A Toolkit for Divisive Times

A Guide to Help School Board Members Advance Educational Equity in Hyperpolarized Environments
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A TOOLKIT FOR DIVISIVE TIMES

We prepared this toolkit to help school board members like you navigate the challenges of today’s hyperpolarized environments. As you’ll see, this resource is designed to be both practical and flexible since a one-size-fits-all approach wouldn’t work for a state as unique as Texas.

Before getting into the components of this toolkit, let’s first take a moment to discuss why this resource was developed. To do that, we need to address what it wasn’t created to do:

- **It wasn’t created to cause further division in our already divided communities.**
- **It wasn’t created to advance a particular agenda or point of view.**

Rather, this resource was developed to provide you with tools, tips, and suggestions to help you keep your district focused on excellent, equitable student outcomes.

Naturally, people have strong feelings and opinions on many topics affecting K-12 education right now. We get that. Things like critical race theory (CRT), diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts, and transgender rights quickly come to mind. Add to this the deep division in many communities around COVID-19 issues — requiring or not requiring masks, and in-person versus virtual instruction — and you have a perfect storm.

**So, what’s the answer? What’s the way forward?**

Here at TASB, we believe the way forward is through public school efforts that help ensure all students are successful. That’s the only way that our great state will be able to ensure that all Texas communities are successful today, tomorrow and in the future.

**That’s what this toolkit is all about. It’s about cutting through the noise.**
**It’s about focusing on what unites us.**

And most importantly, it’s about enabling local school boards to do the work they were called to do — ensuring all students are treated with dignity and respect and are provided the opportunity to succeed in school and in life.

**That’s the fight ahead for school boards and school board members.**
**Hyperpolitical tensions at the local level don’t seem to be going anywhere for now.**

Therefore, it’s about staying in the fight for Texas students.

Please count on us here at TASB to continue to provide you with resources you need to do just that. This toolkit is the start of those efforts.
First up, we’ll discuss:

- **Educational Equity — What It Is, and What It Isn’t.**

Next up, we outline five core strategies for advancing your district’s mission while also navigating topics that are dividing our communities:

- **Stay Student Focused**
- **Monitor Your Environment, but Avoid Opinion Wars**
- **Welcome Difficult Conversations**
- **Leverage Frontline Stories**
- **Lean On Unifying Messages**

While each of these strategies can be used independently, they’re most powerful when used together, and consistently, over time.

That’s the toolkit in a nutshell. We hope you find it useful in your work.
“Upon the subject of education...I can only say that I view it as the most important subject which we as a people may be engaged in.”

—Abraham Lincoln
EDUCATIONAL EQUITY — WHAT IT IS, AND WHAT IT ISN’T.

As most board members well know, there are wide-ranging viewpoints and feelings about the term educational equity, especially right now:

- Some community members are dissatisfied with gaps in academic achievement and asking that equity plans be implemented.
- Some community members are saying “no way” to equity plans, fearing that these efforts will divide, not unite, their community.
- Some community members say that equity work requires taking away from one student group or school to give to another.
- Some community members say that equity work is the only way forward if we want to prioritize student achievement and strengthen our communities.
- Some community members are asking that district policies be reviewed with an equity lens, noting that some policies are outdated, biased and in some cases even racist.
- Some community members insist that student codes of conduct policies, like dress codes, be strictly enforced as they prepare students for real life and professional work environments.
- Some community members are using critical race theory (CRT) and educational equity interchangeably.
- Some community members are adamant that critical race theory (CRT) and educational equity are completely different and shouldn’t be confused.

And the list could go on, and on.

Of course, we understand that some school districts have seen little community activity around equity issues. We also know that some school districts have seen all the above activity, plus outside political action committees (PAC) at work.

So how can school board members wanting to advance educational equity help clear up the confusion and stay focused on excellent, equitable outcomes?

Well, there are no easy answers. Unfortunately, easy solutions for complex issues rarely exist, especially when feelings are strong and viewpoints are entrenched.

To have more productive conversations around educational equity, we recommend starting with improving the understanding of what educational equity is, and what it isn’t:

Simply put, educational equity is a straightforward term with a singular purpose — ensuring all students are provided the opportunity to be successful in school and in life.

That’s it. Nothing more. Nothing less.
EDUCATIONAL EQUITY — WHAT IT IS, AND WHAT IT ISN’T.

Here are two practical examples that provide a wonderful way to explain equity to others.

