



**Equity & Inclusion for All Learners  
through Partnership & Collaboration**

**Equity Audit  
for Shrewsbury Public Schools  
2020**

**Submitted to Shrewsbury Public Schools  
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## **I. Introduction**

### **Introduction to the equity audit**

This equity audit addresses the current reality within Shrewsbury Public Schools (from here on referred to as SPS) with a focus on the community impact based on comprehensive stakeholder centered data, along with resources on how to create a more equitable and sustainable learning environment.

The following will introduce readers to the auditors, the purpose of the equity audit, and how the equity audit was focused and aligned. It will also highlight the initial and ongoing partnership with the core group of SPS leaders who steered and supported the equity audit.

### **Assabet Valley Collaborative**

Established in 1976, Assabet Valley Collaborative (from here on referred to as AVC) is an education service agency serving 15 member school districts, including Shrewsbury Public Schools, which has been a member for over 40 years. AVC provides an array of consultation services to school districts specializing in educational equity, cultural proficiency, culturally responsive teaching, shared inquiry/action research, professional learning, and strategic improvement planning.

AVC began prioritizing educational equity in 2012 when the Executive Director, Dr. Cathy Cummins, took a transformative graduate course in Cultural Proficiency taught by Boston College instructor, Patti DeRosa. First, Dr. Cummins brought the same course to the organization, then beginning in 2014, AVC began to offer this professional development externally to educators from other organizations. These efforts started by contracting with Ms. DeRosa to teach the classes through open enrollment and over time evolved to include the training of Dr. Cummins and two other team members to begin facilitating these courses independently of Ms. DeRosa. Between 2014 and 2018, AVC delivered cultural proficiency learning events in a range of venues/formats to nearly 1500 educators.

In 2018, AVC was awarded three pivotal opportunities which deeply impacted and strengthened its capacity to support the equity-centered improvement efforts of educational institutions. First, two of AVC's consultants were selected to be trained as facilitators of strategic planning through DESE's Planning for Success program. Second, AVC was awarded a contract with DESE to deliver a year-long course titled "Developing Cultural Proficiency in K12 Settings" to 100 educators; which was delivered in partnership with Patti DeRosa and renowned author, Zaretta Hammond (Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain - 2015). Third, AVC was awarded a capacity building grant from the Sudbury Foundation to be trained in facilitation of Design Thinking. AVC facilitators received 5 days of training from social innovation firm, Design Impact. A vital outcome of this



opportunity was the publishing of AVC's Commitments to Educational Equity and the design of a new position, Educational Equity Specialist.

As a result of these efforts in 2018, Kiesha Lamb filled the new position of Educational Equity Specialist. Her leadership and expertise deepened AVC's will, skill, and capacity within to accelerate and deepen the confidence to support districts in advancing educational equity through a variety of methodologies - facilitating professional learning, coaching, strategic planning, program evaluations and equity audits.

### **Biographies of Auditors**



Kiesha E. Lamb is the Educational Equity Specialist at Assabet Valley Collaborative. She is an expert at facilitating rich and deepened dialogue between community members of all ages. With a focus on Equity she has linked people and communities who, at times, because of personal and/or systemic barriers, feel worlds apart. She uses art as a tool to advocate for the owners of absent narratives.

Kiesha grew up within two different major inner cities and graduated from Chicago Public Schools. She moved to the Twin Cities in Minnesota and earned a B.A. in Educational Equity and the Arts from Metropolitan State University. During this time, she served as a professional development facilitator and consultant for Education Minnesota and the American Federation of Teachers. Kiesha has dedicated her career to seeking equity in the corners of education, from a parent's access to their child's education to a teacher's access to culturally relevant materials. This work's central goal is advancing student achievement and preparing youth and adults alike to better engage with the local and global world. Kiesha has also spent the last decade expanding the definition of educator to include families and community members who impact others through language and practice. She has family spread across the continents; when she's not working within communities, she's seeking opportunities to engage deeper in her writing, healing and traveling.



Dr. Cathy Cummins is the Executive Director at Assabet Valley Collaborative. Her expertise in equity-centered leadership emanates from nearly 25 years in the education field and is fueled by a deep commitment to continuous learning and inquiry. She has experience as a humanities teacher, special education teacher, residential counselor, and educational administrator - roles and experiences that support her in making equity-centered learning experiences relevant to participants from a variety of roles within the educational sector.

Cathy grew up in a rural community in Illinois - with a population of 750 and a graduating class at the local public high school of 24. She attended Northwestern University where she earned a B.S. in Education and Social Policy. She then moved to New York City where she worked in after school centers and residential treatment centers prior to relocating to MA where she earned her M.Ed. in



Special Education and later her Ed.D. in Educational Leadership. Throughout her studies and leadership opportunities, Cathy has deepened her learning related to cultural proficiency and educational equity and now helps to co-facilitate the learning of others. She sees educational equity as a prerequisite to school and district improvement and any educational innovation.

### **Scope of Work**

AVC's commitments to educational equity are the north star for our equity-centered consultation. Our model for conducting evaluation and audit data is a collaborative, iterative process that includes identifying areas of strength, setting a charge for our district partners to further seek equity, and provide support for their continued learning and growth to become more equity centric. In partnering with SPS on this equity audit, we developed audit protocols to support the learning needed from each audit activity. We conducted focus groups and empathic interviews using principles of human-centered design. We supported SPS in going beyond a review of "traditionally" available data to bring knowledge and truth to the surface based on historical contexts, individual and collective narratives, and a pulse on the community. We worked with our partners to develop tools to continue their equity-based inquiry beyond the term of this audit. Our facilitators, Dr. Cathy Cummins and Kiesha Lamb took seriously the charge of providing an equity audit for the Shrewsbury community. Our hope is that our equity audit report will show to be thorough, empathetic, rigorous, and actionable.

### **Terminology**

Equity audits can be viewed as complex documents; complex documents are not always comprehended and consumed, much less moved from theory to practice. In an attempt to make this document more accessible, AVC created a list of terms that might better ground readers in this report and in the work to move the community towards a more equitable environment for all.

**Core tensions-** Core tensions occur when two realities exist that seem to be juxtaposed against one another that create friction or discomfort.

**Deficit Ideology-** Deficit ideology is a set of beliefs (at times subconscious), connecting negative outcomes to the inherent nature of a person or group that has been historically disadvantaged.

**Fragility-** A higher demand for comfort met with a lowered tolerance for multiple perspectives, especially those that counter one's own beliefs or values. In this context, fragility is found within those who represent the dominant groups in society.

**Equity Detours-** well-intentioned initiatives that use a great deal of time and resources but that fall short of achieving genuine equity in practice.

**Individualism-** The value based stance that each person is responsible for their own progress and achievement of success. This often leads to unhealthy competition and lack of collectivism within



learning environments, promoting the perpetuation of long standing learning and opportunity gaps between historically advantaged and disadvantaged groups.

**Leader/Learner-** The individual terms, leader and learner are commonly used within education, however, in this context, the leader and learner dynamic proposes an opportunity for people to exist in both spaces despite the hierarchy and power dynamics; in fact it acknowledges that everyone has a responsibility to be a leader and a learner, just as well positioned leaders have the responsibility to carve out space for everyone to be a leader and a learner.

**Minoritized-** [Minoritized](#) is a concept describing a certain group of people based on their relationship to the dominant group at a certain time and place. Some groups are minorities only in certain settings, not in relation to the groups they originate from or belong to. AVC has adopted the use of the language “minoritized” instead of “minority” to acknowledge the various identities and the power dynamics that exist.

**Stakeholders-** In general, the term stakeholders within education include all those impacted and those who are connected to or providing input to the education community. In this report, the auditors have narrowed down the focus to include SPS families, students, and staff (licensed and unlicensed). The stakeholders referenced participated in the interviews and focus groups and informed the qualitative data matched by the quantitative data provided.

**Tokenism-** The written, or more likely, unwritten practice of seeing, utilizing, narrowing one’s existence and purpose to one part of their identity as a technical solution to an adaptive problem.

### **AVC and SPS partnership is formed**

In response to a Request for Proposal (RFP) published by the district, AVC designed a proposal that would align to SPS’s request and to AVC’s mission and vision. AVC partnered with SPS leadership to shape the equity audit process. AVC intentionally added into the proposal the need for a steering committee.

The purpose of the steering committee was to:

- To know the community and to support the communications (messaging really matters)
- To have a diverse body (not all admin) representing the complexities of needs and experiences from within the community
- To support the deployment of exploration and document gathering
- To identify stakeholders who have gone through cultural proficiency professional development or have accessed other introductory learning around Equity



A steering committee was pre-selected - Noelle Freeman, Director of Nursing; Amy Clouter, Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction; Margaret Belsito, Assistant Superintendent of Student Services; and Barbara Malone, Executive Director of Human Resources.

