



# Board Meeting Recap

## For Evanston Twp. High School District 202

ETHS Board of Education

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Regular School Board Meeting

February 22, 2021

## Literacy growth improves in Evanston school districts

In January 2014, Evanston school districts 65 and 202 approved a joint literacy goal for both districts. The goal states: *District 65 and District 202 will ensure that all students are proficient readers and college and career ready by the time they reach 12<sup>th</sup> grade.* Knowing it will take time, both districts are committed to realizing the goal starting in pre-kindergarten and building proficiency over time.

**The first challenge** was to determine common assessments to measure grade-level proficiency and growth. District 65 uses MAP; ETHS uses the STAR assessment. Over two years, staffs from both districts collaborated to identify methods that could measure progress and gain consensus around benchmark thresholds for proficiency.

In February 2019, the district literacy teams presented an agreed upon set of annual norms for reporting progress—grade-level equivalents—that are easily understood by the community and school boards and still allow each district to use their preferred assessments. As a result,

ETHS determined a threshold of 8.3 grade-level equivalent as proficiency for incoming freshmen.

At the February 22 joint school board meeting, the literacy teams shared assessment data collected in spring 2019 (D65 MAP) and fall 2019 (D202 STAR). They included an historical analysis of students who met the grade-level thresholds for 3<sup>rd</sup> through 11<sup>th</sup> grades from 2016-17 and 2017-18. (Due to Covid, neither school district did testing last school year. Both will test the students this year.)

**Highlights from the** data analyses include:

- Trends are relatively consistent over the last three reported years for grades 3-8. (For example, 64% of 8<sup>th</sup> graders met the literacy goal in 2019, an increase from 61% in 2017 and 2018.
- Some areas of notable progress include 25% of Black 8<sup>th</sup> graders met the joint threshold in 2017; by 2019, 41% met the goal.
- Female students make the literacy goal at a higher rate than males:

69% of 8<sup>th</sup>-grade girls met the benchmark in 2019 vs. 58% of 8<sup>th</sup>-grade males.

- Students on free/reduced lunch are reaching the goal at higher rates: in 2017, 28% of 8<sup>th</sup>-graders met the goal; in 2019, 39% did (a 10% increase).
- For the Classes of 2020 and 2021, there was an overall increase in the percent of students who met the goal each year, consistent across all subgroups.

**School board members** noted that the consistency in trends will allow literacy leaders the chance to focus on learning standards. For example, D65 is re-evaluating how teachers use the data and is planning a curriculum audit. Both districts are working to make sure the transitions from pre-kindergarten to kindergarten and from 8<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> grade are smooth and that interventions are added where needed. Another concern: how is data from students with IEPs influencing progress.

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## Literacy partnerships benefit students and teachers

Board members at the February 22 joint school board meeting heard about two literacy partnerships—the Summer Lift program that serves challenged readers and a program to build teacher expertise in reading—that have seen recent success.

**Summer Lift**, offered for the past two years, focuses on building reading skills for identified students in grades 2 through 12 during the summer through targeted, personalized instruction. Students with varying needs who are at least two years behind in reading were invited to join the program that met for 11 consecutive Saturdays at ETHS.

Working with reading specialists, 14 students from D65 and 9 from ETHS participated in summer 2019, and 30 students (15 per district) joined the following summer. The 2019 students attended in person, but due to Covid, the summer 2020 group met remotely, daily for three weeks, for instruction and support. Teachers assessed the reading strengths and instructional needs of each student and determined the most effective

literacy strategies to improve each student's success.

**The results from** both year's programs were impressive. In 2019, the average grade-level improvement for D65 students was 2.0 grades (from 1.9 to 3.9 by the end of the summer). For ETHS students, the average grade-level improvement was 2.7 (from grades 3.6 to 6.3; two students grew more than 4 grade levels).

In 2020, the average improvement for D65 students was 1.8 (from grades 1.7 to 3.5), and for ETHS students, it was 2.1 (from grades 5.9 to 8). The lower growth rate in 2020 may have been influenced by Covid-driven remote learning.

**In addition to the** Summer Lift reading program, D65 and 202 have partnered with Northeastern IL University (NEIU), Foundation 65, ETHS Foundation, and private donors, to increase the number of faculty members who have completed their reading specialist degree or reading endorsement, or to pursue professional learning in literacy education.

ETHS also offers incentives including credits toward salary lane advancement and fast-track professional growth credits. All Summer Lift teachers were enrolled in the NEIU credential program and received tuition scholarships from the two districts' foundations.

**Board member** concerns focused on whether the summer reading gains are sustainable into the school year, funding to expand the Lift program, coordinated literacy leadership across the two districts, and triage work with pre-kindergarten youngsters and parents to help students be ready once they get to D65.

The need is immediate, said ETHS Supt. Eric Witherspoon. "The older an individual gets the more profound the effect becomes on their inability or deficiency in reading," he said. He added: "You can just see it in a child's eyes. If you're a sophomore and you can't read at the level of the materials that are being used in the classroom...they know they can't keep up with the other kids. We can't lose sight of it. Reading is the gateway to all learning."

## Using an equity lens with students paramount in D65 and 202

Racial and educational equity are top priorities in both Evanston school districts. D65 and 202 have well-defined goals and statements that frame and guide the districts' activities to eliminate racial and cultural biases in all forms that impact student learning and achievement, particularly for Black and Brown students.

**According to** Dr. Marcus Campbell, ETHS Asst. Supt./Principal, "Given the racial disparities of Covid-19 on communities of color as well as the

deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery" within the past calendar year, D65 and 202 have been working non-stop on equity issues with faculty and students, even during the pandemic.

**Equity projects at** ETHS are numerous. All ETHS staff received information this school year about how to use an equity lens with various issues that surface during remote learning...activities that go beyond course content such as internet connectivity issues, disparities in physi-

cal space and technology, awareness of students with diverse learning styles, and computer screen fatigue, for example. Building relationships with and among students was also a priority.

ETHS assembled a comprehensive Anti-Racist Resource Toolkit that addresses current issues related to the pandemic and social-justice movements for teachers to enhance their understanding of "what is happening in our country to better engage

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## **Equity – Continued from page 2**

in conversations with students using an anti-racist lens,” said Campbell.

**ETHS has offered** extensive staff development working with noted antiracist professionals to focus, for instance, on decentering whiteness in leadership and departments, incorporating student voice into their work and discussions, especially during remote learning, and helping to encourage staff in their work. Virtual Family Nights for all families and community members have fostered discussions on student achievement, 21<sup>st</sup> century parenting, and relevant racial and social justice issues. All of these efforts have focused on ensuring ALL students have access to high-quality learning.

Staff development has been a mainstay in D65 as well. This year they hired Devon Alexander as Manager of Equity, Diversity, and Family & Community Engagement to “help put equity into action,” said Dr. Latarsha Green, Deputy Superintendent. Alexander’s work centers on leadership development and strengthening family partnerships with the district.

**Professional teacher** training in D65 has been redesigned to allow teachers personal choice in working on racial equity development through action research and incorporating it into their classrooms.

According to D65 Supt. Devon Horton, other avenues for putting equity to work include detracking advanced math to allow more (and diverse) students the opportunity to succeed, rewriting its social studies curriculum to “speak truth about Black history...and include diversity, representation, and social justice orientation,” among other components. Also, due to a “teacher diversity shortage,” D65 has partnered with Northwestern University and received a state grant to train newly hired teachers to use an equity lens in their work, and put them in diversity cohorts throughout the district.