As a parent...

■ Every parent knows that each of their children is different and has unique needs.

■ If your eldest child struggled to read in second grade, you’d work to ensure they were provided additional supports at school.

■ Additionally, you’d become more diligent about reading time at home. Maybe you’d even purchase more books or go to the library.

■ In contrast, your second child was an early reader and did well in school overall. They did, though, struggle in social situations and often needed additional comforting and encouragement to feel more at ease outside of the home.

■ This family scenario is also a fitting example of equity. In most families, these types of adjustments are naturally made over time as parents work to provide their children what they need to be successful.

This is equity at work.

In a classroom...

■ In a third-grade classroom, students not reading on grade level would be provided additional support so they can get on grade level. Everyone knows how important that is.

■ Not reading on grade level in third grade can have huge implications for the following years of education.

■ Everyone gets that, and it’s just part of the educational practices in schools.

■ This is an example of educational equity at work in a classroom and in a school.

■ Obviously, it’s not about taking away resources from other students, but about helping all students get the kinds of supports they need to be successful.

This is equity at work.

According to the 2019-20 Texas Academic Performance Report (TAPR), third graders who are economically disadvantaged performed a full seven percentage points below the state average for “approaches grade level or above” in reading.
EDUCATIONAL EQUITY — WHAT IT IS, AND WHAT IT ISN’T.

The graphic below illustrates the difference between equality and equity. Developed by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, it helps to illustrate what equity is and what it isn’t.

Equality

Equity

Of course, we understand that there’s more at play in the attacks on school board members than a simple definition and straightforward examples can address. The misrepresentation of equity work has been widespread—just look at social media. It’s therefore natural — albeit disheartening — that in some communities it has become difficult to talk about equity work without backlash.

That’s why the conversation around the term equity is so critical.

- **Equity work is not about further dividing our communities.**
- **Equity is not about “taking away” from one group to “give” to another.**

Educational equity has always been about ensuring all students are successful. It’s about removing barriers to student success. And it’s about working to close achievement gaps when they exist and as required by both federal and state educational accountability systems.

Overall, that’s the gist of this section. Navigating today’s environment means reclaiming the term educational equity. We hope you find our simple definition, examples, and colorful graphic helpful in your work.

Next up, we’ll look at practical tools and techniques to keep in mind as you work to stay student focused.

In fact, the next section is aptly titled “Stay Student Focused.”
The term educational equity came into common use in federal and state education policies and practices about 20 years ago. It’s strongly associated with “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) legislation led by former President George W. Bush.

In recent years, the terms equity work or diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) have also become more commonplace in K-12 education as some districts revisit and renew their local efforts to close achievement gaps as required by Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

When signed into law in 2015, ESSA further advanced educational equity in U.S. education policy by upholding critical protections outlined in NCLB while also granting flexibility to states in exchange for rigorous and comprehensive state-developed plans designed to close achievement gaps, increase equity, improve the quality of instruction, and increase outcomes for all students.
“Children are apt to live up to what you believe of them.”

—Lady Bird Johnson

STAY STUDENT FOCUSED
When you ask most school board members why they ran for their local school board, you’ll hear responses like:

“I got involved in the PTA at my daughter’s school, and that was the beginning of everything. Who knew at that time that I would run for school board?”

“My mom was on the school board when I was young, and it was just something that I always felt was important. I love my community and I love my work on the board.”

“My son has learning disabilities and I started getting involved at his school. Then I got involved on some district-level committees. Next thing I knew several people recommended that I run for the board. The rest is history.”

“After my kids graduated from high school, I started tutoring at the middle school in my neighborhood. Because of that work, I was asked to participate on a bond committee, which I really enjoyed. Next thing I know a good friend said I should run for the Board, and I did. I love this work.”

“I’m a local business owner and I wanted to make sure that the young people in my neighborhood would have the skills needed to be successful.”

“I was a teacher and a principal before retiring and running for the board. I knew I could help make our schools stronger.”

At the center of all of these statements are the students. They’re the most important stakeholders in your district.

Education will always be a local issue—and sometimes a contentious one—because it’s about the kids in our communities. And they need us all working together for them.

Staying student focused is critically important for two key reasons:

**First, remembering your “why” will sustain you in challenging times.**

As one of the most accessible public entities in the U.S., school boards often become ground zero for the heated debates at play at the state and national level.