Assabet Valley Collaborative Proposal Equity Audit for Shrewsbury Public Schools	
Activities	Deliverable
Project scope/planning meeting with steering team;  Implementation meeting with steering team	Timeline/Calendar of events; focus group invitation template  Development of Essential Questions  Development of collaboration tools (google);  Development of initial data/document collection list  Development of stakeholder list
Site visits - tour of buildings, recess, lunch, faculty meetings	Field notes - coded/analyzed to develop themes  Refinement of focus group questions & data/document review
12 Focus Groups (2 hours each) with time between for synthesis	Facilitation of focus groups & synthesis of focus group notes
Interviews with up to 15 stakeholders	1.5 hours interview + time between & synthesis time
Document Review, Synthesis, Analysis, & Writing	
Meeting with steering committee and Dr Sawyer (in time to prep for the school committee meeting)	Initial Report Due (DRAFT findings)-SC Meeting TBD
Steering Committee Review of initial findings - provide input, feedback, additional data	
Revisions and refinement of final report - including recommendations.	
Final Written Report	



After an initial kickoff and planning meeting, the steering committee adopted the following Essential Questions for the auditors to use in framing inquiry with stakeholders. The questions were translated into multiple languages on the district website, added to all communications to students, staff, and families, and were used to guide each conversation within stakeholder meetings:

1. How do SPS students and staff experience being learners in the district?
2. What root causes might explain the data for minoritized groups (amongst students, families and staff) within the district?
3. What do our minoritized groups need to experience success, safety, and a sense of belonging

## **II. Methodology**

### **Human Centered Design and Processes**

AVC's proposal highlighted a human-centered design approach to supporting partners in better knowing the experiences of members of their community as they shape their goals to advance equity. Human-centered design relies on surfacing the stories, experiences, and perspectives of stakeholders (see terminology) throughout an organization. School districts often are missing important data from stakeholders because reform and improvement efforts are often driven, designed, implemented, and evaluated in a rigid, linear, and top down approach by those who have the most positional power. This includes school committees, administrators, prominent community members, faculty with valued professional expertise or status and possibly 'diverse' family and community representatives whose thinking aligns to the aforementioned group of leaders.

This often leads school districts to adopt strategic plans, mission statements and core values that communicate commitments to serving all, but that lack deep knowledge and awareness of how stakeholders experience the practices and beliefs within the system. AVC's approach to equity leadership intentionally strives to surface the experiences and stories of stakeholders whose experiences have not been made visible to those who are making the decisions and whose voices are not included in forming the system's public statements or internal practices. This next section will walk through the phases AVC employed to invite stakeholder engagement including a focus on protocols, process, design and implementation approaches and stories.

### **Stakeholder Engagement**

AVC supported the steering committee in developing communications to families, principals, and all SPS staff regarding the purpose, phases, and process of the equity audit. These communications were distributed in multiple formats and languages within the district's limitations. To allow for the



human-centered design and process of the equity audit to be more accessible to stakeholders of all levels of education, power, and privilege, AVC crafted a list of potential frequently asked questions (FAQs) to be attached to all other correspondences.

## **FAQ**

What is an Equity Audit?

An Equity Audit is an assessment of the diversity, equity, and inclusion within an entity.

Why does my school need to complete an Equity Audit?

SPS as a district has sought out the opportunity to better align with its mission

Who will be completing the Equity Audit?

See auditor's bios above

What is my school's/ district's role in completing the Equity Audit?

District: Steering Committee will support the scheduling of focus groups across schools and disciplines

Schools: Individual schools are encouraged to welcome and support AVC's work

How long will the Equity Audit take to be completed?

Milestones and frequent Check-ins throughout

Final report due May 11th 2020 (\*timeline later adjusted to adapt to COVID-19 disruption)

How will I know what the next steps will be or what my role is?

The Steering Committee will be communicating between stakeholders as needed

Quality stakeholder engagement required research, intentional communications, a spirit of trust and partnership and a willingness to meet stakeholders where they were (literally and figuratively). The auditors met with stakeholders in coffee shops, and other times on the carpet during small group time. The outcome of engagement with SPS stakeholders delivered the bulk of data that would be analyzed and interpreted within this report.

## **Document and Data Review**

In addition to gathering qualitative data from stakeholders, the auditors reviewed documents and data sources that were publicly available or provided by members of the steering committee. These elements are summarized below as the context for our engagement with stakeholders.

## **Mission Statement and Strategic Plan:**

Shrewsbury Public Schools' Mission Statement reads: *Shrewsbury Public Schools, in partnership with the community, will provide students with the skills and knowledge for the 21st century, an appreciation of our democratic tradition, and the desire to continue to learn throughout life.* Core values listed under the mission statement include: Respect and Responsibility, Collaboration and Communication, Commitment to High Standards and Expectations, and Equity - which is described as creating "equal opportunities for all students to achieve success." A five year strategic plan was adopted in 2017 with the following Strategic Priorities: 1) Space and resources to support effective learning; 2) Learning environments where everyone's success matters; 3) Enhanced well-being of all; and 4) Connected learning for a complex world. Within strategic priority #2 - the district plan



articulates action areas related to staff learning inclusive and culturally proficient practices and identifying and closing achievement/performance gaps between student groups..

Shrewsbury's **Portrait of a Graduate** (2017) describes the competencies the school community desires each of their graduates to possess. They include Global Citizenship & Engagement, Collaboration & Communication, Resilience & Focus, Innovation, Critical Thinking & Content Mastery, and Leadership. Within each domain, descriptors include references to multiple perspectives, valuing diversity, self-care, problem-solving, creativity, and relationships with others.

### **Disproportionality finding from MA DESE**

The steering committee members informed the auditors that the district had received a finding from the MA DESE that there was a "significant disproportionality with regard to white students with emotional disabilities."

### **Curriculum Bias Review (required by [DESE's Public School Tiered Focused Monitoring](#))**

In the last several years, DESE has begun to enforce a long-standing requirement that districts ensure "that individual teachers... review all educational materials for simplistic and demeaning generalizations, lacking intellectual merit, on the basis of race, color, sex, gender, identity, religion, national origin and sexual orientation" and that "appropriate activities, discussions and/or supplementary materials are used to provide balance and context for any such stereotypes depicted in such materials." DESE's shift to more directly enforce documentation and compliance on this topic caused many districts, like Shrewsbury, to deliver and document compliance with this newly enforced criterion within a short window of time. Shrewsbury's leadership team added slides to the district's digital mandated training slide deck (see appendix) that described 7 Forms of Bias and the expectation that each team member review their curriculum for bias. The team created a checklist (see appendix) that directed teachers: "Where bias is found, it must be addressed in a timely manner." The team also created a script for department leaders to use when talking with their teams about using the new checklist.

### **Staff and Student Demographics**

Steering Committee members informed the auditors that the student and community demographics have changed significantly over the last decade, with a particular increase in community members who are categorized as "Asian." It was also noted that because the elementary schools are districted by neighborhood, the demographics of students vary by race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. As of this past year, 51% of students in the district are white, compared to almost 94% of SPS staff and 100% of senior administrators (Central Office Leaders, Director of Instructional Technology, Assistant Director of Pupil Personnel Services, Principals and Assistant Principals) being white. Figures 1-3 display data regarding SPS student and faculty demographics.



## District Demographic Data

Figure 1

SPS School Profiles from DESE Website										
	Parker	Beal	Coolidge	Spring	Paton	Floral	Sherwood	Oak	SHS	
Grade Span	PK	K-1	K-4	K-4	K-4	1-4	5-6	7-8	9-12	
Enrollment	230	316	410	352	354	726	1,001	994	1885	
African American	3.9%	3.8%	4.1%	2.0%	2.3%	3.9%	2.3%	3.5%	3.0%	
Asian	42.2%	53.2%	33.9%	26.1%	20.6%	48.2%	33.5%	29.9%	26.3%	
Hispanic	4.8%	6.0%	15.4%	4.5%	6.8%	8.0%	9.5%	9.4%	8.5%	
Native American	0.9%	0.9%	1.0%	0.3%	0.3%	1.0%	0.4%	0.2%	0.4%	
White	45.2%	32.6%	40.7%	61.1%	66.9%	34.8%	50.0%	53.5%	58.6%	
Multi-Race, Non-Hispanic	3.0%	3.5%	4.9%	6.0%	3.1%	4.1%	4.4%	3.5%	3.3%	
First Language not English	47.8%	57.0%	47.6%	24.7%	22.6%	52.0%	35.7%	34.1%	27.9%	
English Learner	3.5%	6.6%	6.3%	1.1%	0.6%	4.0%	2.6%	2.6%	2.1%	
Students with Disabilities	29.6%	14.9%	14.9%	12.2%	14.1%	13.1%	16.1%	13.2%	12.0%	
High Needs	41.3%	37.3%	42.7%	20.7%	23.2%	31.5%	31.5%	28.0%	22.8%	
Economically Disadvantaged	15.2%	13.0%	22.0%	5.1%	8.2%	10.2%	10.8%	11.8%	10.7%	
Accountability Classification	N/A	N/A	Substantial Progress toward targets	School of Recognition	Meeting or exceeding targets	Meeting or exceeding targets	Substantial Progress toward targets	Substantial Progress toward targets	Substantial Progress toward targets	

