

## **New York State Integration Project: Work Underway in Community School District 2**

The purpose of the NYSIP-PLC program is to increase student achievement in New York State Title I Schools, particularly those schools identified for improvement, by encouraging greater integration by race and ethnicity, as well as socioeconomic, special education, and English language learner/Multilingual learner (ELL/MLL) status in Title I schools.

The three phases of this multi-year program provide districts with funding and programmatic support:

**Phase I:** District teams learn about the benefits of integration

**Phase II:** District teams develop a sustainable strategy that addresses segregation in the district and promotes integration

**Phase III:** District teams refine an integration strategy and implement a limited pilot plan in year one. In years two and three of Phase III, districts fully implement an integration strategy within target schools

### **Our District's Eligibility to Participate**

NYSIP-eligible districts are identified by NYSED according to the following criteria: (1) Ranking among the top 18 districts in the state for *Within District Overall Segregation* and (2) ranking within the top 12 districts in the State for *Between District Segregation*.

*Within District Overall Segregation* is defined as districts where the demographic makeup of schools (e.g., Race, Free and Reduced Price Lunch (FRPL), English Language Learners (ELLs) and Students with Disabilities) differs most from districtwide demographics, such that individual schools in the district have very different demographic groups represented in each school.

*Between District Segregation* is defined as districts where the demographic makeup of their district (e.g., Race, FRPL, English Language Learners and Students with Disabilities) differs most from their county demographics, such that the district has a very different demographic makeup as compared to other districts in the county.

### **District 2 middle schools (excluding K-8 schools) have the following ranges in student composition.**

Asian students	6.5% - 79.8%
Black students	1% - 25%
Hispanic students	5% - 57%
White students	1.7% - 64.1%
Special education students	4.2% - 32%
English Language Learners/Multi-lingual Learners (ELL/MLL)	0% - 25.2%
Qualify for free/reduced price lunch	14.2% - 89%
% of students testing at or above proficiency in ELA	31% - 95%
% of students testing at or above proficiency in Math	23% - 96%

### **The Challenge: Desegregating our District Without Using Race as an Integrating Variable**

NYSED has specified that all integration proposals must be consistent with the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District*. No. 1, 551 U.S. 701 (2007). "The Supreme Court's decision in *Parents Involved* is the most recent in a series of school desegregation and civil rights decisions that promote the notion of colorblindness, rejecting voluntary adoption of race conscious remedies to promote racial integration in public schools" (21). "The story of *Parents Involved* ends with the dismantling of Seattle Public Schools' voluntary integration plan, and restrictions nationwide on what school districts may

legally do in order to promote racially integrated school environments for students. Perhaps the most important lesson from the story of *Parents Involved* is that race conscious discussions must be veiled in terms of diversity...thereby dismissing explicit discourse about persistent racial inequalities, specifically within our public schools" (43).

In *Parents Involved*, Justice Kennedy suggests specifics means school districts may employ to promote integration without using race-conscious strategies. "He stated, "School boards may pursue the goal of bringing together students of diverse backgrounds and races through other means, including strategic site selection of new schools; drawing attendance zones with general recognition of the demographics of neighborhoods, allocating resources for special programs; recruiting students and faculty in a targeted fashion; and tracking enrollments, performance, and other statistics by race."

### **The Learning of NYSIP Phases I and II**

Through our work in NYSIP Phases I and II, our district community gained a deep awareness of the disparate academic outcomes - ultimately lifelong advantages or disadvantages - that our schools and larger system bestow upon our students as a result of our participation in the Phase I PLC. Upon beginning our Phase II work, our NYSIP team was very invested in CRSE practices, yet we repeatedly hit a brick wall when working on the composition prong. The team's best idea was to propose doing away with a competitive middle school application process altogether, similar to another NYC district's approach. However, when we proposed this idea to school leaders, parent leaders, labor partners, and our district's middle school youth leaders, it was clear that rubrics, screening, and competitive admissions were highly controversial, divisive topics. Proposing to abolish the current system would set us up for a long, hard year of infighting that would engender skepticism about our CRSE efforts, polarize our NYSIP work, and further delay integration. Our team began to think together with our partners about how we could instead *lean into* our students' data and the competitive admissions process to advantage vulnerable or less-advantaged applicants, thereby exerting the system's sorting mechanisms in their favor. We believe that every child deserves a fully integrated, welcoming, supportive, challenging, affirming school experience. As a team, we began to consider the idea that admissions formulas that currently have the effect of *segregating* students could be reworked to *integrate* students.

