Pennsylvania Teachers Advisory Committee

COMMITTEE REPORT

Report on Equity and Education Practices in Pennsylvania Schools

About the Pennsylvania Teachers Advisory Committee

Vision

All students thriving in a quality education system shaped by teacher expertise

Mission

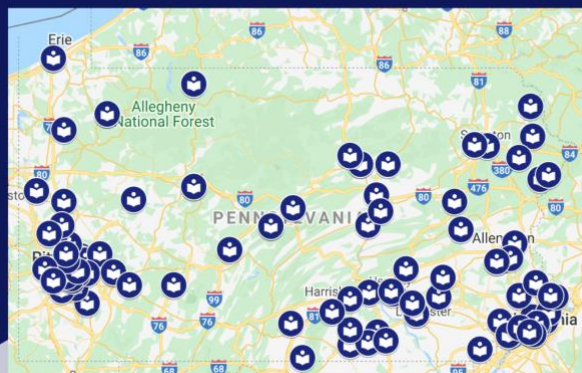To ensure essential decisions that impact students are informed by expert teachers

About

The Pennsylvania Teachers Advisory Committee (PTAC) is a non-profit organization composed of active classroom teachers from across the Commonwealth who have been recognized as expert practitioners and demonstrated professional leadership.

PTAC Members have been recognized for teaching excellence by these organizations and others like them:

- American Association of School Librarians
- Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation
- Center for Creative Learning through the Arts
- Future Farmers of America
- Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History
- GRAMMY Educator Awards
- Global Teacher Prize
- International Society for Technology in Education
- International Technology and Engineering Educators Association
- Microsoft
- Milken Family Foundation
- NASA
- National Board for Professional Teaching Standards
- National Education Association
- National Liberty Museum
- National Geographic Society
- National School Boards Association
- National Science Foundation
- National Science Teacher Association
- Pennsylvania Art Education Association
- Pennsylvania Association of Educational Communications and Technology
- Pennsylvania Association of School Retirees
- Pennsylvania School Librarians Association
- Pennsylvania Department of Education
- Philadelphia Home and School Council
- US Department of Education
- US Department of State
- Yale University
- Veterans of Foreign Wars
- Voya

GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION OF PTAC MEMBERS

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Introduction

Over the past four years, members of the Pennsylvania Teachers Advisory Committee (PTAC) have elevated the concern about inequities in the Commonwealth's education system and expressed the determination to lend their narratives and expertise to alleviating these gaps. The COVID-19 pandemic and other events in the past year have further exposed and amplified these inequities. When education in Pennsylvania moved to virtual environments in March 2020, PTAC began hosting Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) designed to support teachers and provide opportunity for collaboration on pressing issues. Inequities within our education system became a recurring theme within these PLCs and led to members creating Recommendations for Teaching and Learning in the 2020-2021 School year (Appendix A). Issues of equity were embedded in every recommendation.

PTAC hosted a virtual summit in July 2020 to further explore the Recommendations for Teaching and Learning. This event brought stakeholders together from the Pennsylvania House and Senate Education Committees, the Pennsylvania Department of Education, state curriculum organizations, education unions, and within PTAC's highly recognized teacher network. Summit topics focused on each of the recommendations and highlighted inequities that impact students and communities as areas where policy and practice informed by teacher expertise and narrative could close equity gaps. (An executive summary of the summit that includes actions teachers, schools, and organizations are taking toward this goal can be found on PTAC's website at http://ptacvoice.org/reports.)

This report is a continuation and expansion of PTAC's work since the beginning of the pandemic. PTAC continues to forge and seek partnerships with other stakeholders who are committed to developing an education system that provides opportunity and quality education to all children in the State. This work includes connecting the expertise and narrative of our highly recognized teachers with those who can use that information to create better education policies for our students.

Contained within this report are many important insights into questions that must be addressed in our education system. We do not claim that this report gives a comprehensive understanding of educational equity in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The issue is far too complex, and, while PTAC members are among the most expert educational practitioners in Pennsylvania, their perspectives come from the classroom. These perspectives cannot fully account for systemic reasons why issues of equity are occurring. The teachers who provided the data and narrative for this report are sharing what is happening in their schools, districts, and classrooms. We do not ask them to opine on causational political forces that may be shaping those outcomes. Our mission as an organization is to provide a plurality of expert teacher perspectives so that those making decisions are well informed about the implications.

However, those political forces that ultimately impact schools, classrooms, teachers, and students are critical components to any discussion of educational equity. We would be negligent if we did not acknowledge this fact, even if these factors are not the primary focus of this report. School funding formulas, legislative priorities, policy interpretations, and other systemic functions all contribute to promoting equity or inequity in our education system.

Our hope is that the quantitative and qualitative data contained within this document drive discussions about how we can improve all aspects of Pennsylvania's education system. As you will see below, equity is not solely a rural, suburban, or urban issue. It is not isolated in any one geographic area of the Commonwealth. Inequity is prevalent and uniquely manifested in each of those contexts. Solutions must allow for those complexities.

PTAC's intention is that this report drives critical discourse and policy decisions that create greater equity for students across Pennsylvania, while also increasing opportunities for expert teachers to provide input in creating this equity.

Methodology

PTAC conducted an initial equity survey of members in October 2020. This first survey sought to:

- ascertain our members' understanding of equity,
- determine how active our members and their LEAs were in working toward equity within their schools, and
- identify members of our organization who were actively engaged in educational initiatives focused on equity, inclusion, diversity, and social justice outside their school districts.

A focus group of PTAC members was then established to analyze and provide professional insight into the data collected from this initial survey. This focus group developed questions for two additional membership surveys.

The second survey, conducted in November, gathered narrative and data on student agency and engagement in educational equity initiatives, while the third survey, conducted in December, focused on teacher needs and school practices in regard to equity.

Each of these two additional surveys began by asking all respondents to read and refer to the Pennsylvania Department of Education's (PDE) definition of equity as listed on the Department's Equitable Practices Hub. This definition places heavy emphasis on academic outcomes, which some of our members argued was too restrictive a demarcation of the purpose of public education, but provides a common context for us to have conversations about equity in our schools. The definition as given on that website is:

> *In Pennsylvania, equity has been defined as "every student having access to the educational resources and rigor they need at the right moment in their education across race, gender, ethnicity, language, disability, sexual orientation, family background and/or family income (www.ccsso.org)." Additionally, the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) has noted that "to do their best, students must feel safe at school. A healthy and safe environment can help students thrive, and every student, regardless of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression should be provided the opportunity to learn - free from discrimination, fear, or harassment."*

Each survey also included questions about geographic locale to allow insight into equity in different areas of the Commonwealth. Geographic locale was determined by using National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) designations. To match PTAC's categories of "Large Urban", "Small Urban", "Suburban", and "Rural", the following correlations were made:

NCES Designation	PTAC Category
City – Large (Philadelphia and Pittsburgh)	Large Urban
City – Midsize City – Small	Small Urban
Suburban – Large Suburban – Midsize Suburban – Small Town – Fringe	Suburban
Town – Remote Town – Distant Rural – Fringe Rural – Distant Rural – Remote	Rural

Table 1

During the months of October, November, and December, a virtual PLC was convened in which PTAC members could continue discussing survey data, share their experiences, and provide additional input. This PLC met on five occasions.

The information, quantitative data, and qualitative data contained within this report comes from the above-mentioned surveys, focus groups, and PLCs.

How Much Focus is on Equity?