Figure 2

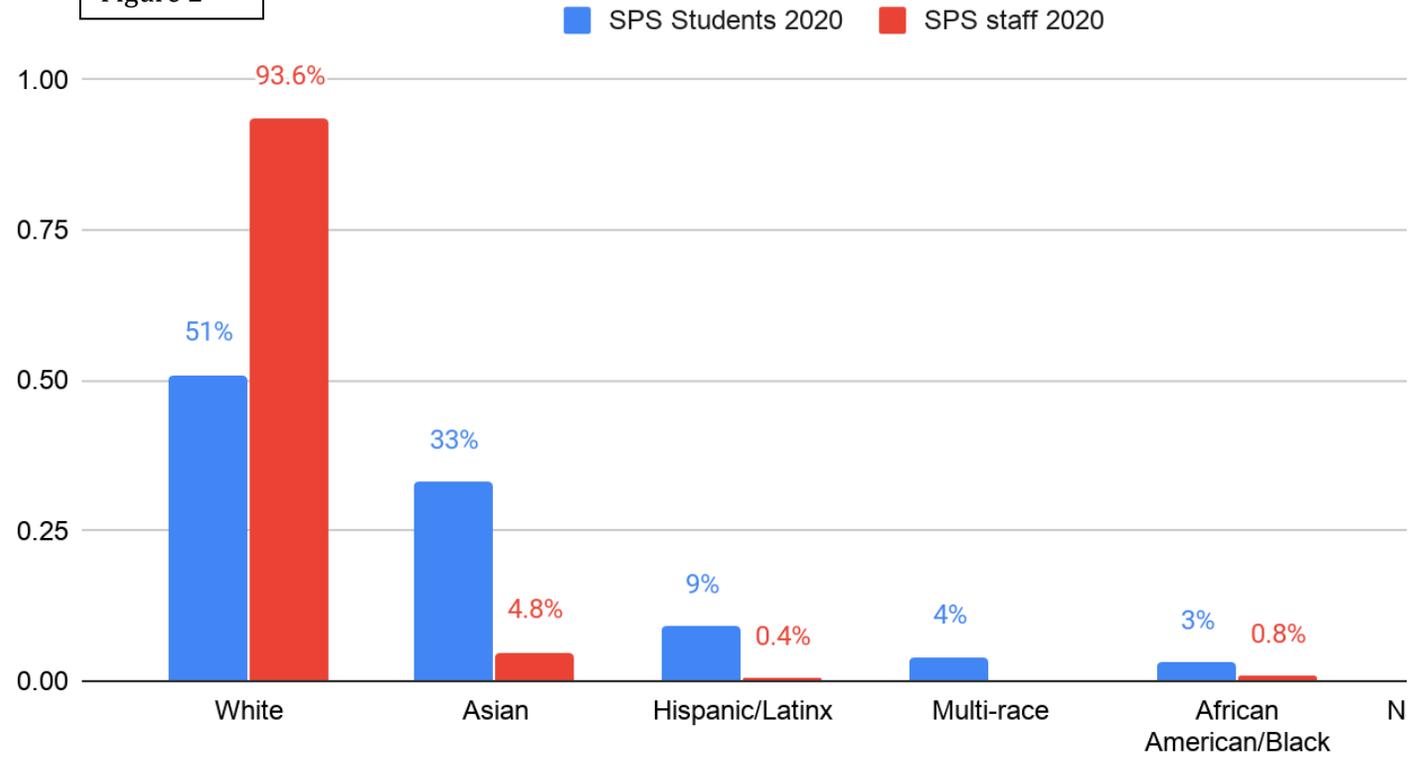
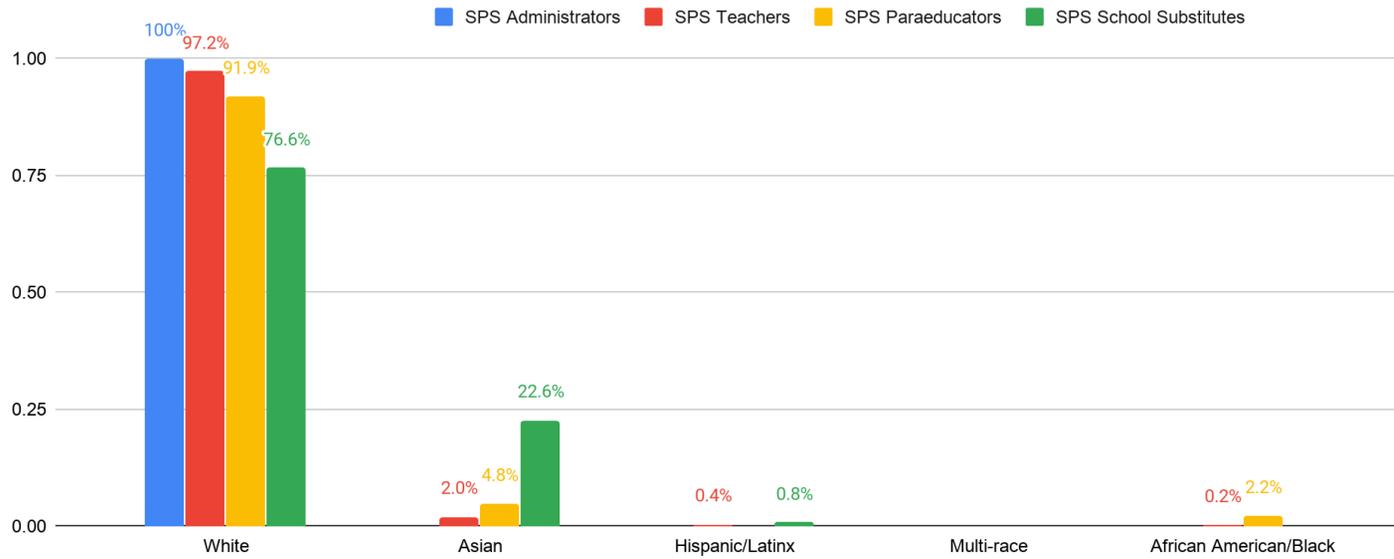


Figure 3





**“Advanced” Courses**

According to Massachusetts DESE “Courses that are considered advanced include Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, dual enrollment, and other challenging classes in a variety of subjects.” According to the most recent DESE Advanced Course Completion report (Figure 4) there are discrepancies between the percentage of students from various student groups who complete “advanced coursework” in grades 11 or 12. More than 93% of White, Asian, and female students complete advanced courses, compared to less than 90% of male, and Black students, 80% economically disadvantaged students, 76% Latinx students, 72% high needs, 64% students with disabilities, and 40% of English learners. The 2019 SHS testing Report summarizes aggregate data related to student participation in AP courses and results from standardized tests including AP, SAT, ACT, and PSAT. The data included in the report does not include disaggregated data related to these same categories.

Figure 4

Advanced Course Completion (2018-19) - DESE			
Student Group	# Grade 11 and 12 Students	# Students Completing Advanced	% Students Completing Advanced
All Students	935	864	92.4
Asian	211	203	96.2
Female	490	466	95.1
White	596	556	93.3
Multi-race, non-Hispanic or Latino	21	19	90.5
Male	443	396	89.4
African American/Black	26	23	88.5
Economically Disadvantaged	113	91	80.5
Hispanic or Latino	78	60	76.9
High needs	217	157	72.4
Students with disabilities	103	66	64.1
English learner (EL)	20	8	40



## **Student Discipline**

Like all districts in MA, suspensions and expulsions have decreased over the last decade as districts have implemented mandates aimed to reduce out of district suspensions and eliminate expulsions. Similar to these efforts within other districts, despite the decrease of suspensions, trends continue to show that predictably, certain groups of students are more likely to be disciplined and specifically out-of-school suspended than others. In Shrewsbury students who are economically disadvantaged, students with disabilities and black students are suspended at the highest rates (Figure 5), a trend showing relative consistency since 2015 (Figures 6 and 7). Discipline data show improvement in reducing the rate of suspensions for Latinx students in the last two years. While suspensions are one significant element of school discipline, other forms of discipline including office referrals, calls home, and detentions are important to review and disaggregate for better understanding how discipline policies and practices impact students. These types of reports were not provided for the audit, but may exist and be readily used by the district to support their additional inquiry.



Figure 5

<b>2018-19 Student Discipline Data Report - MA DESE - All Offenses</b>					
<b>Student Group</b>	<b>Students</b>	<b>Students Disciplined</b>	<b>% of Student Group Disciplined</b>	<b>% In-School Suspension</b>	<b>% Out-of-School Suspension</b>
Students w/disabilities	981	33	3.4%	0.9	2.5
Economically disadvantaged	853	27	3.2%	0.8	2.5
Afr. Amer./Black	197	6	3.0%	1	2.5
High needs	1,977	47	2.4%	0.7	1.8
Male	3,231	71	2.2%	0.6	1.6
Hispanic/Latino	557	10	1.8%	0.5	1.3
White	3,359	60	1.8%	0.5	1.4
All Students	6,405	84	1.3%	0.4	1
English Learner	240	3	1.3%		
Multi-race, Non-Hisp./Lat.	231	1	0.4%		
Female	3,170	12	0.4%	0.1	0.3
Asian	2,032	7	0.3%	0	0.3
Amer. Indian. or Alaska Nat.	28	0	0.0%		
Nat. Haw. or Pacif. Isl.	1		0.0%		

