

An Inequitable New Approach to Equity in Princeton Public Schools

May 23, 2022

Executive Summary

The full report, including exhibits and other supporting documentation, will be publicly distributed on Monday, May 30, 2022.

A number of developments at Princeton Public Schools (PPS) this spring have raised concerns among parents that district administrators have embraced a new approach to pursuing equity at PPS that entails the removal of opportunities for accelerated and advanced instruction. On May 12th, however, Dr. Kelley emailed the PPS community denying that there were any plans to make PPS “a less academic place with fewer opportunities to excel academically,” asserting that the district “would only contemplate changes [to the math program] that would benefit all students, including gifted students,” and asking the community to “[p]lease help us correct the record on this point.” Similarly, at a Board of Education (BOE) meeting on May 10th, BOE President Dafna Kendal decried as “rumors” parent concerns about the removal of opportunities for students to take accelerated and advanced courses. The message from Dr. Kelley and the BOE is effectively that parents should stand down, there is nothing to see here.

In light of those disavowals, as parents who are now deeply concerned with the new direction of Princeton Public Schools, we have compiled this report to detail the bases for our concerns. We hope that, by reading this report and its exhibits, other parents and interested community members will understand that those concerns are not based on “rumors” but rather on a series of actions and statements by senior leaders of PPS.

In Section 1 we document how senior administrators at PPS formed a “Math Committee” in March 2022 to consider a set of reforms to the math curriculum that had been proposed to the district by an outside consultant. The proposed reforms would “detrack” PPS’s math curriculum through 10th grade, so that all students—regardless of aptitude or interest in math—would be taught the exact same content. Algebra 1 would no longer be taught to precocious 7th and 8th grade students at Princeton Middle School (PMS); instead all students would take Algebra 1 in 9th grade. Under the proposal, the Princeton High School (PHS) math curriculum would end with Precalculus; the existing Calculus courses would no longer be taught. These radical reforms were proposed in the name of equity.

We show that:

- In December 2020 PPS hired a known anti-tracking and anti-acceleration advocate, Dr. Eric Milou, to review the math curriculum.
- After Dr. Milou submitted his report in May 2021 recommending detracking the math curriculum through 10th grade and eliminating Calculus from the standard K-12 curriculum:
 - The PPS BOE approved a new consulting contract for Dr. Milou in December 2021 to work further on reform of PPS’s math program, indicating their approval of the direction Dr. Milou recommended.
 - The “Math Committee” formed in March 2022 to review Dr. Milou’s recommendations set a timetable for implementing reforms by the start of the 2022 - 2023 school year.
 - The PPS district Math Supervisor reiterated Dr. Milou’s recommendation to detrack through 10th grade and endorsed his rationales for the reform at a public BOE meeting on March 29th.
- Dr. Milou’s recommended final curriculum is simply a copy of other reforms being developed and adopted elsewhere in the country. For example, it is the curriculum recommended in the current draft of the 2022 California Math Framework (CMF), which has drawn heavy criticism for removing critical preparation for STEM students, badly misrepresenting the findings of education research, denigrating the importance of procedural fluency, advocating for the elimination of objective measures of learning, and ignoring research on how best to support struggling students.
- District administrators thus appear to have embraced—apparently with the BOE’s approval—a national movement in favor of removing opportunities to take accelerated and advanced math courses in the name of equity.

Moreover, the district ignored the clear desire among parents of PPS students for the opposite of Dr. Milou's recommendations by:

- Keeping the members, materials, and deliberations of the Math Committee confidential;

- Including only parents of current 5th and 6th graders on the Math Committee, even though any curriculum changes would impact students for years to come; and
- Publicly misrepresenting the reform recommended by Dr. Milou's recommended as one that doesn't take anything away, but “only adds pathways” for students.

Perhaps most outrageous, in terms of lack of transparency, is the district’s release of only a heavily redacted version of Dr. Milou’s report in response to numerous requests by parents for the report under the New Jersey Open Public Records Act. The redactions omit all of Dr. Milou’s recommendations and their rationales—which is crucial information for parents concerned about these issues. If there is truly “nothing to see here,” as Dr. Kelley’s May 12th email suggests, then why is the district hiding from the community what Dr. Milou recommended and why? It seems that district administrators do have something to hide with respect to their efforts to reform the math curriculum. That they have redacted this information goes against basic principles of transparency and probity in government.