PTAC's initial survey in October found a significant disparity between the focus teachers in PTAC place on equity in their classrooms and their perception of the focus of their Local Education Agencies (LEAs) on ensuring equity within schools (Figure 1). When asked to rate their own focus on equity in the past year on a scale from 1 (low) to 10 (high), PTAC members' average rating was 8.40. Rating the focus of their LEA on equity in the past year, that average score dropped to 5.52.
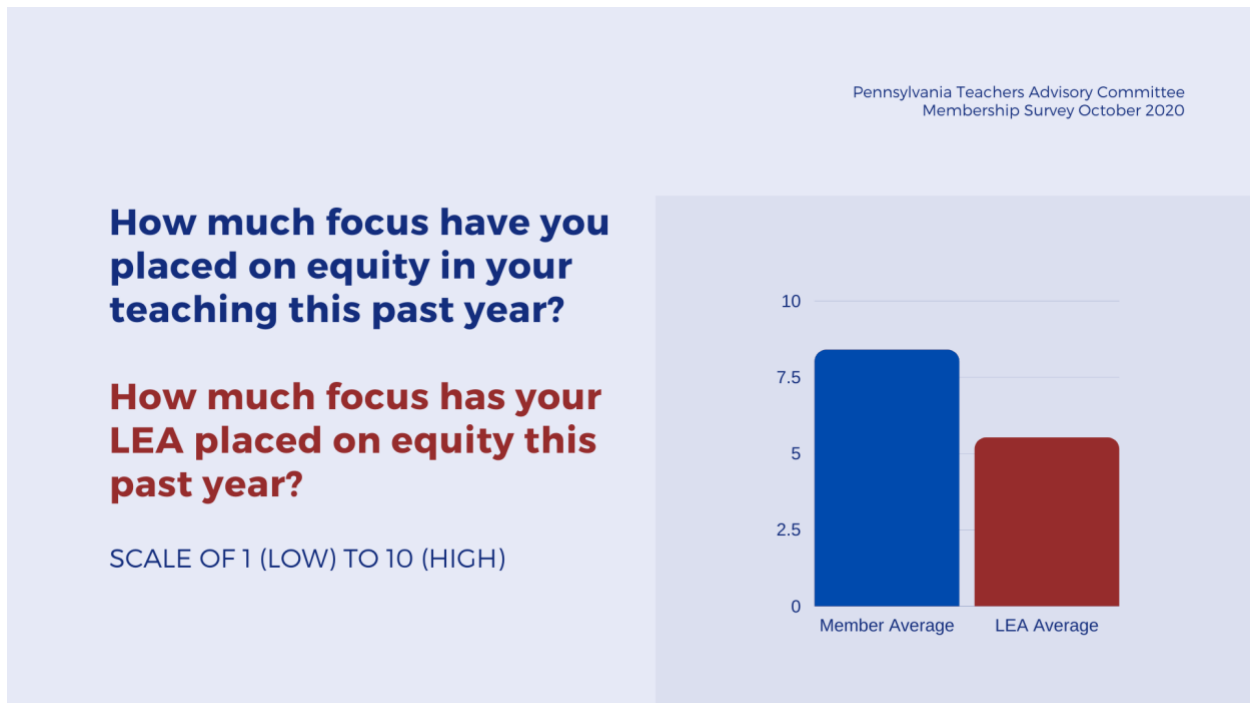

Figure 1

Disaggregated by geographic locale, the significant gap between teacher focus and LEA focus remained in each category. In addition, the data show that urban members and LEAs are more focused on issues of equity than their suburban and rural counterparts (Figure 2). The average rating of teacher focus in both small and large urban areas was 9.00. In suburban areas the average rating for teachers dropped slightly to 8.60, and rural teachers gave a lower average rating of 7.29. When rating their LEAs, the average small urban and large urban rating was 6.25, compared with an average of 5.80 for suburban LEAs and 4.29 for rural LEAs.

These trends are also reflected in comments that were included by respondents on the survey. While several suburban and urban teachers described initiatives their districts were taking such as convening "equity teams" composed of school staff, building an "equity coalition" in coordination with community members, and creating positions such as a "Director of Equity and Inclusion," none of the rural teachers who responded to the survey mentioned such broad-equity initiatives.

In PLC discussions issues of funding for such initiatives were mentioned as a possible reason for this disparity in initiatives and the geographic differences in the

above numerical survey results, but no qualitative or quantitative data that was provided that supported or discredited this supposition. We believe this to be a question that merits further exploration.
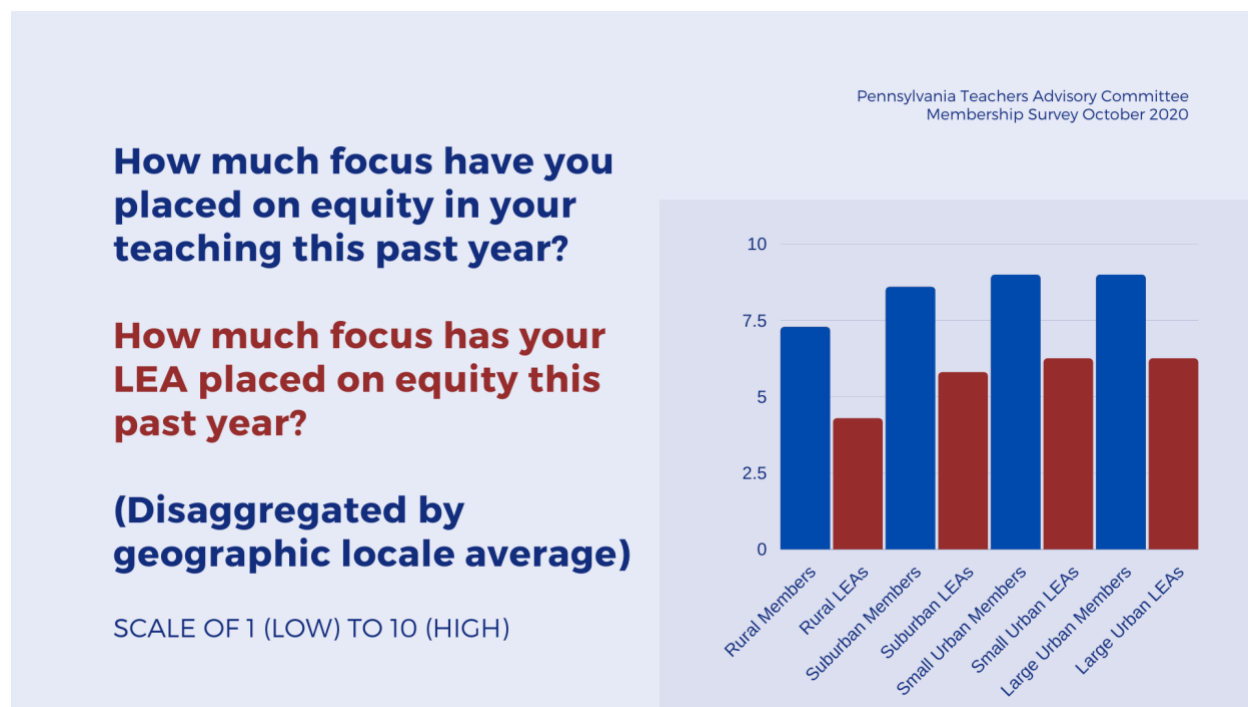

Figure 2

Even though rural members rated themselves as having the least focus on equity, the gap between the focus placed on equitable practices in classrooms and the perceptions of commitment by schools and districts to ensure equity were widest in rural locales by a small margin. This gap was 3.00 rating points in rural areas, as opposed to, 2.80 points in suburban areas and 2.75 points in both small and large urban areas.