Figure 6

% of Student Group Disciplined SY15-SY19

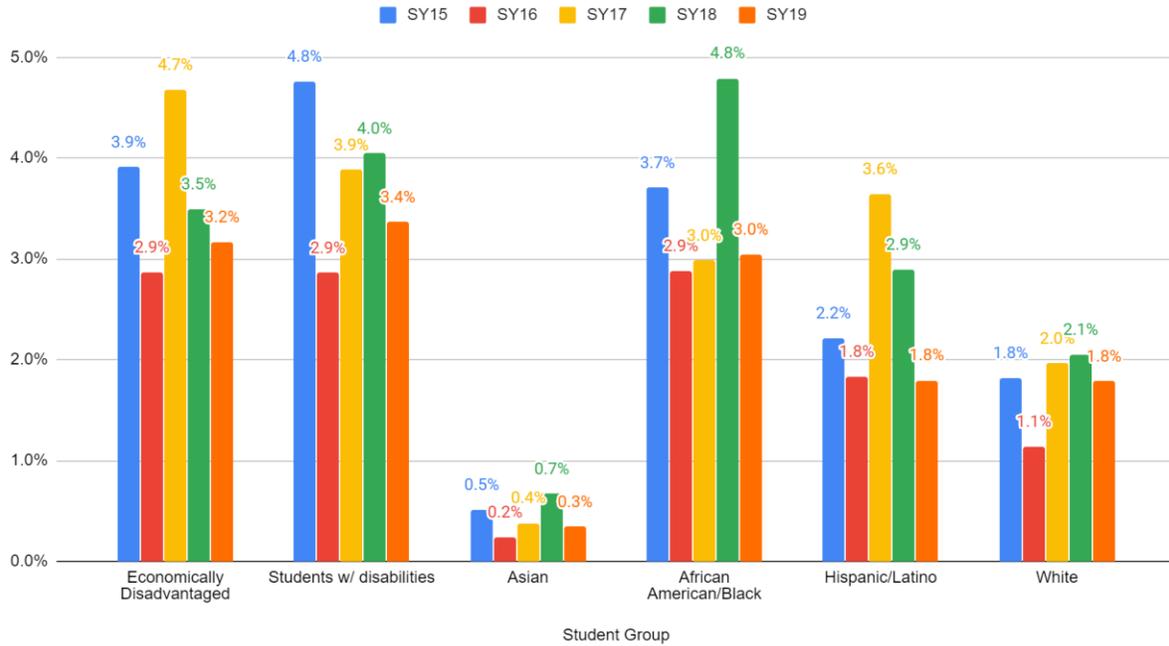
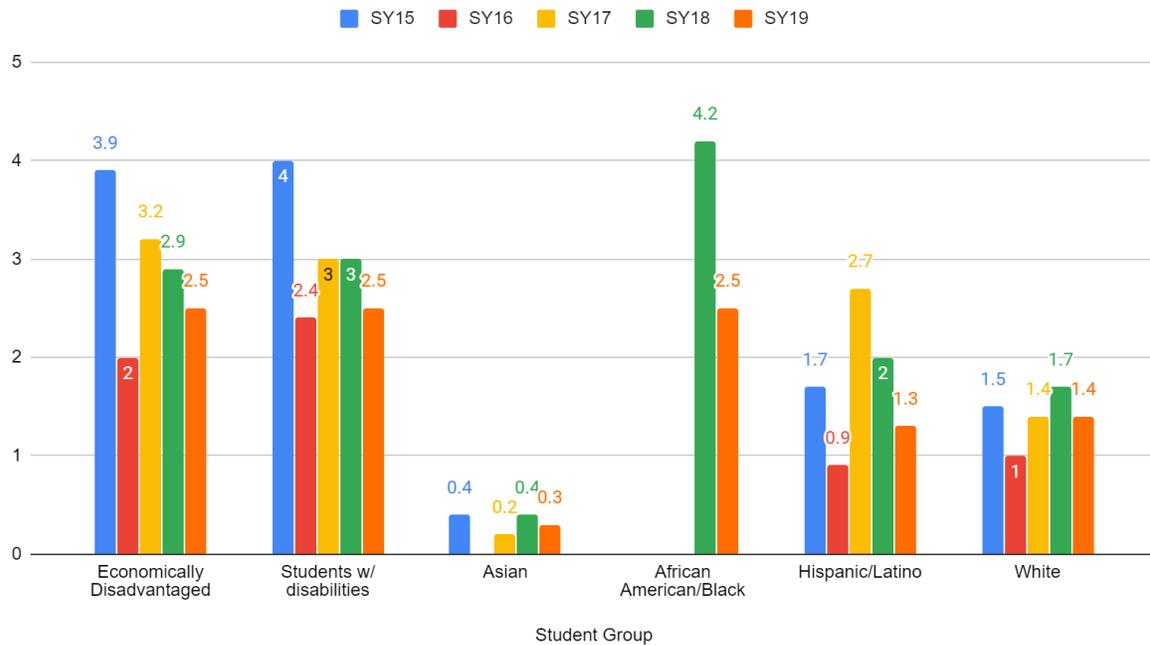


Figure 7

% Out of School Suspensions SY15-SY19



### Chronically Absent Rates

During the last two years, MA DESE has begun to report student “chronically absent” (defined as missing at least 10% of days enrolled regardless of whether the absences are excused, unexcused and/or for disciplinary reasons.) According to DESE, “being chronically absent can have a significant impact on a student’s ability to read at grade level, perform academically, and graduate on time.” In general, absence rates increase through middle school and peak in high school – and this is true in Shrewsbury as well. However, the chronically absent rates for students at Shrewsbury High School are comparatively higher than the chronically absent rates at ten comparison schools and compared to the state average. Figure 8 shows the 2018-2019 chronically absent rates at SHS for subgroups and shows comparison data from ten “like” high schools and the state. Figure 9 displays SHS Chronically Absent Rates for 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 – demonstrating an increase in the chronically absent rates for subgroups, and particularly Black and Latinx students and students who are economically disadvantaged, who are English learners, and students with disabilities.

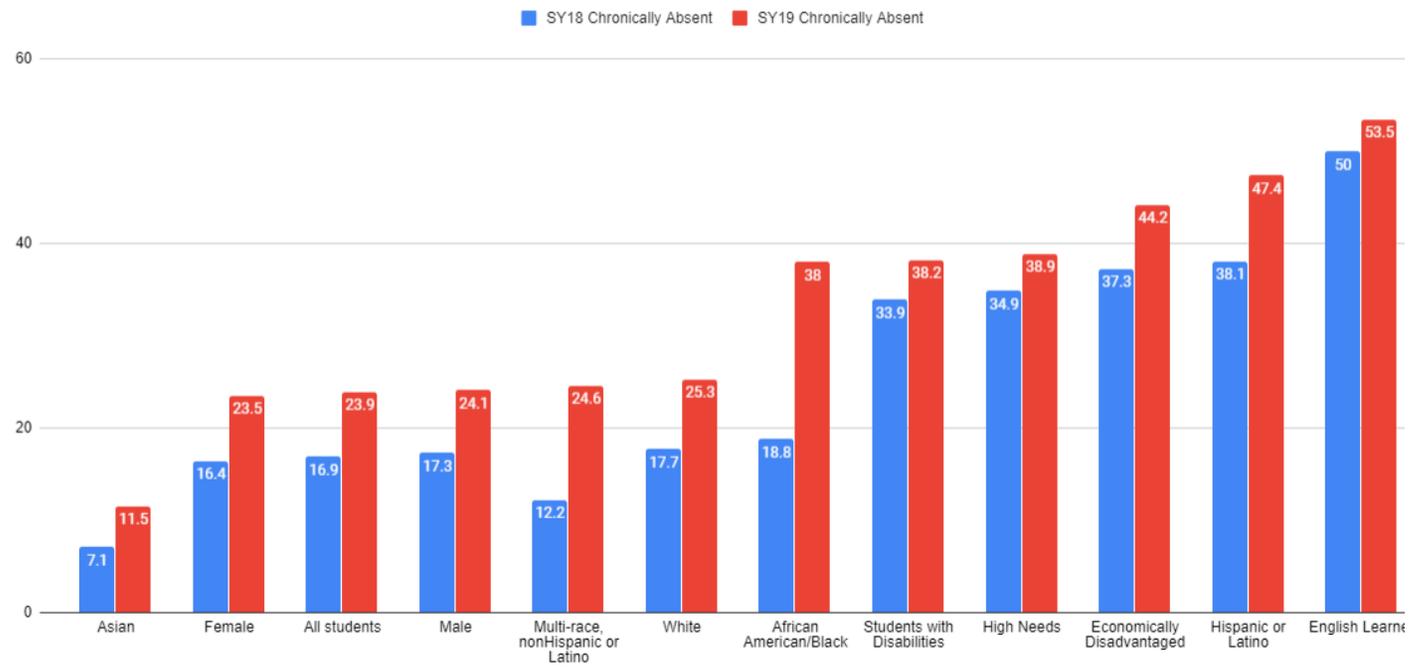
Source: MA DESE - District Analysis and Review Tool (DART) Success After High School Report. (Last updated March 2020) *\*NOTE –in reviewing this report, SPS leaders expressed concern that the chronically absent data may reflect errors in reporting. The SPS leadership team plans to investigate and share its findings.\**

Figure 8

DART Success After High School		Economically Disadvantaged	African American/Black	Hispanic/Latino	White	Asian
Schools / Districts		2019	2019	2019	2019	2019
	N	233	50	152	1,129	469
Shrewsbury - Shrewsbury Sr High	%	44.2	38	47.4	25.3	11.5
	N	135	26	79	740	294
Westborough - Westborough High	%	24.4	3.8	31.6	9.2	4.1
		99,790	28,290	59,162	184,001	19,636
State		31.8	23.5	32	13.5	8.6
	N	136	47	62	944	59
Walpole - Walpole High	%	34.6	19.1	17.7	10.4	6.8
	N	234	38	104	1,862	65
Wachusett - Wachusett Regional High	%	16.2	5.3	11.5	6.3	4.6
	N	122	73	59	661	289
Sharon - Sharon High	%	22.1	9.6	11.9	12.1	3.5
	N	214	57	143	1,147	103
North Andover - North Andover High	%	28.5	10.5	26.6	9.9	6.8
	N	146	198	60	672	68
Milton - Milton High	%	15.8	15.7	8.3	4.3	1.5
	N	134	73	43	825	47
Melrose - Melrose High	%	27.6	17.8	23.3	10.3	6.4
	N	162	52	57	1,113	205
Chelmsford - Chelmsford High	%	30.9	13.5	22.8	10.8	6.3
	N	111	49	57	908	238
Belmont - Belmont High	%	7.2	2	5.3	4.3	2.5
	N	133	52	88	1,030	157
Arlington - Arlington High	%	23.3	13.5	25	11.7	14

Figure 9

Shrewsbury High School - Chronically Absent Rates by Subgroup (2 year)





## **Limitations**

Even with intentional communications, a thorough and human-centered approach, collaborating with SPS partners, and collectively having decades of expertise, there are limitations worth naming. Many of the findings in our audit reflect phenomena that exist systemically and are not unique to SPS. As such, the recommendations will be focused on efforts SPS might consider to disrupt inequity within the district in spite of external influences. Also not unique to SPS, equity audits, by their very nature, require those who complete them to surface inequities and mirror them back to those who requested the audit. At times, equity audits are requested with good intentions or by mission statements and strategic plans but stakeholders are unprepared for the complexities, core tensions, new or named narratives, and inevitable difficulty that comes from the findings that result.

