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NEWS RELEASE

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District's equity work aims to close student achievement gaps

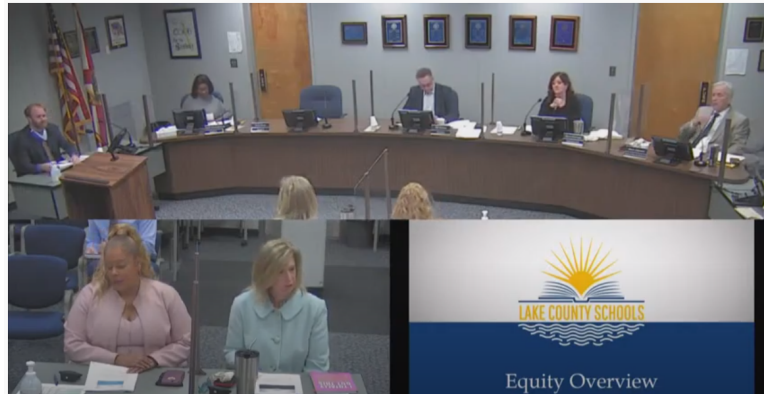
TAVARES -- Throughout her four years with the district, Lake County Schools Superintendent Diane Kornegay has been leading her staff to look for ways to eliminate disparities among students represented by gender, race, ethnicity, language, disability and socioeconomic status. The goal is to ensure that a student's success in the district is no longer predictable by those categories.

At a School Board workshop on Monday, staff provided an update on their work showing that while progress is being made, there is still much work to be done. The shorthand word for this work is "equity," not to be confused with "equality."

Equality involves using the same approaches across the board with all students -- teaching and reaching each one the same way. Equity, on the other hand, is meeting the individual needs of each student, using the approach that works best even if it means one student receives instruction and services differently from his or her peers.

Experts say the idea of equity can be uncomfortable for those who have grown up thinking equality leads to justice and fairness. "But discomfort produces change," Emily Feltner, Assistant Superintendent of Teaching, Learning and Leadership, told the board. "There are thousands of students already benefiting from what we do. We want to get to the point where all of our students are benefiting."

One area where the district has seen success is in narrowing the graduation rate gap, Feltner said. In 2017, for example, the graduation rate for black students was about 67.3 percent, while the graduation rate for white students and Hispanic students was 79.5 percent each -- a gap of 12.2 percentage points. Three years later in 2020, the graduation rate for black students jumped to 83.4 percent while the rate for white students climbed to 91 percent and for Hispanic students 92.5. That's a much smaller gap of 7.6 percentage points between black students and their white peers, and of 9.1 percentage points between black students and their Hispanic peers.



Kati Pearson, executive director Academic Services and Intervention, and Emily Feltner, assistant superintendent Teaching, Learning and Leadership, provide an overview of the district's equity work to the School Board during a Feb. 1 workshop.

“While we are seeing some progress, we also know that our work in eliminating the achievement gap is only just beginning,” Feltner said. She explained that gaps exist in the areas of academic achievement, discipline, access to Advanced Placement classes, Exceptional Education identification and, still, the graduation rate.

For example, of all the students retained last year in Lake, 63 percent were male, representing the largest subgroup. Also, of all students with a GPA of 3.0 or higher, only 12 percent were black. Both figures represent disproportionality, said Kati Pearson, Executive Director of Academic Services and Intervention. “We should ask ourselves, ‘What is it about our system that causes these subgroups to consistently underachieve or be overidentified? How can we make our system more equitable for these groups without creating the same disproportionality among other groups?’ ” she told the board.

Every Lake principal has been asked to create an equity coalition to address achievement gaps on his or her campus. At Eustis Heights Elementary, that coalition led to a schoolwide study of the book *Overcoming the Achievement Gap Trap* by Anthony Muhammad, which was studied by district leaders last year. Employees at the school are aiming to “create equity from class to class, as a common thread for everything we do,” said Principal Tiffany Scott, Ed.D.

At Windy Hill Middle School, Principal William Roberts said their equity coalition consists of teachers and other staff members, but will be expanding to include parents and students as well. They are examining the school’s equity data and having honest conversations about which student needs are being met and where they might be falling short. The next step is to use the data to make changes, starting with scheduling, to ensure they are providing more learning opportunities for all students across the board.

At Tavares High School, Principal Jacob Stein invited members of the City Council, Chamber of Commerce and Lake County Sheriff’s Department to join the school’s equity coalition. They set goals and outlined steps to reach those goals, including increasing the number of students enrolling in AP classes across all subgroups. “When we look at that data, we want to see that achievement gap closing by providing opportunities not just academically but through our extracurriculars, through our discipline and through our social and emotional opportunities,” he said.

Feltner cautioned that equity work is complex and often appears slow-moving. Additionally, districts that take on the work are often criticized both for doing too much and for doing too little. But the potential for positive student outcomes makes the work worthwhile. “As the district leaders of our county, we will continue to grow in our own understanding of equity, help school leaders do the same, and create more opportunities for students to learn at high levels by refining and examining all aspects of our system,” she said.

Board Chairman Bill Mathias agreed the process is slow, but worthwhile. “You’re not planting annuals, you’re planting trees,” he said. “It takes more time. This is very good.”

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