Initial conversations about these data revealed that PTAC members often viewed equity through the lens of their own personal passions, areas of expertise, and school experiences rather than looking at educational equity from a broader perspective. A decision was made to facilitate collaboration and help members seek divergent perspectives by focusing on PDE's definition of equity (listed above) and discussing ways that LEAs, teachers, and students can identify and overcome inequities in their local contexts. This produced several insights.

An elementary teacher in a rural Northeastern Pennsylvania school wrote,

Often in rural areas, discussions of equity only include socio-economic status (SES) and perhaps special education. Because rural schools like mine may not have many non-white students or English Language Learners (ELLs), their data is not considered when looking at gaps in academic performance or whether there are barriers to opportunity. Those students do not receive the support they need, but nobody really pays much attention.

A suburban high-school teacher in Southwestern Pennsylvania identified a different barrier to discussions of equity:

Even when districts are focused on equity, there are places where certain types of equity are OK to talk about, and others aren't. For example, in my school we are encouraged to discuss issues of inequity due to race and poverty, but there is little support for any discussion of the rights of our transgender students.

A teacher in a large urban high school explained the difficulties that teachers face when their district does not place the same importance on equity:

Inequity results from system-wide structures. We need changes that not just teachers but also administrators and families can implement… I have curriculum for celebrating/engaging all students in place in my classroom. What I don't have are ways for student voices to be heard on the bigger issues which we face. When a female student feels harassed, I always think to myself "where is the Title IX office?" I don't wonder how I can address harassment in my curriculum.

Access to holistic curricula and programming within schools is often an indicator of educational equity, as this high-school teacher in a suburban Southwestern Pennsylvania district expressed:

Funding inequities are reflected in schools' ability to offer a wide variety of elective courses. Strong and diverse program offerings in the arts, in particular, reflect the health of a school district's budget. Students in these districts are deprived of fundamental outlets and development of emotional expression, creativity and problem-solving.

Student Engagement and Agency

In October 2020, PTAC convened a focus group to analyze data from the initial survey and to determine next steps. The focus group advised that PTAC should initially gather data and narrative on educational equity in two areas:
- student agency in creating equity
- support for teachers doing work in educational equity.

These two focal areas became the basis for membership surveys and PLCs in November and December. The November 2020 survey explored the first identified area, student engagement and agency in educational equity. The majority of respondents (86.4%) shared that their schools/districts sponsored active student clubs or groups engaged in supporting equity, diversity, social justice, and/or inclusion (Figure 3). We also asked for teachers to describe the active student clubs or groups in their schools and any partnerships with community organizations that supported educational equity. A summary of those responses can be found in Table 2.

Pennsylvania Teachers Advisory Committee
Membership Survey November 2020

Are there any student organizations active in your school/district in supporting equity, diversity, social justice, and/or inclusion?

No
13.6%

Yes
86.4%

Figure 3

Summary of Internal and External Organizations Supporting Educational Equity in PTAC Member Schools			
Descriptions/Names of Active Student Organizations (many of these responses were listed by multiple members)		**Partner Community Organizations (many of these responses were listed by multiple members)**	
Student Steering Committee (advising school policy decisions)	GSA Clubs (Gay-Straight Alliance or Gender Sexuality Awareness depending on school)	Many Local Community Organizations	NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People)
Women's Club	Buddy Club (Partnering students who are mainstreamed with those who are not)	YWCA	ACRP (Alternative Community Resource Program – provides counseling services)
Anchor Club (Supporting inclusive student activities)	Youth of Color (Partnership with local NAACP to promote racial equity)	The Backpack Project (Helping with food insecurity)	Atlantic Broadband (Helping with digital equity issues)
Interact Club (Partnership with Rotary Club to promote international understanding)	Young Women's Empowerment Club (Partnership with YWCA)	Martha and Mary House (Helping homeless families)	Disability Together
Student Diversity Taskforce	Athletes Helping Athletes (partnering HS athletes with special-needs students)	GLSEN	Local LGBT Community Centers
Lady Leaders	NAACP Youth Council	The Peace Center	University of Pittsburgh
Social Justice Club	Renaissance Club (Connecting students to the community)	PBS and local affiliate stations	Rotary Club
SHOUT (Social Handprints Overcoming Unjust Treatment)	Student Action Club (formed in response to asbestos crisis in Philadelphia schools)	Intermediate Units	Hispanic Center of Lehigh Valley
Philadelphia Student Union	Black Student Union	Black Lives Matter	Pratyush Sinha Foundation
The Pantry (teacher-student partnership to provide hygiene supplies to students in need)	HELP (Health and Education of the Less Privileged – student focuses on global inequity)	Devereux Foundation (Counseling and support for special-needs students)	UPMC (University of Pittsburgh Medical Center)

Table 2

PTAC Members who responded to this second survey also expressed overwhelmingly, with an average rating of 9.00 on a 10-point scale, (Figure 4) that schools should value student agency in identifying and communicating equity gaps to teachers and administrators. However, respondents did not feel that schools and districts provided that level of agency. When asked how much agency students had in identifying and communicating equity gaps, the average rating was only 5.36.

In disaggregating the data by geographic locale (Figure 5), this "student agency gap" was largest in small urban and rural schools. In small urban locales, the gap between how much PTAC members valued student agency (9.50) and the perception of actual agency (5.00) was 4.50. This gap was similar but slightly smaller in rural schools, where teacher value was 8.67 and perceived actual agency was 4.33, showing a gap of 4.34 points.

There was also a significant, yet slightly smaller gap, in large urban and suburban schools. In large urban environments, the difference between teacher value of student agency (8.40) and the perceived agency that students actually have (4.80) was 3.60, and in suburban areas the gap was 3.99 (teacher value = 9.91, perceived agency = 5.92.)
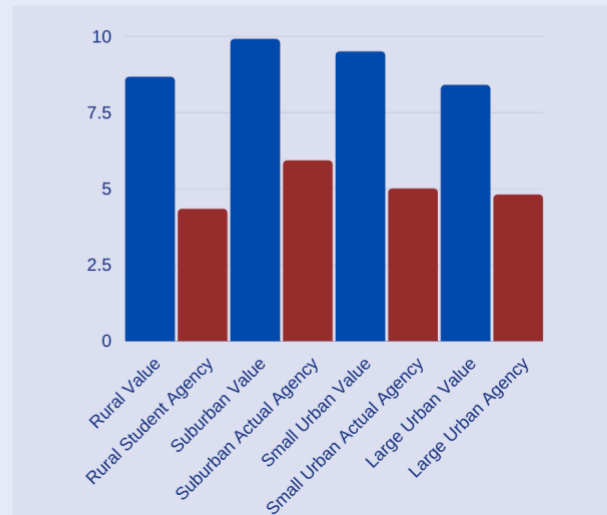

Figure 4

Figure 5

PTAC members were also asked to describe practices they employ to engage students and promote equity, inclusion, diversity, and/or social justice. Due to the wide range of grade levels, content areas, and local communities represented, these practices varied.