Sometimes district leaders request an equity audit to address a particular incident or in response to advocacy from minoritized stakeholders; that was not the case for SPS. SPS requested the audit as part of carrying out the goals of the five year strategic plan; this is to be commended as an effort to follow through on public commitments to all students. Consequently, because the community at large was not widely expecting an equity audit and did not have clarity on the administration's rationale for why one was needed, there were many misconceptions about what "problem" AVC's equity audit was meant to address. This lack of clarity or wide community engagement in designing the audit and/or purpose itself led to some delays in outreach to stakeholders and also added barriers to wide-scale participation of minoritized stakeholders including families, paraeducators, and students (particularly if they needed interpreter services to participate).

The findings reflect perceptual/qualitative data collected through focus groups, interviews, site visits, and documents provided by a small district team of administrators or found on public domains. Proportionally, the individuals who participated in interviews, focus groups, and the steering committee were predominantly administrators and/or white professional status faculty. The response rate from SPS families, students, paraeducators, faculty, with special attention on families of color or of self-identified stakeholders of minority status, was minimal. In addition, several participants requested individual conversations and confidentiality for fear of repercussions and/or fear of persistent apathy or inaction to previously named issues.

Families were informed of the site visits to their student's schools and given the opportunity to opt-out of having their students participate individually in interviews, seventy-nine students were opted out of the process by their parent/guardian. While the auditors visited each of the nine schools, the time frame and scope of the audit was not designed to provide a comprehensive review of practices in each location. Thus, the findings and recommendations are limited to themes generated from the aforementioned data elements and are provided as overarching concepts to support additional inquiry and action planning by district personnel.



### III. Findings (Assets and Areas of improvement)

By mid to late January, AVC, with the support of the SPS steering committee began scheduling initial interviews and site visits with all nine of the Shrewsbury principals at their respective schools. During the initial interviews with principals, the auditors shared about their work beyond the introductory emails sent prior to the meeting, the purpose for the upcoming site visit with their staff in their community, solicited the foci principals hoped would be prioritized ('look fors') in the equity audit based on their identified needs, and scheduled the logistics of the site visit. Within the interviews some common 'look fors' were surfaced, these included but were not limited to the following:

#### 'Look fors' as identified by Principals

- Any and everything
- Principal interactions with staff and students (needs assessment)
- Staff behaviors with auditors in the building
- Staff perceived levels of comprehension of equity, why an equity audit, and why now?
- The inclusion (or exclusion) practices by teachers
- Staff stereotyping students
- Connections staff make between the auditors being present and the most recent DESE curriculum review
- Retention of staff
- Representation of student diversity (materials in classrooms, hallways, and within curriculum)
- Socioeconomic related challenges
- Student culture
- Student behaviors (misbehaviors, interactions between races, and engagement)
- Who is invisible?
- Special education practices
- English Language Learner support and engagement

**While this 'Look fors' list is not exhaustive, it guided the auditor's observations and built in the data around the culture and needs within the district. The interviews with principals also surfaced some *core tensions* including:**

- Educators fear saying or doing the wrong thing and being considered racist
- To avoid misrepresentation or lack of representation, staff choose to avoid representation altogether (i.e. replacing diverse human depictions with inanimate objects)
- The recent curriculum bias reports were informative and created defensiveness and helplessness- process surfaced new opportunities for learning but was lacking expertise and sustainable direction
- "The *Blue Ribbon* school" refers to Spring St; not because it has actually received that particular award, but as code to signal its status as "better" or "better performing" or "more desired" as a result of being located in a more affluent neighborhood, having a higher DESE rating, and more PTO fundraising - proverbially known as "*center brats*"



- Coolidge is located in a socioeconomically lower neighborhood and holds a stigma of having the “most challenging students” - proverbially known as the “lake rats”. Sometimes its staff are held up or hold themselves up as “working harder”
- Paton and Floral sit in the middle with hard working staff who often feel undervalued in comparison to staff and students at Spring St and Coolidge.
- Redistricting is a much needed shift and opportunity for more students to experience success based on more equitable classroom sizes and equitable access to education and resources
- Redistricting also raised the possibility of parent and staff discord in relation to the redistribution of resources and staff

**Site Visits**

AVC went into each site visit with a list of ‘look fors’ from the previously completed interviews with principals along with the updated list of students whose families had opted them out of the interview process. Each of the 9 schools had its own culture and climate, assets and areas of improvement. Each site also welcomed the auditors in different ways, some with more trepidation than others, some with a chaperone and others with a map of the building and a thumbs up. Despite the shared messaging around the equity audit visit, not all staff members were privy to or comprehended the purpose or presence of the auditors. During the weeks of site visits AVC covered a wide range of people, spaces, and topics, including but not limited to:

People and places	Topics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Students</li> <li>● Families</li> <li>● Media centers</li> <li>● Interactive book cases</li> <li>● PK-12 classrooms and hallways</li> <li>● Main offices and front office staff</li> <li>● Recess and lunch</li> <li>● Psychology/counseling dept.</li> <li>● Extended learning/after school</li> <li>● Lounges with staff during lunch</li> <li>● Team level meetings</li> <li>● Specialists</li> <li>● ELL community</li> <li>● Reading nooks</li> <li>● Hallway break out sessions</li> <li>● Admin</li> <li>● OTs/PTs/SLTs</li> <li>● Paraeducators</li> <li>● Licensed staff</li> <li>● Volunteers</li> <li>● Debate team practice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● “Hour of Play”</li> <li>● Leadership and learning models/ Pathways</li> <li>● Deadlines and staff anxiety</li> <li>● ELC/Special Education</li> <li>● Classroom management and support</li> <li>● Academic and Behavioral instruction</li> <li>● Academic tracks</li> <li>● Transportation and Cost of extra-curricular activities</li> <li>● Parenting</li> <li>● Economic disparities</li> <li>● Field trips</li> <li>● Redistricting</li> <li>● Ratios</li> <li>● Technology</li> <li>● Sports vs. the Arts</li> <li>● Diversity</li> <li>● Relationships</li> <li>● Social emotional learning and Mental health</li> <li>● Curriculum bias</li> <li>● Gender, Race, Sexuality, Ability, Language, Culture...</li> </ul>



## Stakeholder Engagement

In addition to being welcomed to observe each of the 9 school sites, AVC also engaged directly with 126 stakeholders via 90 formal and informal meetings, focus groups, in-person interviews, phone calls and home and community visits. These engagements included thirty three families, fifty seven school staff, nine principals, and twenty seven students.

### Stakeholder Data

33 families 6 focus groups(AM/PM), + additional one on ones
57 staff (licensed and unlicensed) 4 focus groups(AM/PM), + additional one on ones
9 interviews with Principals
27 students (1st-11th graders) One on ones and small groups

## Focus Groups

AVC facilitated 10 focus groups – 6 with families and 4 with SPS staff. Rooms were reserved across the district, including Town Hall, and the schedule included morning and evening times. The focus group materials included background information on AVC, introductory prompts to get to know the stakeholder(s) present, a confidentiality form to commit to respecting the desire of anonymity of others present, the essential questions to ground the stakeholder(s) in shared purpose, and a feedback form to assess each stakeholder’s experience in the focus group.

## Informal and Individual Engagements

The auditors did not have access to students in the form of focus groups, therefore student engagement activities took place informally during site visits or observations – recess, lunch, classrooms, hallways, and after school events. In addition, several families and staff members reported having some trepidation about going through the established channels and chose to offer their responses through more secure avenues with the auditors. In some cases this meant meeting one-on-one at a local café, or home, or scheduling a phone call, or participating in a specialized focus group.

## Analysis and Themes

As the auditors synthesized their field notes and completed document and data review, themes emerged in four core competencies: 1) Instructional Practices, 2) Culture and Climate, 3) Staffing and Professional Learning and Growth, and 4) Representation and Tokenization.



Readers of this analysis should note the interconnectedness of the features within each of the core competencies. It is only divided into these sections to create a “bite sized” approach to learning, not to compartmentalize the collective responsibilities to all aspects of the community’s growth in becoming a more equity-centered community. Along with the interconnected competencies, the resources and recommendations also can be used interchangeably between the competencies.

Recommendations are written in detail with examples and scenarios directly below; these are bolstered with line by line resources at the end of this report. Finally, each of the competencies are written in language that might be more accessible to the masses with the goal of naming the values, behaviors, and practices that currently exist within SPS, but are challenging to see. Without accessible language, the work of dismantling inequities will be less likely to occur. The auditors were intentional in honoring the confidentiality of stakeholders while lifting up themes that were either repetitive or honed in on as an area of strength or hope related to equity.

### **Instructional Practices**

“Instructional Practices” refers to all features of a school environment that relate to learning - both what students are learning and what the staff are learning. To the extent that discipline practices or social/emotional curriculum are intended to “teach” students how to behave, regulate, and thrive - these are also included as “instructional practices.” Instructional Practices are essential to the learning environment and essential to how we measure by imposed standards, the success of all students.