### **Inequitable Outcomes with our Students' School Experiences, and Progress We've Made**

Furthermore, within our district, economically disadvantaged students are 10 times more likely to be designated to receive special class services. Black students are six times more likely than white students to be classified as emotionally disturbed, and four times more likely to be suspended than they are to score a level 4 on the NYS mathematics exam. Hispanic students are twice as likely as white students to be classified as Speech Impaired, while 25% of ELLs in our district have IEPs. We see our disproportionate achievement outcomes and the disparity in student behavioral consequences, special education designations, and access to advanced and selective academic programs and we know that we have a lot of work to do. That said, through our efforts in Phase I and II, however, we are making strong progress. This year, as a result of devoting ourselves to learning and applying CRSE practices, superintendent suspensions were reduced by 33% district-wide; principal suspensions were reduced by 10%. In one of our pilot schools, PS 11, we saw IEP referrals drop from a yearly average of 30 by January to a mere seven. In the past, the majority of students referred were Black and Hispanic boys. This year, only two such students were included in the seven referred. These successes have bolstered us, and have encouraged us to look deeply at the root causes of the disparities that so significantly impact our students.

## **NYSIP Prong I: Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Pedagogy**

Our district has taken the learning and resources of NYSIP Phase I and II and we have built-out impactful professional learning structures to dramatically reduce the racial, socioeconomic, special education and ELL/MLL isolation of student throughout our schools, with a focus on the schools and classrooms where students encounter this isolation most frequently and deeply.

During Phase II,

- We developed teacher “think tanks” grounded in a focal student approach that centered Black and Hispanic students and students receiving special education services in our curricular and program design efforts.
- We also established School-level Equity in Action teams and Equity and Excellence cohorts for principals: Collaborative inquiry work into specific aspects of content-specific pedagogy with a CRSE lens.
- Educators conducted frequent student shadowing protocols to truly enter the life space of our most vulnerable kids. At our pilot schools, we developed and conducted School Culture Assessments, which offered us a holistic assessment of children’s experiences and regular feedback from students and families to ensure our school improvement work is grounded in their experience and perspective.
- The Critical Pedagogy cohort, grounded in the work of Dr. Ghody Muhammed and Dr. Christopher Emdin, asked educators to design curriculum to leverage students’ funds of knowledge, foster student agency and to develop their criticality.
- The Radical Inclusivity cohort, grounded in the work of Dr. Celia Oyler and Teachers College Inclusive Classrooms Project, pushed school leaders and educators to assess and flexibly program individual students who have special class program mandates to mitigate the isolation that is often experienced by these students, and to provide an education plan that is data-driven and academically responsive to the student’s needs.
- For the leaders and educators in all cohorts, district leaders visited classrooms, monitored student, classroom, and school-level data, and used our noticings to refine our approach.

To further convey a public, unwavering commitment to equitable practices and integration, our district revamped our school leader, teacher, and guidance counselor tenure processes to align to eliminating disproportionality in student achievement, access to selective academic programs and learning enrichment opportunities, disciplinary consequences, and IEP status/disability classification/recommended settings. The tenure review process is now completely evidence-based. Made possible by NYSIP funding, we established a year-long cohort-model professional learning series for educators in these titles to assist them with CRSE action research and in-classroom data analysis in several areas of disproportionality. Centering disproportionality data in the tenure portfolio process made equity work the coin of the realm among early-career practitioners.

