

# EQUITY WARRIORS

**Build an environment that advances educational equity by getting teachers to rely on each other across grade levels**

**BY GEORGE S. PERRY JR.**

**T**ry as one might, no principal can accomplish a school's equity vision alone. Advancing a vision that speaks to the success of all students requires everyone in the school community to rely on and support one another. Equity warriors—learners and visionaries—use existing structures and systems as tools to persuade the school community to join together and “own” the success of a shared vision.

NAESP's *Leaders We Need Now* study says that a majority of principals have been spending less time on crucial long-range initiatives such as equity and cultural responsiveness due to the often sudden and unpredictable demands of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many expressed a desire to recalibrate their work with equity at its center, as well as redistribute responsibilities to support equity initiatives in school.

Grade-level interdependence—getting teachers to collaborate on student goals throughout the school—animates what educators know intuitively: that it takes a village to educate a child. When the challenges to student learning from COVID-19 seem overwhelming, success in ensuring that each and every student moves smoothly through the elementary grades depends on the contributions of one's colleagues.

## **WARRIORS TOGETHER**

Equity warriors embrace grade-level interdependence as something they can use to improve teaching and learning and advance equity. This doesn't require additional funding, but it might require principals to use their skills of persuasion to nudge changes in the school culture.

Grade-level interdependence also shows teachers that nobody expects any one of them to be a superhero. Few teachers have the skills and the conditions to help students advance multiple grade levels in a single year—at

least not in every year or with every student. It's true that teachers need to be dedicated, devoted, and have the right supports in place to accelerate student learning, but we can't expect them to act alone.

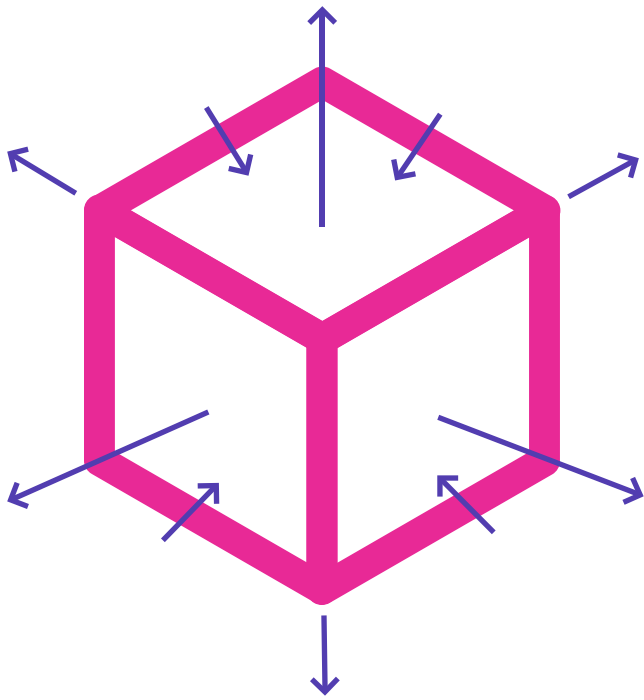
One of the most remarkable teachers I met taught in a school on the south side of San Diego. The school—located in a barrio isolated by gang territory—served new arrivals, homeless families, and others who often moved out of the neighborhood as quickly as they were able to do so. Each year, this teacher helped her kindergartners read and write to proficiency, often at the second-grade level.

Unfortunately, there was little evidence that students who had been successful in her classroom continued to excel. First- and second-grade teachers were unable—and ultimately, unwilling—to teach in ways that built upon the solid foundation students had at the end of kindergarten. Even when examples of student success due to individual efficacy were present, the school's culture couldn't muster collective efficacy, and students regressed academically.

## **CHANGING THE ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE**

Peter Drucker is credited with saying that “culture eats strategy for breakfast.” Equity warriors know that changing organizational culture is difficult, but it can be their greatest ally in creating equitable opportunities for students across grade levels.

For example, one of our partner schools in Texas enrolled just under 600 students, of whom 68 percent qualified for free and reduced-price meals. While most students performed well on state assessments, many students—particularly new kindergartners and first graders—struggled. The school's culture had been shaped by two principals, each



of whom had spent several years as the school's assistant principal before being appointed principal.

The current principal invested in team-building to increase staff capacity, particularly among experienced teachers. Grade-level teams met two or three times a week, and "vertical" teams met once a week with an agenda developed by the principal and lead teachers. Teachers slowly became more comfortable with open conversations, developed weekly pacing plans, and engaged in careful reviews of student work. The principal provided supervision and regular feedback.

The most remarkable process was the use of vertical team time for planning. Teachers visited other teachers' classrooms periodically. With about a month remaining in the school year, grade-level teams conducted an extended visit to the grade level immediately before their grade (for example, third-grade teachers visited second-grade classrooms). The visits were intended to help teachers determine the readiness of students entering their classrooms the following year, and to advise current teachers on the content and skills they needed to reinforce during the final month of the school year.

Visiting and visited teachers later exchanged feedback with little administrative supervision, and they valued their colleagues' feedback.

### SUSTAINING COLLECTIVE EFFICACY

Building a culture that sustains collective efficacy takes time, stable leadership, attention, and the right conditions. Nevertheless, we have seen other examples of teachers and staff embracing strategies to move the organizational culture.

Flint (Michigan) Community Schools realized culture changes following the introduction of a district-required,

fully aligned, standards-based literacy and mathematics curriculum at each grade level. The district had decided that uniformity in curriculum and instructional strategy across schools was critical to the success of students whose families tended to relocate often within the area.

The first step was to prepare teachers to use the curriculum, including daily lesson plans. While teachers were not required to follow the scripts provided, they were expected to follow the scope and sequence of the yearlong curriculum and its research-based instructional strategies.

Extensive investment in professional learning, including support from school-based coaches, helped convince teachers to try the district's curriculum. Many did so reluctantly. But when students began to respond positively and demonstrate their learning, teachers embraced the units and lessons. As the curriculum took hold with teachers and students, academic achievement increased for the first time in recent memory.

Part of Flint's professional learning was designed to help teachers understand the curriculum's vertical and horizontal alignment. There were two explicit messages: (1) Keep the pace as directed, since students will have multiple opportunities to master concepts each year and over time; and (2) teachers working together can make a difference in student learning.

Over the next few years, teachers learned to identify students' understanding of key concepts and gaps in student knowledge. In some schools, they also noticed that students who had spent the previous year with a particular teacher were further behind than students taught by other teachers. Teachers understood that when students come to them unprepared because colleagues haven't done their part, there is a consequence: The receiving teachers have to work harder.

### POWERS OF PERSUASION

Equity warriors create opportunities for teachers and staff to understand their interdependence and build collective efficacy. But teachers first need evidence that their efficacy comes from a culture that supports collaboration on student learning.

Savvy equity warriors persuade teachers that working together to bring alignment to the school's curriculum, instructional practices, protocols, and processes builds their capacity to learn from each other and reinforces student learning. The cycle becomes complete when collective efforts result in measurable gains.

So, ask yourself: How do the structures and systems in your school—such as the instructional leadership teams and professional learning communities—encourage and support grade-level interdependence? ●

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**George S. Perry Jr.** *advises school and district leaders and is the author of Equity Warriors: Creating Schools That Students Deserve.*