A teacher in a small urban high school in Southwestern Pennsylvania elaborated on strategies he uses:

> **I started a weekly "Civil Conversation Challenge" that provides a safe and mature platform to have meaningful conversations about powerful topics such as race, disabilities, opportunities/barriers, etc. Students have begun opening up and sharing vulnerable information here, even knowing that everyone else in the class can see it. We practice listening to understand rather than listening to respond. We practice asking questions, advancing the conversation, and providing feedback to all who share. This practice has provided validation to those thoughts and experiences that students share.**
>
> **Students also write in a journal daily in my class. They respond to a prompt every day and it is an opportunity to get them thinking and writing, but also an opportunity for me to learn so much about them as people. I am very intentional about providing meaningful feedback to each student so that it feels like an ongoing conversation between us. Each student has his or her own private line of communication with me which creates a safe space to share their experiences and even learn about mine.**

A number of teachers in both the survey and Professional Learning Communities described the use of restorative circles and morning circles to create trauma-informed and equitable learning environments. A high school teacher in a suburban Southeastern Pennsylvania school explained:

In a restorative circle, participants respond to a prompt. In addition to implementing this practice in teaching, we've also brought staff and students together with this technique. In one case, four of our students talked about the equity issues in our school from their perspectives. Faculty members were divided into Zoom breakout rooms with a facilitator. I was one of the facilitators and the prompts were:

- **How did the speakers make you feel?**
- **What was a takeaway you have from what they said?**

We went around the circle to discuss each prompt. Each person took a turn in sequence. The closing of the circle was an opportunity for each person to respond to something that was. This validated the students' viewpoints and opinions regarding equity, diversity, and voice.

Several respondents indicated that they intentionally focus on social-emotional learning (SEL). A teacher in a different suburban high school in Southeastern Pennsylvania shared one of her strategies:

On the first day of school I ask my students to share something about them that they wished their teacher knew. This reveals a lot about some of the struggles our students encounter. In addition, I do frequent emotional check-ins in the form of surveys and questionnaires throughout the year.

A small urban high-school teacher Eastern Pennsylvania also shared that she uses surveys to better understand the lived experiences of her students:

I use student surveys (where students share their activities and interests outside of school during class discussions - recorded on a spreadsheet), communication with parents, and open discussions around current event issues to better understand my students. My history lessons also include multiple perspectives, and my classroom features a diverse book collection.

Many responses also included a focus on ensuring all students knew that their unique identities were valued. A high school teacher in Philadelphia wrote:

I explicitly state that my classroom is a safe space for students no matter their race, creed, affiliations, gender identity, sexual orientation, etc. I do my best to foster positive relationships with all of my students. We also commonly have conversations in response to newsworthy events which

affect equity.

A rural teacher in Northeastern Pennsylvania described the use of videoconferencing software to expose students to divergent perspectives.

> **There is not a lot of racial, cultural, religious, or ethnic diversity in my rural area. Students are not often exposed to perspectives that allow them to see beyond that bubble. I regularly use videoconferencing as a tool to allow students collaboration opportunities with those that have different life experiences and viewpoints. Research tells us that exposure and interaction with those who are different correlates with open-mindedness, acceptance, and inclusion. In areas like mine, we have to be intentional about creating those opportunities because they don't happen naturally outside school.**

A summary of additional responses can be found in Table 3 below.

Classroom practices that support equity, diversity, inclusion, and social justice	
Encourage student creativity in using their narrative and voice to share experiences through projects. These are shared throughout the school and community.	I create an environment where students feel safe and included by professionally communicating with them about their lived experiences outside of school. My attendance at their community performances and athletic events reinforces my care and concern for their well-being.
It's important to get to know students. I use short individual conversations throughout the year. I try to speak to each student about a personal interest at least once a week.	I use surveys and discussions regularly to promote student voice.
We have regular, candid discussions about equity issues on a regular basis.	I use surveys, journal entries, reflection papers, book clubs, and online discussions.
My class has a "no homework" policy other than optional enrichment. Inequities in our community mean that more than half of my students do not have spaces that are conducive to learning at home. I also use both before and after school time to provide students access to school resources that they do not have at home.	In addition to open conversations, journaling is utilized in class, and, as a history teacher, I often ask students to think metaphorically with the feelings of those who lived in the past. "When has something been a struggle for you like "XYZ" struggled?" "When you describe that a [historical figure] faced criticism from others, when have you witnessed or experienced something of a similar nature, if at all?"
Community Meetings give me the opportunity to understand my students' experiences better.	I use Student Learning Communities to allow students opportunity to discuss issues they feel are important.
I often involve myself in professional collaboration, reading, and webinars to help me understand equity issues and how to meet the needs of my students. It's our job to never stop learning.	My class includes honest conversations, frequent check-ins, and student surveys.
I use daily SEL lessons to meet the holistic needs of students.	I take community walks with my students, use observations, surveys, and panel discussions, and attend community events to better understand the experiences of my students.

Table 3

Impact of Instructional Models on Equity

In the November survey we also asked PTAC members to share the instructional model their school was using at the time (Figure 6) and to comment on how that instructional model impacted equity in their school/district. Half of respondents (50%) were teaching in a hybrid model at that time, defined in the survey as, "students coming to school on different days, possibly with students joining from home virtually when not in school." 27.3% of those who responded were teaching in a fully remote environment, 13.6% were teaching concurrently (situations where different groups of students are being taught both virtually and in-person at the same time), and 9.1% were teaching in environments where all students were physically coming to the school every day.

There was a clear difference between instructional models being employed in different geographic locales. When looking at respondents in large and small urban settings, 71.4% were in fully remote teaching situations, and 28.6% were in hybrid learning environments. None were in schools operating in-person or concurrently.

Conversely, no suburban or rural teachers were in fully remote situations. 62.3% were in hybrid models, 21.4% were teaching concurrently, and 14.3% were in a traditional in-person model.
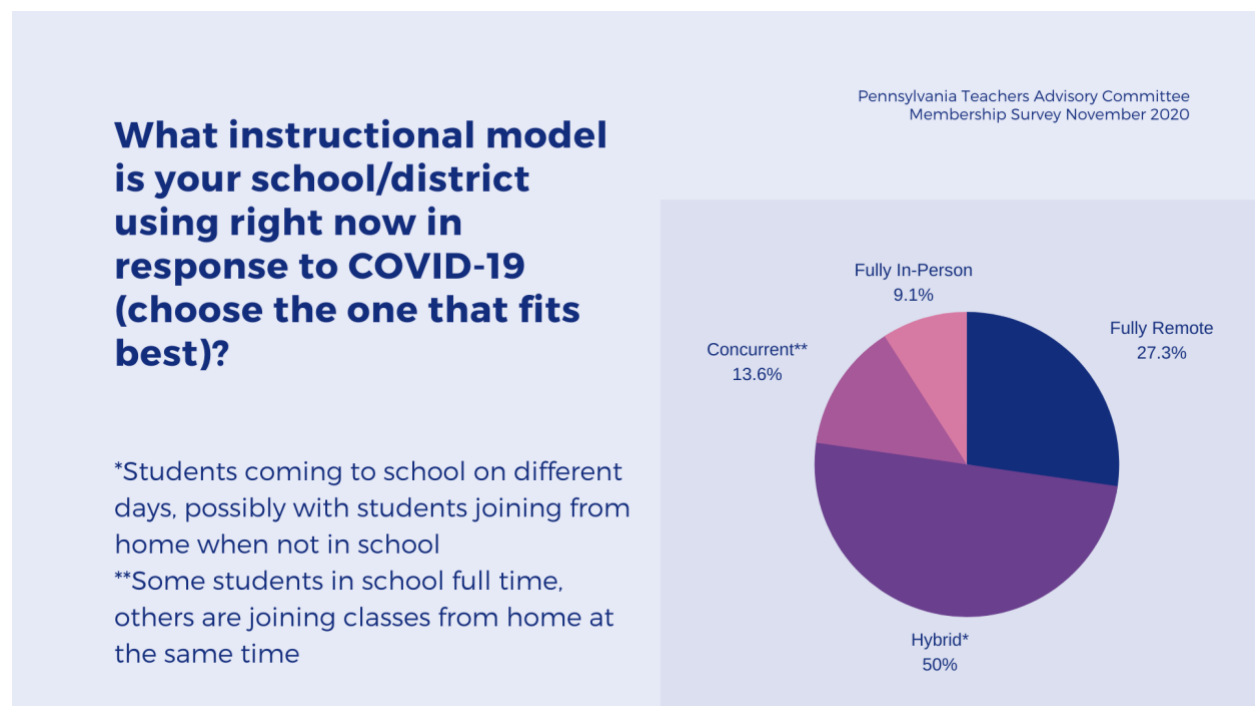