That’s exactly what’s happening right now. Simply by being more accessible, school boards have faced much of the pent-up anger and frustration from the pandemic. It’s taken many forms and evolved over time, but regardless of how it looks in your district, it’s likely been directed at you at some point over the last two years.
That’s precisely why this reminder is here. It may sound simple, but it’s important.

Ask a family member or a friend to support you in these efforts — ask them to remind you after a rough board meeting or difficult conversation of why you do this work, and the positive impact you’ve had on your school board.

Place a small reminder at the front of your board desk area or at your workspace at home, noting something like “It’s about the kiddos” or with your favorite graduation ceremony picture or a photo from a special school event you attended as a trustee.

Start the tradition of purposefully putting on your favorite school or district apparel when arriving home from a challenging board meeting, using it as a prompt for returning to your “why.”

Remembering your “why” will sustain you in times like these if you lean into it.

In short, establish a practice that helps you center on your “why.” It’s important to the future of our great state. We need dedicated board members like you to stay in the fight for Texas students.

Second, remembering your “why” is a powerful tool for positioning and advancing equity work in your district.

Here’s a high-level example of how this can work in practice:

Imagine there’s an agenda item for an upcoming board meeting that you know your community has strong feelings about, and you expect there will be a large turnout for public comments. This item could be related to the launch of an equity plan or simply be an initiative that connects to the work your district is doing to remove barriers to student success.

You’ve been monitoring social media and there is a good deal of heated commentary around the topic. Some vocal folks are against the item. You know, though, that a vote in favor of the item is the best decision for your district, students, and families.

Sounds like something that could unfold — or already has — in your district, doesn’t it?

Your “why” can help you manage a situation like this.

That’s because, when you need to bring a topic back to student success and excellent, equitable outcomes, leaning into your “why” can have a powerful, positive effect.

So, let’s tackle the scenario above with this approach in mind.
To start, don’t underestimate the importance of acknowledging emotions when tensions are high.

It makes a difference, even if the person making an angry comment is dismissive of your efforts. Sometimes, what people need most is just to be heard. Community members — including students, teachers, and staff — are watching. So, set the standard for approaching challenging conversations in a respectful manner.

Acknowledge the situation at the start of the meeting:

“I know emotions are high on this issue, and we want to thank the parents and community for coming out tonight and sharing their input and feedback.”

“It’s obvious from tonight’s turnout that many community members have strong feelings on this issue. That’s understood, and we recognize the passion around this topic.”

“We please know that we hear you and recognize the deep feelings being expressed on this issue.”

Next up, pivot hard to excellent, equitable student outcomes.

When discussing the agenda item, put the topic in a student success frame:

“Our current achievement data shows that we still have gaps in achievement between student groups. As we look at this agenda item, we need to keep the focus on student success, and we must mean all students.”

“We can reach our goal of excellent, equitable outcomes for all students if the appropriate supports and resources are provided to our schools and teachers. I believe wholeheartedly that this initiative is a good start on that path.”

“We made a commitment as a community to work together to close achievement gaps and remove barriers to student success. The item under discussion this evening supports that work.”

“Federal and state accountability systems require us to work at closing achievement gaps so equity work is not a choice, it’s a must.”

“We need to dig deep to understand why we have gaps in student achievement and work together to address the barriers to student success. This agenda item is a good step in the right direction.”

“When we value and lift up all children, we make our community stronger. What it takes to support each student may look different, but we must do this important work—with all students in mind.”

“I understand that this plan requires change, but we need to be open to change if we genuinely want all students to succeed.”

Lastly, we’ve all heard the adage that feedback is a gift. Well, it’s true — even when feedback is rough around the edges. At a minimum, feedback will help you navigate contentious environments more aptly. At its best of course, feedback builds stronger and better solutions for school communities.

Let’s hope that communities across the state can return to more constructive feedback loops soon. It’s an important tradition in local government.

Until then, it’s important to monitor your environment. That’s what the next section of this toolkit is focused on.
“But every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle.”
—Thomas Jefferson
In times of heightened divisiveness, reading comments on social media can be brutal.

Rumors fly, decorum is lost, and everyone has an opinion to share. That’s why it’s often easier to stay away from online chatter. After all, you want to stay focused on what’s important — the success of ALL students in your district.

**Don’t ignore online chatter**

You’ve made it a priority to listen to your constituents—whether it’s local voters, community members, parents, school staff, or students. One of the best ways to get a feel for the leanings in your community is by using social media as a listening tool.

