

addressing disparities on the systems level

STORIES FROM THE NETWORK

Bright Futures | Monterey County, Calif.

*from
A guide to racial and ethnic
equity systems indicators*

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Bright Futures Education Partnership adopted new systems indicators to allow for greater “breadth and depth” to their work as they focus on addressing systemic racial and ethnic inequities.

These indicators are featured or discussed in this story:

- Per-pupil funding
 - Race/ethnicity of teachers and administrators relative to student body
 - Teacher qualifications
 - Internet and computer/device access and technical support
 - School climate/discipline
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shift toward addressing systemic racism

- ▶ In Monterey County, California — a county that spans 24 school districts in the state with the largest Latinx population in the country — Bright Futures Education Partnership models a strong data approach to racial equity work. They've recently adopted seven systems-level indicators, on top of 21 indicators they were already tracking across the cradle-to-career spectrum.

The seven indicators — school funding, same-race teacher, bilingual teacher, teacher credentials, teacher experience, school discipline and the digital gap — focus specifically on identifying systemic racism. The adoption of new indicators, while rooted in Bright Futures' established commitment to data and equity, signals a shift to a more "explicit focus on systemic racial and ethnic equity," according to Data and Research Partnership Manager Michael Applegate.

"We had some degree of a systems orientation previously, but our projects were focused on one outcome area, rather than systems impacting all or most of the cradle-to-career spectrum," Applegate said of earlier methods that emphasized smaller-scale systems. The new approach, on the other hand, seeks to avoid blaming individual students as the source of achievement differences and looks instead at how systems themselves perpetuate disparities.

"Working toward justice is an important goal all by itself, and we won't achieve our

countywide education outcome goals without addressing systemic gaps in opportunity," he added, describing Monterey County's demographics as 87% students of color — the second highest percentage in the state. The county is also tied with having the highest percentage of students learning English in California.

Applegate credited his participation in StriveTogether's Racial and Ethnic Equity Planning and Action teams as an experience that helped him develop strategies for supporting the partnership's shift toward systemic racial equity. As Bright Futures delved deeper into the work, Applegate used data to help build the case for why racial and ethnic equity — compared to other forms of equity like gender or economic equity — was so important.

In the summer of 2019, Bright Futures' partnership also completed a racial equity questionnaire. Results from the questionnaire, disaggregated by race and role, pushed this work forward. One major outcome was the formation of the organization's racial equity task force, which was created to reflect on the questionnaire, propose recommendations to the overall partnership and ultimately oversee the implementation of those recommendations. The questionnaire was an invaluable tool that "supported deeper conversations and actions toward racial equity," Applegate said.

the strategies

- ▶ The process to build out Bright Futures' systemic racial equity approach was still very much in progress at the time of our interview in December 2020. The work of the previous year and a half included task force planning, establishing group agreements, training sessions on diversity, inclusion and systemic racism, and selecting systemic racism indicators. At the end of 2020, the task force was underway with the calculation of recently adopted indicators. Work supporting racial and ethnic equity through the local teacher pathway had also begun.

Applegate named communication as an important aspect of adopting the indicators. Communication, for him, means making national data on educational disparities meaningful in the partnership's community. For example, Bright Futures has worked to translate a national number — the \$23 billion annual funding gap between majority white school districts and districts that are majority people of color — into a number that is now part of their "local story": the more than \$100 million annual funding gap in Monterey County specifically.

"Our first priority is working toward more easily understood systemic metrics we can communicate. Once the community can clearly see the local need — like with the funding gap — we're better able to convene people and get deeper into the nuances of the data."

– Michael Applegate

Mobilizing data such as this local funding number was a huge asset toward getting buy-in from partners, but it wasn't the only means to do so. Bright Futures also supported

early champions in the community and their efforts with research: One of the researchers, education research expert Linda Darling-Hammond, happens to be the president of the California State Board of Education. In various writings, she described some of "the biggest systemic issues" as same-race teacher, teacher qualification disparities, school funding and discipline disparities. Locally, an early champion of the work was the then-dean at the College of Education at California State University (CSU) Monterey Bay — Bright Futures's anchor association — who agreed to be held accountable for some of the systemic indicators. It helped, Applegate said, that some of the early adopters didn't need to be convinced and were "already doing systemic equity work."