Figure 6

The majority of teachers who responded to the survey explained that the instructional model(s) their schools had used in response to COVID-19 this year was impacting educational equity in some way. Many of the equity issues that already existed have been intensified and exposed by shifting instructional models during the pandemic. in both survey responses and PLC meetings, PTAC members raised the following concerns:

- Lack of social-emotional support and trauma-informed care
- digital equity
- academic support for all students, but especially special education students
- support for students of color and other marginalized communities
- logistical difficulties in providing meals to students in poverty
- difficulty in connecting students/families to assistance from community agencies

Most COVID-19 instructional models rely heavily on digital technology. Several teachers noted that lack of access to digital devices and internet service for some students proved to be a significant barrier to both academic and social-emotional learning.

A teacher in a small urban high school using a fully remote model shared:

In March, families in our school indicated that 42% of households were without internet connection. Since then, we have made major efforts to get devices and connectivity to families for virtual learning. But, as of week 11 of the 2020-2021 school year, 21% of my students on my roster have not completed a single assignment yet.

We have severe issues with virtual truancy and digital dropout. These families are not reachable by email, Google Classroom messages, Remind, or phone call. Our truancy officer has struggled to track most of them down even through home visits. Out of 217 eighth graders, we sent home 177 deficiency reports, meaning those students are failing multiple classes. This method of instruction has not been effective for our students. 82% of students are failing more than one class. More than 30% are failing 7 or more classes.

Teachers in hybrid environments voiced their concerns about the academic and social-emotional health of students as well. A teacher in a rural high school using this instructional model explained:

It has been much more difficult to connect with students whom I only see via Google Meet. For the students whom I see in person, I make every attempt to connect with them but since their time in the building has been reduced by at least 60% this year, it is much more difficult that it has been in the past.

A suburban high-school teacher in a hybrid model expressed her concerns about equity for students with special needs:

The instructional model that my district has chosen has negatively impacted students with disabilities. The current model does not provide the necessary educational support for students with learning disabilities.

The comments from those teaching concurrently varied. Some, like this rural teacher in an elementary school described the stress that teachers are feeling and the impact on educational equity:

Our district has an instructional model where students can choose to learn in person or at home. About 80% of our students are in school. Those at home can also choose whether they want to learn synchronously or asynchronously. As a teacher, I feel like I am doing 3 full-time jobs, and none of them well. In my 20+ years of teaching, this is the most difficult thing I've ever done professionally. I spend 80% of my time and energy on the 20% of students who are at home, and many of them are still struggling to learn or not doing any assignments. As a result, the children in front of me are not getting the teacher they deserve. I would love to focus more on equity in my classroom and school, but I am honestly just trying to mentally and emotionally survive myself right now.

In contrast, a few respondents, most notably from Philadelphia, shared that their instructional model has improved educational equity. Many of these positive effects centered around school initiatives that improved digital equity by increasing devices available for students and providing expanded internet access. A high school teacher in Philadelphia, which was using a fully remote model shared:

The district has done a lot in attempts to mitigate problems for students without internet and students with disabilities. Wireless hotspots are set up around Philadelphia. All students with IEPs and their parents had meetings with their case managers in order to discuss digital learning plans and any possible modifications to their IEP.

Another high-school teacher in Philadelphia also commented on the positive steps that have been taken to improve digital equity for students:

Almost all students now have internet access and a computer!!!

A rural teacher in a concurrent model explained how the crisis has motivated his district to innovate in new ways:

For years I have seen other districts, even those around us in the same Intermediate Unit, make great advances in how they use educational technology. It's unfortunate that it took a pandemic, but our district has finally instituted a 1:1 program and upgraded the internet bandwidth in the buildings to support digital learning. This really helps to close the gap between the majority of our students who cannot afford devices and the few affluent students who have access to new tablets and computers in their homes. The instructional model we are using makes it very difficult for teachers, but I am optimistic that when COVID finally ends we will be in a better position to educate our students in a variety of ways.

Other responses indicating how PTAC members felt their instructional model are summarized in Table 4 below.

Summary of Additional Comments about Instructional Model Impact on Educational Equity (as of November 2020, instructional model is in parenthesis)	
COVID has restricted club activities, including student clubs that focus on equity. Many are not being held in virtual environments. Students have been given the option to select the "learning style that fits best for them" – in-person or virtual. (Concurrent)	It is clear that many students are not supported at home. There is a huge divide. Students are either very successful with our current model or not successful at all. There seems to be little in between. We are struggling with finding a way to support all students in the remote model. (Hybrid)
We began the year in a hybrid model, with the option of "building online" (assigned to classroom teachers' schedules) or our virtual campus. After two weeks, we began face to face instruction five days per week. We will be moving back to the hybrid model for grades 3-12 next week. K-2 and some special ed students will remain in person five days per week. Although as a district and a community we have increased the number hotspots available to students/families, we still have many families without access to reliable and/or high-speed internet service. Therefore, we cannot require synchronous instruction for students. Even students choosing either of the online formats are being "lost" or seeing less achievement. (Hybrid)	This year we have employed both hybrid and virtual models. This has certainly impacted equity as we have middle school and high school students that are now responsible for supervising and feeding their younger siblings rather than being able to attend classes or complete their own assignments. Additionally, it is very evident that some students have their own workspaces, while others are sharing internet connections and in the same room as multiple other people, making it more difficult for them to concentrate or even attend. (Fully Remote)
As a district, we are moving in the right direction in terms of educational equity with this instructional model, but we still have a long way to go. (Hybrid)	Students with unreliable internet often cannot get on video calls while the rest of class goes on. (Hybrid)
Many students find full remote instruction to be overwhelming. Some are still learning basic technology skills. Some refuse to engage. Some are not finding the same academic and social successes they would in the traditional classroom. (Fully Remote)	We still do not have devices for all students K-12. This means some cannot be present virtually in classes when it is their days to learn from home. Elementary students are only receiving 2 days of live teacher instruction per week because there are no devices at our elementary schools. (Hybrid)
Being a 1 to 1 school has helped with equity as we've moved to this instructional model. (Hybrid)	Learning technology is available to ALL students K-12. Distance learners still don't seem to be successful since logging on synchronously is not required. (Concurrent)
We actively worked to get internet access for students in case we need to shift to remote learning of some kind. But, sadly, that seems to be the only equity issue we are focused on right now. (Fully In-person)	I have not seen any impact on equity yet. Our school just filled an Equity Coordinator position who will be looking into this, but that person is still working on pushing out objectives and professional development. (Fully Remote)
Many kids are still not logging in consistently. This is and will have an impact on learning. Students who are intrinsically motivated and have support from family thrive better in the virtual or hybrid model. Those who need guidance, extra prompts, models, and hands on learning are at a disadvantage. Of course, issues of equity impact whether students fall in the former or latter categories. (Hybrid)	Our instructional model has limited the trauma informed care and supports that fall under the umbrella of Social Emotional Learning. It has also impacted how much community organizations are able to provide food and financial support to families in need. (Hybrid)

Table 4

Teacher Needs and School Practices

In December 2020, PTAC sent members a third survey focused on teacher needs and school practices. Respondents generally felt that LEA professional development (PD) offerings on equity, if there were any, were ineffective at promoting equitable practices either in individual classrooms or schoolwide.