Being in the social media spotlight as a public figure may not sound appealing but ignoring online chatter completely can put you out of touch with the community’s perception of your district and board. As an elected official, it’s important that you know and understand what’s being said by parents, staff, and voters, especially around the hot topics that may come up at board meetings.

It’s also important to recognize the level and sophistication of efforts underway to attack and unseat current school board members. These organized attacks have been seen in local school board elections before.

That’s precisely why you must be vigilant.

Of course, we’re not saying that you must agree with the information or opinions you read. You also don’t need to read every comment, blog, or tweet out there — either about your district or K-12 education in general.

You do, however, need to be aware of what the chatter and buzz is. Keep your antenna up and monitor opinions in your community closely. Watch for upticks in conversations to better understand how your community members feel about particular issues or initiatives. Many of you have been doing this for years, and it’s simply part of your daily routine. If it isn’t, please consider starting now.

**Listen, learn, and know you don’t always have to reply**

If social media platforms were physical places, they’d be noisy ones. We often think of them as a place to share our opinions, bits of daily life, and funny cat memes. However, one of the most valuable aspects of social media is that you can use it to listen to your community.

Some of their comments you read may anger you. Some may be completely factually incorrect. Some may seem just plain bizarre. However, some can be helpful in providing insight into what your community is thinking about the issues affecting your district.

If you’re feeling angry after reading comments, walk away. Do not engage until you’ve had time to calm down, think, and re-evaluate whether the comment even warrants a reply.

Let people know you’re listening. If someone reaches out to you directly, thank them for their input and emphasize the common ground you share.

If you’re contacted directly or feel that a response is warranted, say something like, “I know this is a topic many people feel passionate about.” Thank them for caring. Again, make it clear that you’re listening to their concerns.

For additional information on Dos and Don’ts for social media, please read TASB Legal Services’ Social Media Guidelines for School Board Members (pdf).
Practical steps for popular social networks

What does this listening look like in practice?

You don’t have to be on every single social media platform and spend hours each day monitoring them to gauge sentiment in your community. But having a presence and knowing how to use these sites as listening tools is important.

Here are some steps you can take on a regular basis to keep a finger on the pulse of your district stakeholders:

**Facebook**
- Like district and school pages. Regularly keep an eye on the comments.
- Join local parent groups on Facebook.
- Seek feedback on important issues.

**Instagram**
- Follow district, leadership, and teacher accounts.
- Follow prominent organizations and people in your community.
- Search and follow relevant hashtags to monitor the conversations.

**Twitter**
- Follow district, leadership, and teacher accounts.
- Follow prominent organizations and people in your community.
- Use Twitter lists and searches to monitor conversations about your district and schools.
- Remember: Only about 1 in 5 people are on Twitter. A typical Twitter user may not be representative of your community.

**YouTube**
- Follow district accounts.
- Read the comments on videos.

**Web**
- Know any local parents who are bloggers? Teachers? Administrators? Keep an eye on those blogs and comments.
- Use Google Alerts to get see any mentions of key terms like your name or your districts’ name.
“I love argument, I love debate. I don’t expect anyone just to sit there and agree with me, that’s not their job.”

—Margaret Thatcher
As a school board trustee, you’re accustomed to managing differences of opinion on key issues in your community. That’s always been part of the job.

Unfortunately, today’s environment feels different because it is different.

School boards are under attack. Tensions are at all-time highs and community divisions are becoming ever more politicized.

While navigating this supercharged environment does indeed require new tools — that’s precisely why this toolkit has been developed — tried-and-true methods are still helpful for diffusing heated situations. That’s why we’re detailing them here.

Naturally, these steps for managing difficult conversations can’t solve the underlying causes of the controversial topics your district may be dealing with right now.

Hopefully, though, they can help.

So, here’s our first tip for managing difficult conversations:

We like to call this approach, “welcoming difficult conversations.”

Here’s why this approach is so important, especially right now:

It provides a solid foundation for building a welcoming, inclusive, accountable culture where you can focus on goals and outcomes, rather than just responding to problems and concerns.

It can generate solutions to issues that would otherwise not have been reached, and doing it before those issues become entrenched problems, which can be difficult to mitigate and keep out the news and off social media.

It helps bridge communication gaps between segments of your community — inspiring trust, growth, and action.

Lastly, you’ll be modeling positive conflict resolution for your students, staff, and community. There’s nothing more important than doing that right now.

