

A School System Designs for Equity In Two Pandemics Case Study: KIPP Metro Atlanta, Atlanta Georgia



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Introduction: Responding to the Moment

As schools and educators reopen in the face of COVID-19 and white supremacy, the need to move forward with equity at the forefront is greater now than ever before. These two pandemics have redesigned the relationships between teachers and students; schools and families. While COVID-19 shaped our lives in the foreground, 2020 reminded us of another chronic pandemic—white supremacy—and its impact on our relationships.

We learned that under pressure, we can react to the moment. As we prepare for the next COVID-19 era, we carry the legacies and learnings of 2020. We need to look at the schools and leaders that are using an equitable design lens to respond to the impact of both pandemics, and study how they have impacted the student and family experience. This case study illustrates how the principles of the equityXdesign framework look in practice and the beauty that emerges when equity is centered in our leadership and design practice.

The Beginning

When the newest pandemic of COVID-19 emerged, we assessed the situation as best as we could. We did not rush to mandate virtual learning. We realized that we had to create a plan. First, we conducted empathy interviews and established our design and implementation phase.

EMPATHY INTERVIEWS

During these interviews, we assessed the connectivity of every child in the system. We had a goal of 100% connectivity either using digital or analog technologies. Analog technologies include the ways we worked together before the Internet age, like paperwork packets. The high school was already tech-enabled so they were able to transition quickly. We anticipated the shift to virtual classrooms would impact the staff, so we took some time to establish a virtual learning culture. We knew that it would not be the same as our in-person culture. Our three principles were safety, equity, and excellence. We let go of perfection but maintained shared expectations.

DESIGN PROCESS

During the design process, we began to notice that when we were tired, we reverted back to what was comfortable. In those moments, we used the equityXdesign framework to remind us that we were indeed designers. Then we iterated, received feedback from our scholars, families and staff, and tried again and again. We had to design for the most vulnerable students first. We designed at the margins. We have families experiencing housing insecurity, food insecurity, job loss, and the social impact of white supremacy. The combination of both pandemics challenged our team to see school opening not as a matter of convenience, but as a matter of life and death for our teachers, students, and their families.

IMPLEMENTATION PHASE

Our Black families and many of our staff were suffering under both pandemics. We ceded power and put the lives of black children, teachers, and families first. We did not always get it right, but our principles of safety, equity, and excellence remained at the center of everything we did. Equipped with this knowledge and feedback, we were the first district in the metro area to announce a virtual opening for the 2020-21 school year.

We knew that there was no blueprint for what we were trying to accomplish, so we leaned into the knowledge of families, teachers, and leaders to help us chart the path together. To better learn the needs of our community, we started implementing our ideas on a small scale before scaling them throughout the district. There were times when we got stuck and it was difficult.

PRINCIPALS CEDE POWER

We were fortunate to have access to design sessions with the equityXdesign framework to help us find the language to speak the future into action. After one particular session, principals explored the ideas of teaching across grade levels to give teachers time to think, plan, and learn. Essentially, principals evolved into co-designers with teachers. The leadership team ceded power to the school teams. We used the framework when we got stuck and it helped us ask the right questions. When principals started teaching in the classrooms, they began to see the student experience through the eyes of the teachers. Well-being improved and the new relationship between teachers, the executive team, families, and principals has been beautiful. This change redesigned our relationships.

UNCOVERING FURTHER CHANGES

Along the way, we discovered policies and practices that were relics in the new system we were designing. Hidden in plain sight, they were only revealed when we started to move and change the way we worked together and started centering the experiences of students. When we started exploring our policies and practices using the equityXdesign framework as our litmus test, it revealed the standards that hindered progress.

We interrogated our dress code and looked closely at the freedom and responsibility of personal fashion. When the leadership team empowered leaders to look at policies and practices that might threaten our commitment to equity, we started to look at how our rules and expectations were gatekeepers that designed the relationships between children and staff; salaried and hourly staff; teachers and leaders; and the leadership team as a whole. When we were able to see the impact of the policy and practice together, we chose to remove it.

Given our position, we were not as proximate to the family or student experiences as our leaders and teachers. We needed the eyes and the experience of those closer to the daily work of school in order to redesign. Ceding our power and elevating their experiences as expertise is creating the groundwater for new relationships. We are now interrogating many more of our policies. This is our ongoing work that has started now and will continue in the upcoming school year.

SPEAKING A NEW FUTURE

In nature, it takes billions of years for mountains to move. When they move abruptly, they can cause violent eruptions and quakes. But we are seeing that when we all move together, we can move the very ground we all walk on without causing more harm and pain. It started with one important and critical step. All of this was enabled by our own shifts and identity work we started with ourselves. We unpacked our own biases, our own stories, and had to recognize that some of our ways of working and being together were compromising our commitment to equity. Before we asked anyone else to change, we as the leadership had to change.

As a result, we were able to be more inclusive in our practice as leaders, pivot, expand, and welcome new ideas. We learned a ton. We remain committed to maintaining 1:1 outreach with all families unable to participate in virtual learning so we are always close to the needs of the most vulnerable. We are also committed to doing the work to educate all of our staff to unlearn, so we can truly design differently and we can design for equity.

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