In responses about the efficacy of LEA-provided PD on promoting a schoolwide culture of equity, the average rating was 4.62 out of 10. The rating was even lower (4.50) in regard to the effectiveness of such offerings on promoting equitable classroom practices. When the results of these two questions are combined and disaggregated by geographic locale (Figure 7), the average effectiveness score in small urban LEAs is only 2.33. Rural LEAs had a slightly higher average score of 2.75. Respondents from suburban schools found their PD offerings to be more effective with an average rating of 4.97. Only large urban teachers who responded gave a positive average rating of 6.40.
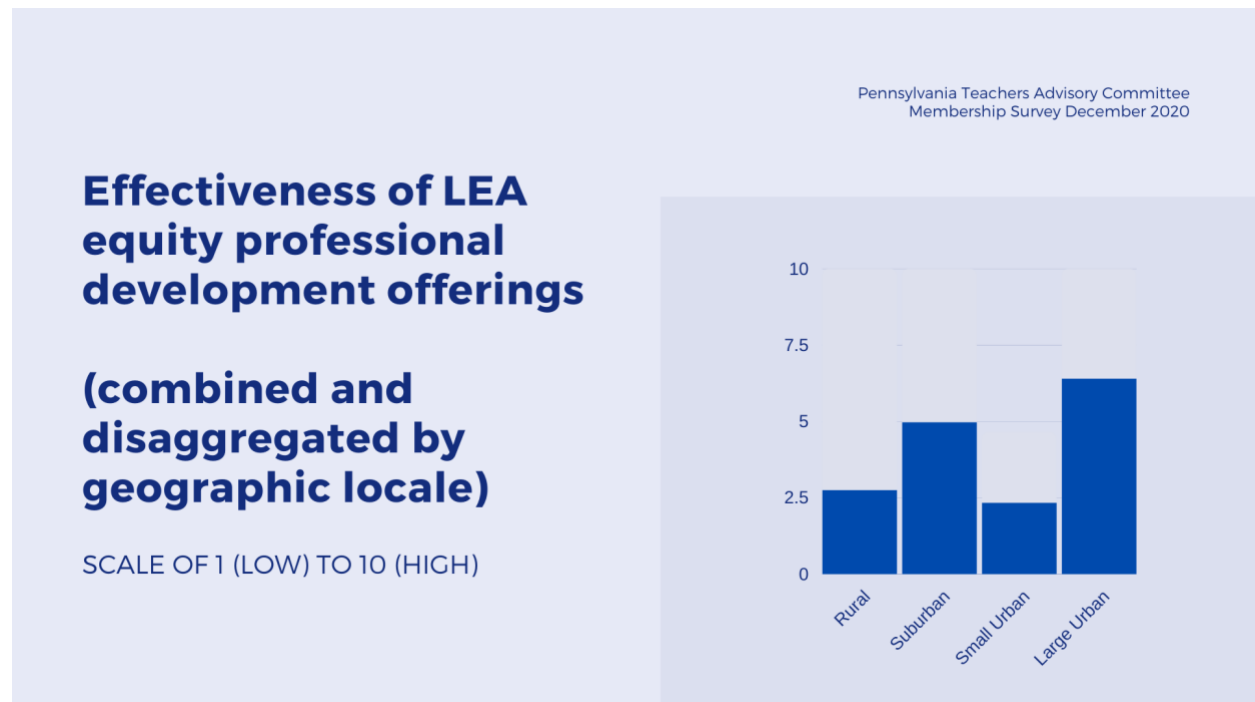

Figure 7

When asked to describe a successful equity-focused professional development session provided by their LEA, 75% of rural teachers said they had never been offered such a session by their school or district – a higher percentage than any other group. Several teachers did indicate that they had pursued professional learning on equity, inclusion, diversity and/or social justice on their own.

Teachers who were able to share details of beneficial professional development offerings described a variety of different models and experiences. One common theme was a focus on helping teachers understand different perspectives. A high school teacher in a rural Northeastern Pennsylvania district did, however, share:

Our school district brought in an effective speaker who helped teachers understand how their biases can easily make their way into instruction unless they are reflective and carefully plan to overcome them.

A teacher in a suburban Central Pennsylvania high school shared this description of a teacher training session offered by his district:

We had members of several community organizations who work with individuals in poverty or low income visit our school and work with teachers and administrators to help us understand how those in poverty deal with their situation. Part of the program was aimed at helping us understand the difference between situational and generational poverty. There was also a one-hour long simulation we had to work through in terms of how one survives in poverty which was extremely effective at getting us to understand the point-of-view from someone trying to survive in both forms of poverty.

This description, from a small urban middle school teacher in Southwestern Pennsylvania explained an experience that helped teachers build an expectation of excellence:

We had a session that addressed some of the language we use as teachers that can affect students' perceptions of themselves. She talked about empowering students and using language that helps them visualize paths to success. "I love how you write creatively. That kind of writing will catch the interest of those reading your college applications." Or, "You've been mastering the accuracy of these equations. When you start your business, that will be a major asset to be able to manage the numbers." She calls her students her "scholars" and calls her ELL students her "emerging bilinguals." There is power in language and we can use it to grow our students.

A Philadelphia high-school teacher shared his perspective that the most impactful professional development is often driven by the expertise that is already in the school:

The most effective PD sessions that tackle equity issues are never actually entitled "Equity in Education" or something similar. The best sessions are often not provided by the district. Home-grown PD led by teachers or administration in my school has always been the most informative. The PD sessions which tackle equity are threaded throughout other meetings to create a positive culture. It is a foundational aspect of the school and is consistently reflected upon.

Another high school teacher in Philadelphia explained that often it is difficult to access the best PD on equity:

The most recent available session related to equity was capped at 80 [maybe less!] participants. Our district employees about 20k staff. PD is only effective if you can participate in it.

Figure 8 shows words and phrases that appeared most frequently in PTAC member responses describing effective professional development on issues of equity. Larger words appeared more frequently in responses.

Figure 8

PTAC Members were also asked to describe what their vision of a highly-effective professional learning opportunity related to equity would entail. For this response, we encouraged teachers to share effective PD experiences that they had experienced personally outside of what their LEA had offered and could benefit their entire school. We also asked them to share thoughts on PD experiences that they had not experienced but felt were needed.

Many responses noted the need to facilitate honest conversations between teachers, administrators, and students in schools. Restorative Circles, Courageous Conversations Training, and the Inclusive Healthy Communities models were all mentioned as having the potential to be adapted effectively to promote equity.

One teacher in a suburban elementary school in Southwestern Pennsylvania shared the need for more opportunity to have students give critical feedback to teachers:

We need to hear about student experiences that were affected positively and negatively by teachers. Hearing about best practice is helpful, however hearing from our students about specific instances and moments and how teacher reaction (or lack of action) impacted that moment would allow us to look honestly at our own practices and improve them.