Of course, these proactive conversations may be in the form of one-on-one conversations or public forums. Because of the differences between the two, let’s walk through each of these scenarios.

In both scenarios, it is important to remember that you are participating in these conversations as a school board trustee, not as a parent or an individual community member. Doing this will help you approach these conversations from an elected official stance, which is essential to ensuring conversations have the best chance of being productive. This approach will also help you reduce feelings about being personally attacked, which is essential when putting students first.

Be proactive! Don’t wait for difficult conversations to come to you. Instead, get out in front of a hot topic when possible. This may sound counterintuitive, but it’s the best approach for creating an environment where conversations are productive, rather than destructive. You can’t be a diverse, effective team if healthy conflict is not welcomed.
One-on-One Conversations
These conversations may be with your colleagues, staff, students, parents, or community members.

- Remember that everyone is entitled to their perspective, feelings, and opinion.
- Give the person your full attention and let them express their concerns.
- Ask them what resolution they are seeking.
- If that resolution is not possible, explain why. Where possible, leverage one or two concrete examples of why what they’re asking is not feasible or optimal.
- Make every effort to remain calm. Understand their frustration, but do not allow them to become disrespectful.
- Be wary of getting involved in parent complaints that may become future grievances.

Public Forum and the Board Meeting
Unlike one-on-one conversations, there are laws governing how school board members are allowed to interact in public forums. The Open Meetings Act prohibits you from having a back-and-forth conversation with someone who comes to address you at a meeting.

Before you make a decision that could be controversial, here are some suggestions:

- Present the facts and data behind the decision.
- Survey your stakeholders to gauge their understanding and feelings.
- If there is time, schedule workshop sessions where you can allow people to express their concerns before the decision is made.
- Take into consideration concerns that suggest a different decision might be possible or necessary.
- Develop a plan for how people will be informed once the decision is made. This is critical. Thoughtful, strong decisions often go off course without a detailed communication plan.
- Provide multiple avenues for two-way communication with your constituents such as monitored email, phone and social media accounts to get ahead of questions and concerns.
- Anticipate questions that will arise and be ready to explain the purpose and process.
- Develop brief talking points that allow you to convey the decision in conversations.

Open Forum and Public Comment
- Make sure participants are aware of any limitations of the board’s ability to respond.
- Set reasonable guidelines for how long each speaker can address the board.
- Remain calm and convey empathy.
- Identify shared values and keep the focus on those.
- Even if their opinion goes against your own, allow them to express it uninterrupted.
- Give each speaker equal time and thank each one.
- Minimize disruptions and keep communication open.
- Remember that participants may reflect a very vocal minority and their perspective may not be representative of the larger community.

Lastly, think of difficult conversations as a process and difficult topics as opportunities. A single conversation or a single board meeting can have a significant impact, but it often takes multiple conversations and/or meetings to advance an issue, reach a compromise, or move forward.

In fact, trustees dedicated to excellent, equitable outcomes for all students will find that this work never ends and that welcoming difficult conversations is a critical tool in their toolkit.

For additional information on navigating the unique challenges of being a board member, please read TASB Legal Services’ Juggling More than One Role as a Board Member.
STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN SCHOOL BOARD MEETINGS

Occasionally school boards are overwhelmed by the number of individuals who want to provide public comments at a board meeting. The strategies below, when used in consultation with your school attorney, may help your board manage high interest in public comment. Before adopting any of the strategies below, be sure the approach complies with the Open Meetings Act (OMA) and does not conflict with local policy or procedures. For more information, see TASB Legal Services’ Public Comment and Other Rights of the Public.

OMA requirement: School boards must allow each member of the public who desires to address the board regarding an item on an open meeting agenda to do so before or during the body’s consideration of the item at the meeting. A board may adopt reasonable rules governing public comments. Tex. Gov’t Code § 551.007(b), (c).

Local rules: TASB Model Policy BED(LOCAL) provides for public comment at every school board meeting. Boards can choose between a local policy option that limits public comments to agenda items or a local policy that allows public comments on any topic related to school district business. In addition, school boards should adopt written procedures for conducting public comment. See TASB Policy Service’s Regulations Resource Manual BED(EXHIBIT) for sample board procedures.