**NYSIP Prong II: Demographic Balancing and School Composition Efforts**

**District 2 middle schools (excluding K-8 schools) have the following ranges in student composition.**

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Throughout our parent, student, and educator equity engagement processes, competition for seats at middle schools noted to serve as “feeder programs” for high-prestige, selective high schools (and ultimately colleges) has presented itself time and again as the most plausible explanation for the persistent scourge of segregation in our district. In NYC, in contrast to many other districts in NYS, the application process to middle school is competitive, decided by criteria that entail aspects of students’ fourth grade elementary school performance such as grades, behavior scores, attendance, and NYS ELA and mathematics exam proficiency scores. In eighth grade, students apply to high schools in the same competitive manner. While the middle school application process is community school district-wide, the high school process is City-wide. In both the middle and high school admissions processes, students and parents must navigate vast options and systems, including strategizing around ever-evolving admissions methodology and rubrics, to maintain a competitive advantage. Students and parents frequently speak of the anxiety wrought by these processes, and voice a pervasive fear of becoming disadvantaged in the high school and college admissions game before ever matriculating to sixth grade. Meanwhile, teachers and school leaders tell of the intense pressures they face to prepare students for these competitive admissions processes and the resources that the processes demand from those educators who are tasked with facilitating it.

Through the NYSIP PLC, our ongoing data dives, and community engagement efforts, we have come to understand that our system of school choice that was intended to offer increased options to all students has become a venue of fierce competition that is slanted in favor of the already-advantaged. We see that the students who attend our strongest elementary schools earn the highest grades, test scores, and attendance scores, and they are advantaged in this current system beyond measure. Conversely, in large part, these competitive middle and high school admissions processes create the many gaps through which students in our most vulnerable subgroups often fall, which in turn leads to the compounding of disproportionate impacts that we seek to redress through the equity efforts made possible by this grant.

From a student or family perspective, cultivating empathy and awareness of the particular competitive dynamics of the K-12 landscape in our district are crucial first steps to planning for and successfully implementing a sustainable, effective district-wide integration initiative. In District 2, the middle school admissions process is inextricably linked with the high school admission process, which in turn increases students’ access to a select array of colleges and universities. Our team’s examination of the K-12 longitudinal student matriculation, graduation, and college data for our district cemented the impact of advantages and disadvantages that we began charting in *kindergarten*. Our conclusion is that if equitable middle school admissions are a huge lever for integration, then high school admissions is the torque that manifests true equitable educational and life opportunities for the broadest array of students.

## **Our Proposed Path Forward to Full District Integration**

We engineered our Phase II pilot to make equity-focused formulaic adjustments to our admissions process for middle schools by assigning numerical weights to particular subgroups of students based on specific characteristics that stood out as drivers of disproportionality – and we aggressively ramped up CRSE professional learning to create awareness, empathy, and skillful pedagogy around the students we sought to prioritize. Specifically, students with IEPs, students who are classified as English Language Learners, students whose families live in poverty, students whose families reside in temporary housing, and students who have scored at proficiency level one for mathematics or ELA on the NYS exams at any time in elementary school are demonstrably disadvantaged candidates in the current selective middle school application process. We note their overconcentration in several middle schools while other more selective schools admit virtually no students who have any of these characteristics. To remedy this disadvantage – and for many students these compounded disadvantages – we partnered with Dr. Amelie Marian, a data scientist from Rutgers University. Dr. Marian is helping us to develop formulaic weights that will be attached to the rubric scores of our most vulnerable students in the next middle school admissions cycle. This strategy was devised after an examination of system-wide and school-specific student data, an analysis of the admissions rubrics of individual schools as well as a model of the outcomes when the formulas and weights were applied, demonstrating the dynamic interdependent effect of each middle school's admissions changes on the other 18 middle schools in the district. Time and again, we noted through data modeling that the pattern of students who are most at risk of being assigned to a school with a concentrated group of other students who have the same intense needs could be disrupted through the application of these strategic admissions weights. We now have faith that we can reliably increase access and opportunity for the young people in our most vulnerable subgroups by applying strategic weights to already existing admissions rubrics.