Student outcomes within SPS and within educational communities nationwide are not only predictors for a community’s success but present as a positive or negative tracking status of schools. There are often district wide approaches to equity, differentiated and scaffolded to meet the needs of staff, students, and families. The goal is to operate from equity *embedded* curriculum, classrooms, and an overall equity centered school environment. But what does this mean?

Within SPS, the data would suggest that there are already some established areas of competency that not only need to be highlighted, but lifted up as models for the entire district to build upon and replicate. Access and inclusion is happening, for example, 1:1 technology within SPS has increased the student body’s chance at accessing learning, and with increased tech literacy at the forefront of 21st century learning, SPS is ahead of many others with technological access and inclusion. District wide book studies of culturally relevant texts like *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain* by Zaretta Hammond showcase a willingness to learn how to better tap into a student’s brilliance while allowing them to continue being responsible for their learning and growth. Hammond’s observation protocol is a great example of how to redefine the ‘look fors’ for educators to maximize the potential success in a classroom setting.

In relation to academic and behavioral instruction, collective learning is needed on the impact of white culture beliefs and behaviors on students through instruction. This will support All students, specifically those who are not able to fit the dominant culture’s standards and practices for a myriad of reasons (i.e. ELC students, ELL students, students experiencing poverty or a part of working class families etc.).



In the article, *“Grit is in our DNA”*, Dr. Bettina Love eloquently explains how “grit” out of context, is not a bad word, however context always matters. As documented, the SPS data around socioeconomic and learning divides are vast; therefore more learning is needed to close the research and instructional gap on meeting the needs of students who are experiencing poverty, the working class, learning disabilities, and other realities that don’t fit the dominant culture’s narrative of academic success within SPS. Work in these core areas will greatly improve the sub culture practice of identifying the success of the “Green apartment” families, the “bad or misbehaving students”, or other proverbial divisive language used within SPS to speak about marginalized students and the reasons behind their level of success.

Instructional practices and academic success cannot be separated from the policies, practices, and/or culture that centers equity or leads to inequities. For example, stakeholders at all levels used language to explain disproportionate access to higher level classes (i.e. honors and AP) including assumptions and stereotypes about which students “belong” in these higher level classes and which students should be provided with “lower level” curriculum (like vocational pathways) instead of comprehensive high school curriculum. Within this report, AVC has provided resources to learn more about the culture of tracking and the beliefs and practices that inform the status of equity reform in learning communities.

### **Culture and Climate**

In several interviews and focus groups AVC learned about how much love and support some staff feel, despite their affiliations, orientations, or status within SPS. A few stakeholders highlighted Shrewsbury’s award-winning unified programming – inclusion of students with disabilities in extracurricular programming. Several stakeholders noted positive experiences with the district’s support for students and faculty in the LGBTQIA community.

Audits intentionally highlight the areas that need to be reproduced and provide the “Why” and the “How” of the work. There’s a proverb that says *“A chain is no stronger than its weakest link”* and for the sake of this equity audit, it’s vital to name how the “weakest links” are experiencing the culture and climate in SPS, not to shame, but to provide opportunities for growth as a district. It is near impossible for an entire district to have the aforementioned culture of love and support across multiple sites without doing the necessary work that each site individually requires. This is where intentionally building in protocols, expectations, accountability measures, and rallying buy- in to attain the desired culture and climate can be a predictor of an equity centered environment.

It wasn’t far into the equity audit process that the auditors were introduced to concepts like the “Blue Ribbon School” and tokenization of the minoritized groups. Out of context, a concept can appear to be harmless, but within the SPS context, both concepts exist as barriers to achieving diversity, equity, and inclusion. It was not surprising to the auditors after visiting Spring St. school how amazing and hard working the students, staff, and leadership were, similar to all the other schools; in fact, this reality should remind the readers of how proverbial sayings like “Blue Ribbon School” hurt everyone involved. The fact is, the “Blue Ribbon School” is a euphemism for the socio economic advantages that haunt and create barriers to equity; it is a passive aggressive attempt at naming how schools, staff, students, and families are labeled superior or inferior based on their relationship to the distribution of resources and the status and prestige given or obtained by one site over the others. The fear of naming these inequities and disrupting this behavior by creatively



and collectively problem solving with stakeholders across the district has led to the acceptance and familiarity of this proverbial phrase and real divide for generations.

SPS stakeholders also spoke to the tokenism experienced by students, staff, and families across the district. It is important to name how tokenism shows up, who it impacts, and how to dismantle it. With a tendency to seek quick fixes due to budgetary restrictions or lack of resources, it is easy to employ strategies that lead to equity detours and the perpetuation of dominant norms. For example, who is consistently called on when there's a need for interpretation for families whose native language is one other than English? Questions to consider: Was there a formal agreement for this person to be the interpreter? How many times would they be expected to speak to a student's thinking, beliefs, and behaviors, as if all (insert minoritized group) were the same and based in culture and not in a singular household practice? Would these interactions have been negotiated in that first agreement with the stakeholder or just assigned to them at the beck and call of the dominant group? Is this position compensated appropriately? What assumptions have been made in this relationship, but not directly named? What are other resources that might be tapped into that don't tokenize but honor?

Another example might be a school's need for more 'diverse' representation at family events or on committees by minoritized groups (reminder that this could be any group that is not dominant in your setting), it is easy to 'cut corners' or participate in equity detours in ways that lead to the perpetuation of stereotypes, and the tokenism of staff, students, and families of minoritized status. This might show up as a well-meaning celebration that lacked research and authentic relationships or only asking 'cultural' related questions to the person being tokenized but no other higher level thinking questions, or better yet, co-designing. The responsibility of all within the community must be to build authentic relationships and rapport with everyone in the community, especially minoritized groups who likely have experienced these same realities outside of the realm of education. Within SPS the work of building rapport and authentic relationships is not only for the few (i.e. ELL staff, therapists, counselors, behavior specialists etc), but for everyone. If the hope is to build a community that's safe and welcoming to all, then creating a safe environment to learn, being vulnerable, and taking risks to close the gap between stakeholders is essential.

As SPS prioritizes the college and career readiness of students it is important to explore the current culture and climate, the impact of individualism over collectivism, and the role of social emotional learning (SEL) to support all students in reaching their full potential. Individualism, as defined above in the terminology section might appear to have only positive and healthy intentions, however the outcomes within a learning environment often lead to a replication of long standing learning and opportunity gaps between historically advantaged and disadvantaged groups. SPS might consider addressing healthy and unhealthy forms of competition when the same groups never 'win'. Competitive culture that promotes individual excellence (individualism) at the expense of a community centered district is counterintuitive to meeting the district's stated mission and vision.

SEL programming often includes a focus on wellness, mindfulness, emotional regulation in ways that often center the need for improvement on the students themselves, rather than on an environment, practice, or climate that promotes stress, pressure, competition, exclusion and compliance. "Kindness" campaigns, or mindfulness exercises, or school-wide posters are often signs that a district has adopted SEL as a priority (as is the case in Shrewsbury). But if the words on



the posters advertise a school that promotes “kindness” without having equal access to transportation for extracurricular activities, or without diverse viewpoints and experiences represented in the curriculum or personnel or leadership of the school, the SEL platform can be superficial. In some cases the SEL platform can run counter to inclusion and equity.

For example, in the SHS “Spring 2018 SEL Surveys” 331 students responded to survey questions designed to assess students' capacity in the following categories: Emotion Regulation, Grit, Growth Mindset, Learning Strategies, Self Efficacy, Self-Management, and Social Awareness. These categories are frequently used in the education field, across the nation, to determine if students have the capacity to withstand stressors, overcome challenges, and achieve wellness – or in other words “to succeed.” At the same time these categories - particularly “Grit” and “Self Efficacy” are in direct conflict with the foundations of racial equity and cultural proficiency. These terms (and many of the ways white institutions implement SEL programs) are examples of what is called “Deficit Thinking” - which means that the challenges students face in their learning are viewed as being solely a direct result of something lacking individually within the student.

Many questions in the SEL survey are framed with deficit thinking language. For example, in the Grit section, students were asked: “If *you have a problem* while working toward an important goal, how well can you keep working?” and “*How often do you stay focused* on the same goal for several months at a time?” In the section titled growth mindset, students were asked “How possible is it for you to change putting forth a lot of effort? or *behaving well* in class? or liking a subject?” In self efficacy - students were asked how confident they are that they can learn all the material? or that they will remember the material next year?

If students expressed lacking confidence in any of these areas, the ratings were not “favorable”. These results indicate that students are lacking the skills needed to learn rather than an indication that the instruction or environment might require intervention in order for the student to maximize their learning capabilities. Readers might benefit from exploring these concepts further and engaging in deepened student and family led inquiry about how they experience learning in Shrewsbury.

### **Staffing and Professional Learning and Growth**

SPS is well known as an innovative district when it comes to instructional technology and creative, nontraditional professional learning opportunities for faculty. SPS’s “pathways” for professional learning were designed to create choice and autonomy for educators when it comes to deciding what and how they’d like to learn. In addition, the district’s “Summer Institute” is well known throughout the region for bringing together high quality PD for the faculty from the district and neighboring districts. Some participants in the stakeholder events named the district’s approach – pathways and/or the Summer Institute as assets that benefit their learning. Other participants noted that for some topics – like cultural proficiency – the pathways approach can water down, or oversimplify complex topics that require expert facilitation and scaffolded coaching.