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<td>Adopt local policy at BED (LOCAL). Determine whether to limit comments to agenda items only or allow comments on any topic.</td>
<td>Review phrasing of board agenda items. Clarify agenda items as needed to manage scope of public comment.</td>
<td>If most speakers are on one agenda item, reorder agenda so board can conduct other business first, then hear comments before board considers the one item.</td>
<td>Presiding officer should begin comments with opening statement about procedures and decorum. Announce any change to procedures in open session.</td>
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<td>Adopt local procedure for public comment. Include reasonable, viewpoint neutral limits, like advance sign up, a per-person time limit, no yielding or sharing time, and no extra time based on number of topics.</td>
<td>Require advance sign-up for public comment. If desired, ask for name and contact info.</td>
<td>If necessary, shorten time period for comments on agenda items down to one minute. Do not allow yielding time to another speaker. Do not add more time per speaker for multiple topics.</td>
<td>Enforce time limits consistently. Do not allow crowd reactions to delay proceedings. Be prepared to cut microphone if needed. Manage decorum with reminders and recess. Only remove a speaker or attendee if necessary.</td>
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<td>Reserve the right in policy to adjust procedures as necessary in the interest of time.</td>
<td>Require speakers to indicate whether they are speaking on an agenda item, and if so, which item(s).</td>
<td>Move comments on non-agenda items to end. Set both speaker time limit and overall time limit on comments on non-agenda items.</td>
<td>Recommend that comments involving personally identifiable students or individual employees or officers be made through grievance policy.</td>
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<td>If desired, require public comment to be in person.</td>
<td>If desired, encourage public feedback to the board through alternate means (survey, email), rather than live public comment.</td>
<td>Cancel or postpone comments on non-agenda items.</td>
<td>For comment on agenda items, continue a meeting or move the item to another day in order to allow adequate time for public comment.</td>
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This document is provided for educational purposes only and contains information to facilitate a general understanding of the law. It is not an exhaustive treatment of the law on this subject nor is it intended to substitute for the advice of an attorney. Consult with your own attorneys to apply these legal principles to specific fact situations.

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“History will judge us by the difference we make in the everyday lives of children.”
—Nelson Mandela
LEVERAGE FRONTLINE STORIES

As you work to advance efforts to close achievement gaps and ensure schools are welcoming environments, it’s important that you use positive frontline stories to position your district’s work—combining strong data points with good storytelling.

For the most impact, the goal should always be twofold:

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<th>Use data points to persuade on an intellectual level</th>
<th>Use storytelling to persuade on an emotional level</th>
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<td>Some critics and skeptics of equity work will only be moved by data points, especially data points that connect to student achievement and other important student success indicators.</td>
<td>When you tell someone a story, you’re sharing an experience. Experiences are memorable and evoke emotion more than statistics.</td>
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Here’s an example:

**Data Points:** Since restorative discipline practices were implemented two years ago at a middle school campus, student attendance has increased 4 percentage points and out-of-school suspensions are down 20 percent.

**Story:** Meet Sarah, a teacher at that middle school. Also, meet Alice, whose son Jonathan attends the school where Sarah teaches. Sarah has been leading her school’s efforts to transition the campus to restorative discipline practices by coaching other teachers. She’s leading a campus committee of teachers, counselors, and parents focused on improving school culture. Alice is not one of the parents that participated on the committee. She declined an invitation to participate since she was initially opposed to the change to restorative discipline practices. A former educator, she believed this change would allow unruly student behavior to disrupt learning and instruction on the campus.

Over the last year, she has become a vocal advocate for the school’s move to restorative discipline practices. Her son, Jonathan, loves the restorative circles and now looks forward to school. This is a substantial change from where Jonathan was two years ago. Shy and introverted, Jonathan often felt like an outsider at school.

Now when Jonathan comes home each day, he often talks about the conversations from the day’s restorative circle time. Overall, he seems happier, is doing better academically, and is excited about going to high school next year.

**How to Leverage:** As you can see, striking data points come to life when you pair them with a frontline story. Improving attendance and reducing suspensions are impressive data points. In the end, though, they are still just numbers, an abstraction of the effect the program has had on the school’s students. The impact of this initiative really hits home when you hear about how the move to restorative practices at this one campus has benefitted Jonathan.

If you wanted to see the expansion of restorative practices to other campuses, it would be essential to leverage this story to advance those efforts. For instance, Sarah and Alice could be invited to speak at a board meeting. The campus principal could present the data, Sarah could talk about the impact on the school culture overall, and then Alice could tell Jonathan’s story. Combined, you have a convincing argument for expanding restorative discipline practices at additional campuses in the district.
Another example:

**Data Points:** Over the last 10-15 years, student demographics have changed significantly for a school district, with Hispanic students now accounting for 40 percent of total enrollment. Only one campus, though, has a Spanish-speaking staff member in the school’s front office. This campus, an elementary school, recently outperformed other elementary schools in the district on the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) exam despite having higher levels of economically disadvantaged students.