A Philadelphia teacher argued that PD focused on improving equity must be intentional and specific:

Within our PD sessions we cannot talk about equity as a nebulous concept. We must dig down and unabashedly discuss how schools can support students most in need of a safe, equitable education.

A rural high-school teacher in Northeastern Pennsylvania commented on the need for professional networking to improve equitable outcomes:

An effective PD plan that looks at equity needs to include groups of teachers working together across the district to identify equity problems in individual school buildings, brainstorming ways to eliminate inequities, and developing action plans.

Several teachers explained that school leaders need to value the importance of addressing inequities if any Professional Learning was to be effective. A suburban middle school teacher in central Pennsylvania shared:

Getting serious about addressing equity issues in our schools means significant changes to many schools' current practices. Any PD on equity that is going to work must be supported by an administration that is serious about creating this kind of change.

With the current pandemic increasing the demands on teachers and decreasing their capacity, a teacher in a rural Southwestern Pennsylvania high school argued that educator motivation must be a central consideration in designing PD:

Any professional development must grow teachers' ability and knowledge in a manner that invigorates rather than exhausts their motivation.

The December survey also asked PTAC members to reflect on their own comfort levels in having discussions about issues of equity within their schools (Figure 9). The responses were consistent among geographic locales with most teachers feeling comfortable having equity conversations with both administrators and colleagues. Overall, when asked to rate their comfort level in discussing issues of equity with colleagues, respondents gave an average rating of 7.27 out of 10. Teachers were slightly less comfortable having these discussions with administrators (6.62).
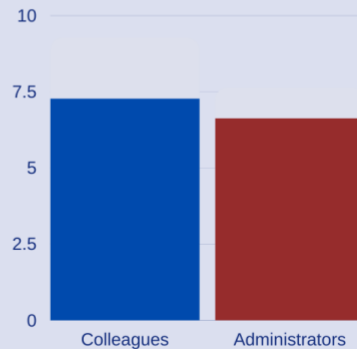
Figure 9

It is important to note, however, that there was an extreme range of responses to these questions. Several respondents gave the lowest rating of 1 in both categories, indicating that there may be several schools in the Commonwealth where discussions of equity are not supported by the culture of the building. There were also many teachers who gave a rating of 10 to both questions, showing that many school cultures are very supportive of discussions on these issues. Having such a disparity in school culture across the Commonwealth can, in itself, lead to inequities within our education system.

The final question on the December survey asked PTAC members to describe what success looks like when it comes to equity, inclusion, and diversity in education (Table 5). This question was also widely discussed in PLC meetings. Many members expressed that true equity is not attainable, but rather something that must continually be worked toward and focused upon in all education conversations. Another common sentiment was that equity should not be solely an outcome to be achieved, but rather it should be the basis for how we begin all conversations in education.

There was consensus that all educators have a responsibility to continually ask the question, "Whose voices are not included?" in all of the spaces which we operate: our classrooms, our schools, as teacher leaders outside our classroom, and in our Pennsylvania education system.

A high-school teacher in Philadelphia explained what this could look like in schools and classrooms:

There is not going to be one specific metric that can be used to measure equity. It is too human, and therefore complex, to measure. But there a few notable indications that can we observe. When all staff in schools recognize that there are always going to be students who need a helping hand to feel safe, respected, and celebrated can we truly approach equity

in the classroom. Tolerance is a weak term for this, as it makes those in non-majority communities feel like a burden.

When schools recognize and celebrate students "across race, gender, ethnicity, language, disability, sexual orientation, family background, and/or family income," can we then approach equity. When schools have the ability to help these students, and the students see their schools as safe spaces will we approach equity. We need to do more than professionally develop teachers. We need to have real discussions with our students. They need to know that their teachers and their schools are safe for them. Students need to be aware of the programs that are in place to help them. Teachers and staff need to be willing to really listen to their students with their stories, their struggles, and their pain. That means actually having a space for these discussions.

A rural high-school teacher in Southwestern Pennsylvania commented that any successes in closing equity gaps must be determined using holistic and local metrics:

Success in a poor rural district is similar to other environments where maximizing students' potential is the goal. An overreliance on standardized test scores as a metric of success not only favors more affluent students but perpetuates the culture of haves and have-nots in our community. Judgement should be in the products of the school system, which might include decreased incarceration rates over generations, the longitudinal increase of stability, employability, and achievement in professions, and the continual increase of responsibilities in professional and societal roles.

Many PTAC members explained that there is a lack of awareness of equity issues in their communities and schools. This response from a suburban elementary school teacher describes how school districts need to look beyond their borders at times:

Any success would start with awareness. I think many are not aware of inequities in our school and state or how to change the learning environment to support all in our school communities. There is some "we don't know what we don't know" challenges that can be hard to fix. District leaders needs to provide opportunities for teachers to engage in experiences outside of our district and Professional Development that allow us to learn from people from outside our own bubble.

A high-school teacher in an Eastern Pennsylvania small urban district kept her description of success simple:

Success would be when all students feel welcomed, safe, and valued.

When it comes to equitable practices in your school/district, what would success look like?	
Success is never truly attained. The goal posts will continue to move as equity will be a constant issue. However, success is in the correct mindset of self-examination of a district or school to be willing to change 'traditional' organizational make-ups, policies, procedures, and staffing.	We need to start the conversation about equity in our schools. There is little focus on equitable practices for our students, staff and community. The environment in a rural school district such as this has not allowed for this conversation. Most are unaware that this needs to be a focus.
To move closer to success, we need to hear the stories of those impacted by lack of opportunity. Perspectives of others, especially teachers who experienced oppression, can help us better understand the direction we need to move in.	Success would mean there is no difference in the color of kids in detention, in-school suspension as well as computer science, calculus and other high-level classes. Every classroom should reflect the community outside school.
As a rural district with significant poverty levels, our most glaring equity gaps are likely between students in poverty and more affluent peers, and special education students and students without learning disabilities. Unseen and undiscussed, however, are experiences of students of color, LBGTQ+, transgender students, religious minorities, etc. We are a predominantly white district in an area that is overwhelmingly regressive in views on equity, inclusion, and diversity. Any effective change in culture have to include intentional efforts to learn about the lived experiences of these students, determine barriers to opportunity, and involve students in designing practices that eliminate those barriers.	Success is a school board and superintendent who will not tolerate any of their students and staff in schools in which they would not send their own children. Schools with asbestos and mold, roaches and mice, no soap or paper towels, send a clear message: no one cares. This is an unacceptable and fixable inequity that professional development cannot address.
	Success looks like developing programs and policies that aim to close equity gaps. An example of this is our movement away from having prerequisite requirements for AP courses and moving to equal access to anyone that desires to take an AP course.
Success will be achieved when the racial make-up of my classroom matches that of the school and community. The disparity in academic success between student subgroups in my school reflects ethnic and socio-economic disparities prevalent in my community. Upper-level classes are filled with predominantly white affluent students; lower-level class students are mostly students of color or low-income. Last year, 42% of my students were disadvantaged; 95% of those students were in the two lower-level classes I taught. This situation exists despite school boundary lines being drawn to integrate schools. Academic opportunities are abundant in my high school, but not every student takes advantage. As a result, I hear statements like, "those kids just aren't interested."	When students' backgrounds no longer predict their outcomes, effective equity work is likely being done. Educators need to focus on conditions we can control to give our students the best opportunities for success. One of the first issues to look at is how we discipline students. We tend to "discipline" (suspend) students with the greatest academic, social, and emotional needs. We take them out of the classroom more than any other student when they likely need to be in there as much as any other student. We need to discipline with a clearly communicated, mutually beneficial purpose. It's important for teachers to have appropriate training in effectively engaging students in meaningful learning, how to build cooperative relationships, and the crucial importance of maintaining high expectations.
Success looks all children having an equal chance at achieving success. Additional attention may need to be given to students who are starting from a disadvantaged place.	Success would mean each student has their own plan for educational success, including how they will access materials and show mastery.
Success includes all teachers offering equitable opportunity. One example would be that teachers no longer separating teams by boys and girls in physical education classes.	We must involve students and their vision of equity when designing professional learning for staff.