In Section 2 we describe the ongoing strategic planning process focused on equity, which is using a framework designed to lead to future reforms involving removing accelerated and advanced courses from the curriculum. We show that:

- The consulting firm that PPS Superintendent Dr. Carol Kelley hired to lead the process, Performance Fact, is using a distressingly simplistic definition of “equity” that requires “equal access to resources and opportunities that guarantee fair, just, and affirming experiences and produce *equal outcomes for every student, without exception.*”
- This new definition of equity stands in stark contrast to the definition adopted by PPS in its 2017 - 2018 equity audit, which stated:

Educational equity is not about equality. It is not about treating all children the same. Instead, equity is about acknowledging and valuing differences and ensuring that all children have the support they need to reach their highest potential in our classrooms regardless of their race, religion, gender, sexual identification, country of origin, cultural affiliation, language spoken, learning difference, or economic background.

We couldn’t agree more.

- The explicit premise for the consultants’ extreme “equal outcomes” definition of equity is that the only cause of a student not having reached a high level of mastery of an academic subject is that “she/he has not been taught well yet.” But a wide variety of factors outside of the control of the school system shape what students learn, including the students’ values and interests, areas of strength, and family resources. As well, the troubling

systematic differences on the basis of race and income in student outcomes and enrollment patterns reflect in large part deep-seated inequalities in broader society, much of which fall on racial lines.

- To be clear, we strongly believe that public education provides one key way for our community to address broader problems of inequality in our society. But we are unaware of any school district in the country that has found a way to completely remove the influence of these factors and achieve “equal outcomes.”
- Consider, then, what will district administrators do when other interventions fail to equalize all outcomes? The detracking approach that district administrators embraced through the Math Committee process suggests a way to equalize: lower the ceiling by eliminating opportunities for accelerated and advanced instruction. For example, PPS would indeed achieve equal enrollment in Calculus under Dr. Milou’s detracking proposal: all groups of students would have zero enrollment.

In Section 3 we provide further corroboration that district administrators have adopted a new view of educational equity that embraces the removal of accelerated learning opportunities as a way to narrow achievement gaps by examining Dr. Kelley’s track record at Oak Park School District, which she led as Superintendent prior to moving to PPS in 2021. We show that:

- Dr. Kelley pushed to end a math acceleration program for 3rd - 5th graders in 2017 because data showed that the students identified as needing accelerated instruction “were not representative of the rich diversity of the district.” Specifically, while Black and Latino students made up 29% of students in the relevant grades in the district, they made up only 11% of the students receiving accelerated math instruction through the program.
- Data from Oak Park show that this reform has lowered the achievement of students denied acceleration without improving outcomes for other students.
- At an Oak Park Board of Education meeting, Dr. Kelley nonetheless “explained that increasing access to opportunity to ALL is NOT about taking opportunity away from anyone. The goal is that EVERY child has access to engaging, stimulating, challenging teaching and learning in their mathematics classroom.” But her assertion that opportunities were not taken away—which echoes her May 12th email to the PPS community—is belied by the record, as we show.
- Parents at Oak Park were evidently kept out of the loop on this reform, to their great frustration. As one parent related at a board of education meeting:

“[Parents] attended community forums, including one of the ‘Community Conversations’ with Dr. Kelley, but were not given the opportunity to ask questions or express their concerns. They were told that these changes were the result of ‘focus groups’ that none of the parents of children in the program had been informed of or invited to. ... Any questions about these changes have been, and continue to be met with accusations of ‘opportunity hoarding’ and racism.”

- In 2019 Oak Park School District under Dr. Kelley then adopted an “equity policy” that creates a presumption that any instructional program that results in over- or under-representation of any group of students should be eliminated. The district’s equity policy also calls for the engagement of outside equity consultants “to conduct an evaluation to comprehensively identify policies and practices ... that are contributing to inequity...”
- It appears that the BOE hired Dr. Kelley specifically based on her track record on equity in which she took this approach. For example, the Town Topics article announcing the hiring of Dr. Kelley as Superintendent of PPS quotes current BOE president Dafna Kendal as saying:

“The most important thing to the Board is achievement for all of its students. There has been a persistent gap in opportunity in our district for students of color, students from homes with lower socio-economic status, and students with special needs. It is long past due that we focus on narrowing these gaps. Dr. Kelley has experience and success in helping all students succeed. We are confident that Dr. Kelley will help us narrow these gaps. Beyond a doubt she was the best candidate for this position.”

