Equity Team 9/30/2020 Meeting Summary

At 7pm on September 30, 2020, we held our first virtual Equity Team meeting of the year. We had 20-25 MS54 community members in attendance, including parents, teachers, staff, and administration.

The Equity Steering Committee (Ms. Zipkin, Ms. Johnson, & Dr. Scott-Clayton) led a simple agenda:
1. Meet & greet (introductions)
2. Describe background and general goals of the Equity Team
3. Open discussion of equity issues, especially as related to remote learning, COVID-19, and current events.

The conversation that followed raised three specific issues: how to provide more support and resources for fully-remote readers with limited access to books at home; whether the "cameras on" attendance requirement might be experienced as intrusive and draining for some students who are already under stress; and what resources are available for students in need of additional emotional support and/or counseling.

Meeting notes and next steps will be posted soon on the Equity Team website: https://www.ms54.org/equity-team.html. We will plan another meeting in 4-6 weeks, specific date and time TBD.

1. Introductions

Ms. Johnson "went around the room" for introductions, sharing names, preferred gender pronouns, connection to the school community, and motivations in deciding to come to the meeting.

Unfortunately, in the middle of these introductions we experienced a "zoom-bombing" incident involving offensive slurs and disturbing graphic images. The incident lasted less than a minute. Once it was resolved, we had a brief discussion of how this occurred. We had made a decision not to require pre-registration in an effort to keep the meeting as accessible as possible to the parent community, although we did make use of both password protection and a waiting room. Ms. Zipkin assured the parents present that such an incident could not occur during school as school zooms are restricted to those with DOE and MS54 e-mail addresses. For future Equity Team meetings, we will take additional precautions while still ensuring access.

A parent who was present and is also a psychologist led the group through a brief breathing and centering exercise, so that we could regroup and continue with introductions.

2. Background and goals

Judy Scott-Clayton provided some background on the Equity Team, its general goals, and its prior work.

- We noted that the "Equity Team" is not exclusive in any way; anyone who comes to any meeting or participates in any of these efforts is part of the team. No obligation is implied by coming to a meeting.
- We are looking for an additional parent or two who can make a bigger commitment to join the Equity Steering group, which helps plan meetings, events, and initiatives. Judy noted that as an 8th grade parent this will be her last year in the Steering group.

We shared our mission statement: *MS54 is committed to providing a learning environment that reflects, supports, and celebrates the diversity of our community, with the belief that all students benefit from diverse, equitable, and inclusive schools and classrooms. The MS54 Equity Team promotes this goal by providing an outlet for community members to share experiences, ideas, and concerns. Throughout the year, the Equity Team will have regular meetings as well as sponsor events. All community members are welcome. For more information, comments, or suggestions, contact equity@ms54pta.org*

Past initiatives:
- Analysis of MS54 demographics, test scores, and school survey data; Back to school BBQ, Resource lists to celebrate cultural months, Public statements in response to current events, Hate Crimes Panel, Headphone distribution for remote learning, and more.
- Many resources from this prior work, including memos, resource lists, and meeting notes, are available on the Equity Team website: https://www.ms54.org/equity-team.html

A parent asked what is next in terms of Equity plans for this year. Ms. Zipkin noted that we welcome input and collaboration from the community. Some plans currently in the works include:
- Surveying families and students about their equity-related concerns and ideas: click here to respond. https://forms.gle/F4VGFicHp18kCW4X9
- Preparing a resource list to celebrate Latinx & Hispanic Heritage Month. We are soliciting suggested resources from the community: click here to contribute ideas. https://forms.gle/4jMh7TscXh8PCNWR6
- Additional next steps coming out of the meeting discussion are at the end of this document.

3. **Open discussion**

Three major topics came up in the open discussion:
1. How to better support remote learning for struggling readers, and for readers who are in the house with no books and fully remote
   a. Ideas from the chat: zoom book buddies, internal Project Cicero donation for classrooms, volunteers to record readings/books for others to listen to, resource drive for graphic novels & "hi-low" category books, book drop-off program, online movie versions of anime stories, online e-book program,
   b. Back-to-School Night could be a space for surveying parents about needing books at home.
   c. Some noted that public library programs may not reach the students/families teachers are most concerned about.

      d. Ms. Pinsen noted that Epic is a great resource for struggling readers at home, but currently is limited to Monday-Friday during school hours. Providing access on evenings & weekends would cost $8/month per student, or about $8,000 for 100 readers for 10 months. The Equity Steering team will follow up with teachers and PTA to see what might be possible.

2. Might the "cameras on" attendance requirement be experienced as intrusive and draining for some students who are already under stress?
      a. Ms. Johnson noted that some see such requirements as contributing to broader concerns about over-policing students' behavior and lives
      b. Some present voiced support of cameras on, and noted the value of being able to see expressions and reactions, and shared a sense that everyone has the equivalent of bad hair days. Several noted the importance of setting expectations, and the risk that students would take advantage if expectations were not structured and clear.
      c. At the same time most voiced a need for flexibility and gentleness. It was raised that the issue is not necessarily about the specific background or physical location; but that being constantly on camera can be experienced as a personal intrusion and psychological drain at a time when some students may already be feeling vulnerable and emotionally exposed.
      d. Some suggestions that were raised: Digital backgrounds, Profile photos, requiring the camera only for attendance, using Zoom polls, verbal cold calling, chat, or another creative way to engage and take attendance; creating a more emotional connection with students as to why we would like cameras to be on and for them to share in return if/when/why that is not always easy for them.

3. What resources are available for students who need support/counseling?
      a. Suggestion was raised for non-academic zoom safe spaces for kids to gather and decompress
      b. Teachers noted a number of student affinity groups already exist in the school (or have existed in past years): e.g. SHADES, LGBTQ+, and AAA.
      c. Ms. Mafdali shared school counseling resources.

4. Next steps

- The Equity Steering team will follow up with teachers and PTA regarding options for providing additional support to readers who are fully remote with limited or no books at home.
- The Equity Steering team will assemble a list of existing student affinity groups at the school with "blurbs" about their purpose and how to join, as well as additional counseling and support resources from Ms. Mafdali, and will help distribute this information to parents and students.
- Any parents who would like to be added to our equity-specific mailing list, or who may be interested in joining the steering committee, should contact equity@ms54pta.org.

The meeting closed with an urging to bring an Equity lens to all conversations and decision-making at the school, not to have it limited to the Equity Team meetings. The next meeting date and time are TBD but will be publicized through the PTA mailing list.