see the world in a different light."