There are some positive intentions and efforts to advance more learning around cultural proficiency across the district; for example, in the last several years SPS teams participated in Cultural Proficiency coursework and last year hosted a racial justice keynote speaker at the Summer Institute. Even with these efforts, stakeholders have identified that there haven’t yet been sustained, embedded efforts or accountability to the learning. As a result, administrators who have participated in introductory professional development or reading have adopted terminology,



vocabulary, and mission statements that are ahead of the practices built into the system. The curriculum bias review training is an example of how the intentions to seek equity, diversity and inclusion were not matched in practice and instead caused harm. There was evidence of this harm formally and informally. At least one formal complaint was filed by SPS staff regarding the bias review training which further marginalized minoritized groups. Informally, there was evidence of the harm caused throughout interviews, focus groups, document reviews, and site visits. Some stakeholders described the rollout as “compliance” not improvement. There are reports of leaders reading from a script when introducing the bias review requirement; sometimes making light of it or complaining that it was yet one more thing required by DESE. The auditors observed a meeting in which the bias review was referred to as the “equity thing” to get “over with” so we “won’t have to go back to it again.”

While some leaders took steps to address and repair the concerns that had been brought to their attention, most of what we learned about the experience of the bias review were not known to leaders prior to this report. Because a bias review was mandated by DESE, the district administration has not needed to take responsibility for a harmful implementation of something as important and vital to the public mission of the district as reviewing curriculum for bias. While DESE’s mandate without practical and comprehensive implementation support is a vital part of the problem, the district administration implemented this mandate without supplemental scaffolds and supports.

Fragility is listed in the terminology section. It is being written about in the professional learning section because it plays an important part in the will, skill, and capacity of SPS staff to learn culturally proficient practices, beliefs and actions to move the theory behind the recommendations into practice. This is not unique to Shrewsbury; often leaders ask for an equity audit but are unprepared for how it will actually feel to have an equity audit completed. There are entire books on the phenomenon that our readers may possibly be experiencing right now. The “truths” SPS asked the auditors to deliberately go in search of may actually cause SPS stakeholders to feel disbelief, anger, frustration, fear, shame, guilt, or outrage. AVC also offers that many of its internal stakeholders have experienced a range of similar emotions. They are all part of a fragility that keeps white-led organizations from better living out their mission statements of meeting the needs of all.

The auditors experienced this fragility (again, not unique to Shrewsbury) throughout all the auditing activities; observed fear about the activities of the audit in many of the spaces, meetings and conversations AVC facilitated. Like in other places AVC visits, the auditors noticed that the books that showed diverse representation were on top of shelves but not reflective of what was throughout the media centers. While many were at minimum curious to see us, if not appreciative, some stakeholders appeared to be hesitant, choosing their words very carefully, or asking if what they said was acceptable. The great news is that because this is not unique to SPS, there are models, ways, and practices that can be taken up to learn how to counteract this behavior so that it doesn’t continue to get in the way of SPS’s desire and ability to achieve equity.

In some conversations, however, stakeholders were not afraid of the conversation and instead let the auditors know how excited they were to see AVC doing this work with SPS; how hopeful they were that this meant the administration was taking this content seriously. These engagements were often preceded with statements like “It’s about time” or “Will you please make sure this... gets in the report”. There were also questions for the auditors – what will happen after the report? What’s going to change? This experience is raised in the professional learning section because these are



potential “leaders” the district hasn’t tapped into yet and they are assets that can support the learning and doing ahead. There are stakeholders throughout the district that are eager and hungry to support this work – but they will need access to spaces and processes where data is analyzed, conclusions are drawn, and decisions are made.

### **Representation and Tokenization**

From start to finish of the audit process there was a mantra shared, that the “demographics of the staff do not represent the demographics of the student body.” This is a well-known fact that is confessed and acknowledged as a problem. There are volumes of research about the positive impact when educators of color are employed in positions throughout schools, as well as the rationale on why the current state of diverse professionals within education is so low. We’ve included some of this research below. The Steering Committee identified that it is a priority for SPS to more effectively attract families and faculty of color. The auditors also heard and observed some situations in which a desire to have diversity represented on initiatives or task forces led to the tokenism described above. When there are very, very few team members of color, they are individually more likely to be tokenized by others.

One challenge districts face in attracting faculty of color is that organizations often have a “reputation” for being inclusive or not being inclusive. In focus groups, some stakeholders joked about the “Shrewsbury way” as if it’s a known fact. And some of the stakeholders talked about it not in a joking way, but in a way that spoke to what it feels like as a student, or a parent, of a staff member if your way isn’t the “Shrewsbury way.” As long as this continues to be a known and accepted mantra, there’s no amount of HR posters, or recruitment language that will suffice to attract AND retain a more diverse workforce.

While as noted earlier, there are pockets of learning taking place throughout the district that should be noted as an important step. The auditors also observed some misconceptions and superficiality to some of the concepts, terminology being used. For example, in a few cases, stakeholders mentioned having learned about “white fragility” while engaging in concepts the book was intended to disrupt (see fragility section above). In other cases, stakeholders used terms like “culturally responsive” to talk about how they had engaged with a family but the description of the engagement was not at all culturally responsive and was in fact filled with bias, assumptions and stereotyping. These are sometimes the dangers inherent in starting learning activities without a coordinated and comprehensive plan for connecting deep learning to deep practice. We’ve added some resources below to support deepening the learning and practices.

### **Family and Community Engagement**

While the district’s strategic plan does not specifically name family engagement, research from Dr. Karen Mapp and stakeholders at all levels of SPS would suggest that family engagement is one of the central pillars to student and community engagement and success. During interviews and focus groups, families were identified as being a named priority, which aligns to all equity based practices; however, moving this theory to practice seemed to be a more complex task. Several stakeholders named the core tensions directly, stating that the goals of engaging more ‘diverse’ families were often met with barriers related to, but not exclusive to, socio-economic status,



cultural norms, educational buy-in, and linguistic needs.

In other cases, SPS stakeholders noted that parent engagement catered to those parents who were already in position to influence or benefit from the system as is; many stakeholders expressed that the PTO or school councils and teams were disproportionately filled with parents who did not represent the demographic composition of the student body. In response to this finding, the steering committee provided the auditors with a document that tabulates the number of parents engaged at each school in School Council or PTO (or “Parent Forum”) in one column and the number of “parents of color” in the other column. (Appendix).

In addition, many stakeholders described the composition of the PTOs at the elementary school level as examples of “haves and have nots” noting a well-known significant discrepancy between how much more Spring Street’s PTO is able to fundraise than Coolidge’s PTO year after year.

At times, SPS stakeholders used proverbial language to describe the status of family engagement that unintentionally perpetuated stereotypes emanating from deficit ideology, i.e. “Asian families are obviously all smart and educated” or “those uninvolved families never...”. This language was framed both as an expectation or pressure to families, and as concerns about students’ well-being in ways that signal a belief that families lacked cultural assets that could be accessed to support their success in school.

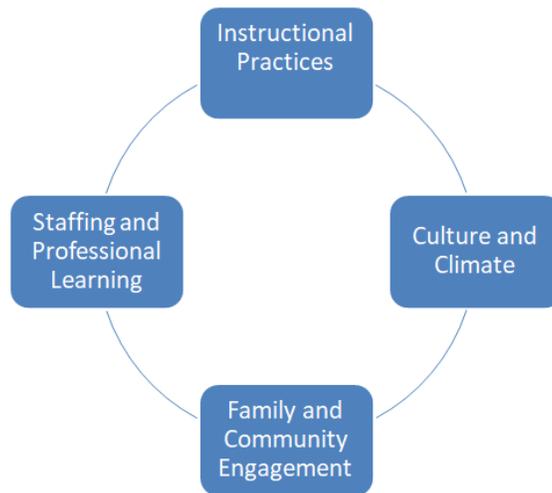
AVC and other stakeholders from focus groups and interviews recommend that SPS increase engagement with agencies, cultural programs and institutions, and community partners to support cross cultural connections and means to educate the community that does not represent the changing demographics of the community, and in ways that won’t tokenize the small number of existing stakeholders who would be interested in supporting this work, if not in isolation and without capacity building and plans for sustainability.

Within SPS, family and community engagement practices do not easily and readily include families who require translation or interpreter services, which continues to perpetuate stereotypes that these families are “less involved” or “less engaged” or “less able” to partner with the school for the success of their students. Clubs, sports, arts activities, and musical performances and classes are amongst the many examples provided by stakeholders that require additional fees and/or individual transportation. The greatest of these costs is the limiting of access to many students and their families from experiencing belonging within SPS. The composition of PTO and school council members was reported to lack diversity (specifically in relation to the proportions of diversity within the student body).

In addition, discrepant fund raising exacerbated inequitable resources in elementary schools, again adding to the existing narratives of inequitable value across the schools. Stakeholders reported that family involvement activities lack systemic, culturally relevant practices of engagement and partnership. To address this reality, SPS might consider district wide approaches to equity centered family engagement across sites with progressive and innovative partnerships to meet the needs of staff, students, and families. Co-designing this process with families would be essential to living into a more equitable learning community that authentically partners with all stakeholders for the success of all students.

## IV Recommendations and Resources

### Equity Audit's Core Competencies



Achieving educational equity requires first steps (short-term) and never-ending (long-term) efforts, both of which can be uplifted by and hindered by contextual circumstances. For example, during the course of AVC's engagement with SPS for the equity audit, the district faced a financial crisis, a global pandemic closed schools, and the killing of George Floyd inspired national protests and introspection.

The district's unexpected financial crisis added complex uncertainties to the impact of our report. Will the district have any financial capacity to try on any of the recommendations we share? Will our recommendations create conflict or tensions at a time that is already stressful for stakeholders? Can AVC pose recommendations that are cost neutral but that would still be meaningful steps in the right direction toward long-term commitments?