Table 5

Conclusion

The data and narrative from PTAC members show the complexities of addressing educational equity in Pennsylvania. Individual teachers often view the issue through the lens of their own personal and professional experiences. Community support for equity work varies widely. Resources available to address inequities are not equitably available across the Commonwealth. Perhaps most significantly, our public schools do not operate in a vacuum; societal inequities outside of education have significant impact on the equity within our education system.

It is clear from this report that educational inequity manifests differently in schools within different geographic areas and locale designations. A holistic state-wide approach that is nuanced enough to address equity issues in rural, suburban, small urban, and large urban schools is necessary. Competition among districts for resources or support perpetuates inequity and creates division. All school districts, administrators, teachers, and students in the Commonwealth must feel that they are supported in addressing inequities as they manifest in local contexts – at the same time that state leaders are working to improve equity between Pennsylvania's public schools.

PTAC members have shared expertise that can guide us in finding solutions to these complex issues, however we acknowledge that there are some limitations to the perspectives that we have shared in this report. As mentioned in the introduction, the experiences of our teachers come from their own interactions in their classrooms, schools, communities, and with education stakeholders. These experiences are important, but incomplete in explaining the full complexity of the issue of systemic educational equity. The data in this report is also limited by sample size. PTAC members represent many of Pennsylvania's LEAs, but not all of them. Not all of our members completed all surveys, nor did all members attend PLC sessions. Thus, the information in this report is limited to the experiences of those who participated.

We believe that these limitations provide an opportunity to engage in further discourse with other teachers, students, building administrators, school district leaders, and policy makers. Addressing inequity requires an understanding of the lived experiences of those who are impacted. These conversations must be informed by teacher expertise and take place across different levels of the system.

Teachers, as professionals who serve at the intersection of policy and practice within our education system, are uniquely positioned to understand the consequences of educational decisions on students. Our members are among the most excellent and respected education practitioners in the state. In this report, their narratives, examples, and recommendations are reflective of that excellence and their high expectations for their students, their schools, and our state education system.

Specific solutions to issues of equity in schools and districts must be locally relevant, and statewide solutions to equity require statewide policy change. However, based on their input of our members, we make the following general recommendations:

- Students must be involved in creating solutions at both the local and state level. Opportunities for students to identify, communicate, and develop solutions to issues of equity must be created and systematized at the classroom, school, district, and statewide level. Student agency allows issues of equity that are misunderstood or undiscovered to surface.
- Teachers' expertise and direction must be included in developing solutions to educational inequities. This includes determining professional development offerings, district initiatives, and policy direction. Teacher input in these areas will prevent many unintended consequences that could occur by sharing the practical implications of decisions.
- Further study and data collection are necessary to understand differences in equity needs across geographic locales in the Commonwealth.
- Networking across schools, districts, and the state is necessary for teachers, administrators, and policy makers in order to understand issues more completely. Isolation creates barriers to overcoming educational inequity. These networking opportunities should be codified in order to ensure they include all regions of the Commonwealth and are available to all educators.

Appendix
PTAC Recommendations on Teaching and Learning for the 2020-2021 School Year

June 22, 2020
Fellow Pennsylvanians,

Last month, a Philadelphia high school senior opened a borrowed Chromebook for the first time, frustrated that he didn't know how to engage with the new technology necessary for remote learning. A student in rural Pennsylvania wanted to send an email to his teacher explaining that he was struggling to complete his schoolwork because of the hours he was spending at his new job at the grocery store but couldn't because he had no internet connection at home. A teacher in the suburbs of Pittsburgh couldn't sleep because she was worried about the students she had not heard from despite repeated attempts - more than 50% of her class.

Pennsylvania has some of the most severe race and income disparities in educational access and opportunity in the United States. These disparities were exposed and amplified by the shift to remote teaching during the COVID-19 Pandemic, despite the intrepid efforts of teachers who adapted to remote teaching with unprecedented speed. The 2020-2021 school year will undoubtedly continue to present many challenges, and a crisis is not a time to take chances with our children. Therefore, in this critical time we must look to those who best understand the learning needs of our students and ensure that the expertise of teachers is driving education decisions.

To that end, since the disruption of education in mid-March, PTAC has conducted surveys and held dozens of online meetings to gather thousands of perspectives from Pennsylvania teachers in urban, suburban, and rural areas. Based on these trends, the highly recognized classroom teachers that compose the membership of PTAC make the following recommendations.

Education must focus on the holistic wellbeing of children to ensure our students are mentally, emotionally, physically, and academically healthy.

● We recommend every school district develop locally relevant, comprehensive, and sustained Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) plans that prioritize the holistic wellbeing of students. These plans must involve families and communities, focusing on activities that promote relationships and student wellness, especially during the first weeks of school.
● We recommend school districts support access to arts, humanities, physical education, and electives, as well as mental health professionals, school nurses, and school librarians. A holistic education prepares children for a 21st-century workforce, develops engagement in learning, supports social and emotional wellness, and allows students to understand how learning applies to the world. These programs must be equitably accessible to all children.
● We recommend every school district embrace culturally responsive teaching and

learning. This should incorporate history inclusive of marginalized perspectives and literature that represents and celebrates diverse cultures and individuals.

● We recommend district leaders reject any efforts to restrict access to the above-mentioned resources and curriculum areas. Additional trauma cannot be inflicted on students by cutting school programs that help them find their identities and passions.

Teachers are educational experts, and thus all decisions about teaching and learning must be driven by their input.

● We recommend every school district create avenues for teachers to help shape teaching and learning for the upcoming school year.

● We recommend all education decisions at the state level be informed by teachers from diverse backgrounds. Teachers, who understand the practical implications of policies, must be included in conversations with decision makers and guide the decision-making process.

● We recommend differentiated instruction (teaching that meets the needs of each individual student) continue. Teachers must be allowed to create their own lessons. Scripted and standardized instructional programs that do not account for teacher expertise limit students' learning and exacerbate equity gaps.

● We recommend determining student needs, designing interventions, and assessing student growth next year be done through teacher-created or local assessments. Standardized tests cannot account for inequitable access to education this spring and should not be administered in the upcoming academic year.

Districts and schools must prioritize the support and wellbeing of teachers, because teachers cannot help students be successful if they are not well themselves.

● We recommend all teachers receive training to meet all children's needs. All school staff must have ongoing support in promoting social-emotional learning, identifying children who have experienced trauma, and creating inclusive classroom spaces protective of all children.

● We recommend teachers receive training on relevant new technologies. If remote teaching must occur, teachers should have access to professional development on effective remote teaching practices and technologies for their content areas.

● We recommend teachers have the ability to self-identify and access professional development that will help them better meet the needs of students.

● We recommend that districts develop and implement a plan that gives teachers sustained access to mental health professionals and creates safe working conditions.

Sincerely,
The Pennsylvania Teachers Advisory Committee

PTAC Board of Directors

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