In Phase II, our team became jubilant that we had found a way to use academic screens to *advance equity initiatives*. We are ready to proceed with implementing the admissions priorities and strategic academic weights at four pilot middle schools in the 2020-2021 admissions cycle. However, due to COVID-19, two of the typical categories in our middle school rubrics (attendance and performance on NYSED assessments) are no longer at play. We are similarly reluctant to use course grades because we know that students have varying levels of access to instruction and varying opportunities to demonstrate course mastery during this period of remote learning. As we anticipate guidance from the New York City Department of Education regarding how middle schools will navigate the 2020-2021 admissions cycle, we are committed to moving ahead with the integration pilot plan that our team crafted and cultivated community support for in Phase II.

### **For 2020-2021 school year:**

- We will support the four pilot middle schools with finalizing their admissions rubric for the 2021-2022 admissions cycle, prioritizing students who are historically disadvantaged in the school choice/middle school admissions process.
- We will continue to collect and analyze disproportionality data and will use that inquiry to expand and deepen our ongoing work in the realm of Social Emotional Learning, inclusive practices and movement to LRE, Critical Pedagogy, and the provision of rigorous, engaging instruction for all learners.
- We will ensure that all D2 schools have a functioning equity team to strengthen their school's capacity to be culturally, socio-emotionally, and academically responsive to all of their students.
- We will continue to cultivate a shared understanding of culturally responsive-sustaining practices across the district.
- We will identify eight Manhattan high schools as partners who will join us in our effort to build a *K-12 continuum* of equitable, deliberately integrated schools for every D2 student.
- We will onboard our new high school partners, ensuring a common set of understandings about our students, and a unified set of CRSE practices.
- Due to COVID-19, we will engage in composition modeling using a tool developed by Dr. Marian to provide additional clarity to our stakeholders.

**For the 2021-2022 school year:**

- We will expand the number of middle schools who will assign weights to particular subgroups
- We will pilot the assignment of strategic weights to the admissions rubrics of our high school partners.
- We will ensure that all D2 schools have a functioning student advisory group that serves alongside the school equity team.

**For the 2022-2023 school year, we will ensure a fully integrated, K-12 continuum of schools for every student in District 2 by:**

- Expanding our composition adjustment efforts to include all D2 middle schools in assigning strategic weights for particular subgroups.
- Expanding our composition adjustment efforts to include all eight Manhattan partner high schools in assigning strategic weights for particular subgroups.
- Continuing to collect and analyze disproportionality data. We will use that inquiry to monitor and revise our ongoing work in the realm of Social Emotional Learning, inclusive practices and movement to LRE, Critical Pedagogy, and the provision of rigorous, engaging instruction for all learners.

**Commitment to Democratic, Collaborative Decision-Making Processes**

Above all, we are committed to doing this work in a manner that fully engages and considers the perspectives of all constituents, through existing democratic decision-making structures. Throughout Phase I and II, we have continuously engaged our stakeholders to pursue and achieve equity and integration goals through professional and civic venues, including: the Principals Advisory Group, Chinatown Task Force, District Equity Team, School Leadership Teams, District Leadership Team, Community Education Council, District 2 PTA Presidents' Council, and consultative relationships with elected officials and labor partner representatives. All of our NYSIP work is shared with the members and leaders of these groups in order to garner feedback and to build consensus. Further, to open the work to entire D2 community, in partnership with our Community Education Council, we launched what we had planned to be a series of district-wide community engagement sessions in February. While the first session was a big success in sharing the enrollment and disproportionality data and providing a forum for multiple perspectives, the remaining sessions were cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. All of our stakeholders are united in their commitment to address the disproportionality data and integration goals of our district. We have benefited significantly from our learning and NYSIP's support in Phase I and II, and we are enormously hopeful that we will be selected to proceed in Phase III.