We agree that achievement gaps are deeply troubling. They exist in virtually every school district in the country and reflect, in major part, deep-seated inequalities in broader American society, much of which fall on racial lines because of the disgraceful history of racism in the United States, from the time of slavery to present day. But equity in education, properly understood, is about giving each student what he or she needs to have an effective, appropriately challenging, and rewarding educational experience. Equity requires deploying interventions that effectively support struggling students, including the disproportionate number that district data show come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Equity also requires giving an accelerated curriculum to students who need it to be appropriately challenged. Those most likely to be harmed by eliminating such opportunities are students from low-income families; families with greater means will simply seek such opportunities outside of PPS, thus exacerbating inequality. And equity requires finding ways to support and encourage students from underrepresented groups to take advantage of those accelerated opportunities, in an effort to address inequities in various careers beyond school.

The new approach to equity reflected in the developments at PPS that we have recounted, which embraces the removal of accelerated learning opportunities as a way to close achievement gaps, represents a stark departure from the approach taken to equity here at PPS as recently as the 2017 - 2018 equity audit. Even if the recent parent outcry has paused for now the district’s proposal to eliminate Calculus from the PHS curriculum, the evidence compiled in this report suggests that the same ideology that led to the Math Committee might result in less extreme but equally insidious changes across the PPS program in areas less likely to provoke such a strong and immediate parental response. The community must engage proactively now, including by shaping the ongoing strategic planning process that is slated for completion by August 2022, to restore a proper understanding of educational equity in the district and to prevent inequitable changes in the name of equity.

To move forward, we call on the Board of Education to adopt a set of clear policies that require school administrators to pursue a truly equitable approach to educating the children of our community. In particular, we call on the BOE to do the following:

1. **Commit to robust transparency in the process by which PPS curriculum decisions are made.** The attempt by district administrators to “hide the ball” from parents about these proposals to change the curriculum is deeply disappointing. We call on the BOE to give clear instructions to senior district administrators that they must be fully transparent with the public. As a first concrete step, we call on the BOE to release the full unredacted report by Dr. Milou from his review of the math curriculum to the PPS community.
2. **Equity means ensuring that all children have the support they need to reach their highest potential.** For purposes of the strategic planning process and beyond, we call on the BOE to readopt the definition of equity used in the district’s 2017 - 2018 equity audit:

“Educational equity is not about equality. It is not about treating all children the same. Instead, equity is about acknowledging and valuing differences and ensuring that all children have the support they need to reach their highest potential in our classrooms regardless of their race, religion, gender, sexual identification, country of origin, cultural affiliation, language spoken, learning difference, or economic background.”

3. **Use proven strategies and interventions to help struggling students.** Education policy is littered with failed reforms, and good intentions are no guarantee of success. Poor and disadvantaged children are especially vulnerable to the impacts of untested reforms because they have less access to private supports—such as tutoring, private classes, and houses full of books—that cushion middle class children from weaknesses in the school

system. Fortunately, there are some interventions, such as high-dose tutoring, that have been shown to be strongly effective. We call on the Board of Education to carefully vet proposed reforms for clear and rigorous evidence that they work.

4. **Equity for high-performing students.** It is inequitable to deny high-performing students opportunities for accelerated instruction. In readopting the definition of equity above, we call on the BOE to make clear that equity requires meeting high-performing students where they are by providing appropriate opportunities for accelerated instruction, and moreover to publicly state that systematic disparities between social groups in enrolling in accelerated courses is not a basis for eliminating those opportunities for acceleration. Furthermore, we urge the BOE to adopt an explicit policy on acceleration that gives every student at PPS the right to receive an appropriately challenging curriculum.

5. **Identify the specific needs of the district and fashion tailored solutions.** In its push for equity, the district is relying too heavily on outside consultants and language lifted from national movements to guide its path. We urge the BOE to direct district administrators to identify the specific needs and challenges of students, families, and teachers in our schools and to support policies and interventions designed to address those unmet needs.

This report was compiled by parents of Princeton Public School students: Ryan Bubb, Claire Bubb, Eleanor Hubbard, Leonidas Nguyen, Jill North, Jai Subrahmanyam, and Rachael Winfree.

Please send any correspondence about this report to parents.4.pps@gmail.com.

We will send additional information and updates about the issues raised in this report—and invite interested community members to opportunities to engage and advocate on behalf of improving Princeton Public Schools—to an email list created for that purpose. If you would like to join the email list, please send an email to parents4pps+subscribe@googlegroups.com and then reply to the email that is sent to you.