**Story:** Meet Tom, the principal at the elementary school mentioned above. Tom came to the district five years ago, and has made great improvements to his campus, including the expansion of family engagement efforts. About 18 months ago, he hired a bilingual receptionist to work at the school’s front office because he had grown concerned about his staff not being able to communicate with his Spanish-speaking families. Tom uses discretionary funds his campus receives each year to budget for this staff position.

Martha, the bilingual receptionist at Tom’s campus, is a graduate of the district and the parent of two middle school students who also attend school there. Her family moved to this community from Mexico when she was seven. She loves her job and has worked hard over the years to help the school’s leadership team create a welcoming environment for Spanish-speaking parents. She sits in on Tom’s weekly principal meetings with parents, translating for Spanish-speaking parents so they can join in the conversations. She also sits in and supports parent-teacher conferences as needed.

**How to Leverage:** Once again, strong data points are even stronger when paired with a frontline story. In this situation, data around the district’s changing demographics could be used to argue the need for a bilingual staff member in each school’s front office. The growth in academic achievement at Tom’s campus further supports this argument. For sure, there are other factors influencing the academic gains at this campus, but staff are quick to assert that the growth achieved would not have been possible without the work to ensure Spanish-speaking families were welcomed and supported.

As such, this is a great story to help support the desire to add a bilingual staff member to every school’s front office.

**To wrap up,** the drive for excellent, equitable, outcomes may take different paths in different communities. Whatever the path, though, never underestimate the power of frontline stories in advancing your district’s equity efforts. Equity work requires change, and change is often difficult. Appealing to others both on an intellectual level and on an emotional level will make a difference in your efforts.

Now, let’s look at unifying messages. In divisive times, it’s important to frame your work in ways that help you gain support from across your community.

Visit the Texas Education Agency for additional information [Restorative Discipline Practices](https://www.texaspublicschools.org/restorative-discipline-practices).
“Only humility will lead us to unity, and unity to peace.”

—Mother Teresa
For this last section of the toolkit, we enlisted the help of a research group to better understand the Texas electorate’s understanding and perception of equity work. At a high level here are some of our key findings:

- About **70 percent** of the Texas electorate surveyed support requiring schools to implement equity initiatives and plans to ensure students from all backgrounds are achieving at high levels.
- Additionally, the research estimates that about **90 percent** of the Texas electorate surveyed believe that special assistance should be provided to students at risk of failing their course work.

Additionally, the following messaging also surveyed well:

- The goal of excellent, equitable outcomes for all Texas students can be attained if the appropriate support and resources are provided to districts, schools, and frontline educators.
- Federal education policy requires that all states work to close achievement gaps and improve outcomes for all students.
- Closing achievement gaps for low-income children and children of color is critical for the future economic success of Texas.
- Equity initiatives and plans create more inclusive and welcoming learning environments for all students.
- While closing achievement gaps may require added support for certain student groups, that doesn’t mean resources will be taken away from other student groups.

“When this ends, we’ll smile sweetly, finally seeing. In testing times, we became the best of things.”

—Amanda Gorman
CLOSING THOUGHTS

We recognize that the work of our Texas school boards in today’s divisive environment often feels overwhelming and daunting. But it’s important to remember that this moment in history, defined by difficult topics, is not unique. School boards have frequently navigated through the most contentious topics of our times, weathering those storms by staying focused on student success.

What we do know from our latest research is that across the spectrum, teachers and school board members have high positive image ratings in their communities. This means local education leaders like yourself are well-positioned to advance student achievement by using equity initiatives as one key strategy to close achievement gaps.

It’s important to keep the conversation focused on student outcomes, which is why we hope you’ll use this toolkit as you manage potentially difficult discussions and decisions. It’s also important to remember that equity work simply means ensuring students from all backgrounds are achieving at high levels, which will require rigorous instruction from caring and experienced educators.

Hopefully, though, by using an equity lens on your work and your decisions, you’ll ensure that all Texas public school children get the personalized support they need to achieve in today’s classroom and in tomorrow’s workforce. At TASB, we’ll be here to assist board members every step of the way.