Shortly after AVC finished the final focus groups and site visits and began to analyze their field notes, the nation-wide COVID-19 pandemic shut down schools across MA. Like everywhere, SPS staff had to quickly change schooling to be delivered remotely. While this took attention from the audit activities, it also provided a strong example of how quickly a system can change when there is no choice.

In the last month, the killing of George Floyd (among many other acts of racial violence in the national news) has sparked national protest and for some an awakening racial consciousness. Superintendents, CEOs, politicians across white America have published statements that condemn



racism and that commit in various ways to “doing more” to fight racism. SPS’s Dr. Sawyer published one such statement (Appendix). In addition, 150 community members drafted a letter to the SPS School Committee demanding action on advancing anti-racism (Appendix). The auditors have drafted this report to help the district “do more” and “do better” as Dr. Sawyer challenged the community in his statement.

The district committed to learning from the equity audit process, including AVC’s findings and recommendations for short-term and long-term advances toward equity. Crises can exacerbate inequities, pause reforms, and distract from improvements. On the other hand, crisis can serve as a catalyst for bold disruptions, quicker actions, collective solidarity, and transformative steps. AVC crafted the research-based recommendations below with the current local and national context in mind. This recommendation reflects overarching findings and the resources to support short-term, next steps.

### **Short Term:**

It will be important that the short-term recommendations are carried out with input from stakeholders across SPS – not simply via an established leadership team or hierarchy. Students, families, paraeducators, educators have insights to share about past efforts and brilliant ideas to share about future efforts. To engage stakeholders in taking action on these recommendations, SPS should consider developing opportunities to engage stakeholders in making sense of the audit and in synthesizing the recommendations and resources. These opportunities should be provided in variety of formats, forums, and pathways that remove barriers to access and that reflect diversity of the community SPS serves. Renowned author, Zaretta Hammond, tells participants in her classes on culturally responsive teaching to “go slow to go deep.” She also talks about the importance of “assessing current reality” and developing “equity fluency” of school staff as first steps in a slow, deep response. This audit serves as a small part of “assessing current reality;” the limitations section highlights some of the gaps in our assessment. Our recommendations include steps the district could take to both continue to better assess the current reality AND to begin building equity fluency in stakeholders across the district.

The recommendations include research-based observation tools, a deeper dive into the curriculum bias aligned with everyday practices (not just annual reviews), equity related videos, activities, and articles. AVC recommends introspective professional learning models that go beyond workshops and book studies. This learning is often labeled “inside-out work;” an introspective model starts with the “inside.” AVC recommends authentic relationship building across cultures in ways that disrupt tokenization and that go beyond multicultural fairs.

It must be noted, short term equity efforts are meant to be enacted as a prerequisite to long term plans. Listed below are some examples; follow up contact with the auditors is welcomed and encouraged.

Core Competencies	Findings	Resources to Address Findings
<p><b>INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES</b></p> <p>District wide approaches to Equity, differentiated and scaffolded to meet the needs of staff, students, and families.</p> <p>Equity embedded curriculum and classroom environments.</p>	<p>Misconceptions of Cultural Proficiency and Culturally Responsive Teaching were observed in language used by faculty, in discussions of book studies, in the ways our focus was continuously drawn toward inclusion of students with disabilities.</p> <p>Execution of Curriculum Bias Review led to misunderstanding of the purpose of the review (and the purpose of the equity audit), superficial checklists, inadequate coverage, and inaccurate teaching of concepts of curriculum bias. (posters, book covers, animals instead of humans, culture fairs)</p> <p>District SEL focus lacks depth and cultural responsiveness which do not address the needs of all students, faculty and families.</p> <p>Tendency to seek pragmatic, quick-fixes - technical solutions (checklists, district-wide online mandated training, etc) create detours to equity-embedded practice.</p> <p>Review disaggregated discipline data (calls home, detention, time outs, office referrals, etc) to better detect disparities.</p> <p>Review access to “Honors” “AP” classes and college entrance exams based on student group demographics to better detect disparities.</p>	<p>Hammond- <a href="#">Podcast link</a></p> <p>Hammond- <a href="#">Observation Protocol</a></p> <p>ASCD- <a href="#">Contextual SEL</a></p> <p>Gorski- <a href="#">Pragmatic Decisions related to Equity</a></p> <p><a href="#">‘Grit is in Our DNA’: Why Teaching Grit is Inherently Anti-Black</a> (Love, 2019)</p> <p><a href="#">When SEL is Used as Another Form of Policing</a> (2020)</p> <p><a href="#">The Problem with Teaching Grit to Poor Kids? They Already Have it</a> (2016)</p> <p><a href="#">Education Equity and the Trouble with Pragmatic Decision Making</a> (2011): an essay written for the <a href="#">LeadScape</a> blog</p> <p><a href="https://paulgorski.efoliomn.com/Publications">https://paulgorski.efoliomn.com/Publications</a></p> <p><a href="#">Detracking for Excellence and Equity</a></p>
<p><b>CULTURE AND CLIMATE</b></p> <p>District wide approaches to identity affirming environments with healthy levels of competition, belonging and partnerships.</p>	<p>Language used to explain disproportionate access to higher level classes (honors, AP) included assumptions and stereotypes about which students “belong” in these classes and which students should be provided with “lower level” curriculum (like vocational pathways) instead of comprehensive high school curriculum.</p> <p>Competitive culture that promotes individual excellence (individualism) at the expense of a community centered district.</p> <p>Minoritized staff, families, and students feeling ostracized, tokenized, judged, or mistreated in relation to their minoritized identities..</p>	<p>YouTube- <a href="#">Becoming aware of stereotypes and seeking multiple narratives</a></p> <p>YouTube- <a href="#">Historical background to promote fact checking and affirm multiple perspectives</a></p> <p><a href="#">Collectivism Handout</a></p> <p><a href="#">Individualism vs. Collectivism</a> table (Hofstede)</p> <p>Zaretta Hammond’s Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain - Chapters 1 &amp; 2</p> <p><a href="#">Detracking for Excellence and Equity</a></p>



<p>STAFFING AND PROFESSIONAL LEARNING</p> <p>District wide approaches to Equity across sites through formal and informal teaching and learning opportunities.</p> <p>Uplifting stakeholders at all levels to be leaders who create a more successful environment for staff, students, and families.</p> <p>Recognize possible barriers experienced by minoritized staff, students, and families and provide teaching and learning opportunities to support them and others.</p>	<p>There were limited mechanisms to engage administrative assistants, paraeducators, families (especially families needing interpreter services) in the formal decision-making and improvement planning. (This also led to some of the limitations noted above in access to diverse stakeholders for the purpose of the audit).</p> <p>The faculty (and particularly the administration) does not reflect the racial, cultural and religious diversity of the student body or their families.</p> <p>Minoritized individuals are at times tapped to lead equity/inclusion/diversity work in ways that tokenize, minimize, and unduly burden their experience in the district.</p>	<p>Cohort models of 'Pathways' that use <a href="#">Observation Protocol</a> and other accountability measurements.</p> <p><a href="#">Equity Detours</a></p> <p><a href="#">Teachers or Color: High Demand and Short Supply</a></p>
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<p><b>FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT</b></p> <p>Expand data on Community needs and resources from an asset based lens.</p> <p>District wide approaches to Equity across sites with progressive and innovative partnerships to meet the needs of staff, students, and families.</p>	<p>Stakeholders reported that PTOs and School Councils lacked diversity (relative to diversity of student body). In addition, discrepant fund raising exacerbated inequitable resources in elementary schools.</p> <p>Clubs, sports, music/performance arts activities require additional fees and/or individual transportation - which limits access to many students.</p> <p>Family engagement practices do not easily include families who require translation or interpreter services, which continues to perpetuate stereotypes that these families are “less involved” or “less engaged” or “less able” to partner with the school in the success of their students.</p> <p>There are rich community-based cultural institutions that can be leveraged to support authentic cultural awareness, but these are not being fully harnessed.</p> <p>Stakeholders reported that family involvement activities lack systemic, culturally relevant practices of engagement and partnership.</p>	<p>Karen Mapp- <a href="#">Family and Community Engagement Framework</a></p> <p><a href="#">Alliance for Excellent Education</a></p>
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## **Conclusion:**

AVC would like to thank the entire SPS community for engaging in the equity audit and especially for the work many are committed to doing to see this process through for the betterment of all. The SPS steering committee members deserve a huge thank you! They partnered with AVC to adopt the essential questions, show up in full dedication and support for the process.

## **Revisiting the Essential Questions:**

1. How do SPS students and staff experience being learners in the district?
2. What root causes might explain the data for minoritized groups (amongst students, families and staff) within the district?
3. What do our minoritized groups need to experience success, safety, and a sense of belonging?

At AVC, we strive for each part of the human-centered design process to be a learning process for all those involved. To this end, we support teams in designing questions that can be asked over time and that will teach those being asked and those listening for answers. These questions opened dialogue and surfaced important themes as noted in the findings and recommendations sections. These questions are not “answered” by this audit in a linear and finite way – as often hoped for after inequities are lifted up. Instead each question is addressed by the brilliance gathered from SPS stakeholders and represent an ongoing, sustained curiosity – inquiry - needed by SPS in order to “do more” and “do better.” These questions could be a resource for continued inquiry as the district considers the short-term recommendations articulated in this report.



## **VI. Appendix**

### **DESE DART - District at a Glance Report**

**Curriculum Bias Checklist**

**Mandated Training Slides**

**Letter to School Committee**

**Superintendent Statement**

**School Council/PTO by School**