Applegate also invests time in sharing the work, making presentations to partner organizations, adjacent sector organizations and foundations on the importance of systemic racism indicators. In these presentations, drawing "a strong connection from history to the local present situation" has been key. He gave an example of discussing the connections between redlining, home ownership and inheritance, and current local school funding disparities in Monterey County.

He also emphasized the impact of the current historical moment on their work. "Of course, communities of color have been experiencing violence and advocating for change for a long time," he said. "But the recent national attention to this violence and the protests around Black Lives Matter definitely generated more momentum in our community."

challenges

► Staff size

One of the challenges Bright Futures is facing is the size of their backbone staff. Currently, their size makes it challenging to effectively do systems improvement work in each of their outcome areas, while also working to change systems that span the cradle-to-career spectrum like school funding or teacher credentials.

“We’re split between those two ways of working on both smaller and larger systems,” Applegate said, viewing both as critical parts of the work to challenge systemic inequities.

Multiple data sets and complex calculations

Applegate shared the technical aspects of collecting data, much of which is publicly available in California “if you know how to get it.” In California, each teacher is assigned a unique identifier for the year — an entry that includes their race, gender, education, experience and credentials — which Bright Futures uses to match to the demographics of their classroom. This process doesn’t require data-sharing agreements. Instead, “it requires linking multiple big data sets together and understanding the data points they have in common.”

Because Applegate is an employee of CSU Monterey Bay — the partner organization responsible for a large portion of the local teacher pathway — he’s also able to access some of the teacher pathway-related data there. The college has agreed to look at the percentage of students of color in their program and their persistence in the program as well as testing and credentials data, all of which will be disaggregated by race as well as the ability to speak multiple languages, where possible. The college also plans to support research efforts on the relationship between classroom management techniques — some of which they teach — and discipline disparities.

Currently, Bright Futures is moving into the next level of calculations. They’ve hired an analyst with a background in accounting to help them understand the data — both school

funding numbers and classroom-level teacher qualifications data. “We’ll be able to see by the racial makeup of the classroom if students of color are less likely to have a fully credentialed teacher or a teacher with less teaching experience,” Applegate said.

“That’s thousands of lines of data and a fairly complex calculation. That’s part of what adopting an indicator means: that we’re moving into really trying to understand that particular piece of the system — and racial and ethnic disparities — more deeply.”

– Michael Applegate

They’ve already started working on this, Applegate said, supporting the College of Education to increase the percentage of teachers of color who are fully credentialed.

Working with partners

At the time of our interview, Bright Futures was putting together a project involving a group of CSU Monterey Bay professors willing to participate in local action research projects. The partnership plans to “test several solutions, many that we will ultimately implement,” Applegate said. Professors will conduct research and co-design solutions with students and teachers, testing whether or not the solutions work.

Partners in the Bright Futures partnership — including community colleges Hartnell and Monterey Peninsula College in addition to CSU Monterey Bay — support a 2+2 program, which allows students to complete their first two years at one of the community colleges and their last two years at CSU Monterey Bay. Prospective teachers can earn their credentials within four years if they choose to teach at the elementary level or take an additional year if they want to teach at a higher level, meaning they don’t have to enroll in a traditional master’s program to earn their teaching credentials.

These college and university partners, according to Applegate, already have concrete examples of “equity built into the program.” Monterey County is bigger than the state

of Delaware; the establishment of remote campuses brought degree programs into rural agricultural communities, helping to eliminate transportation issues, for example. Child care is also readily available at these sites for students who are parents.

conclusion

- ▶ Although supporting the collective shift of the partnership toward addressing systemic racism took time and planning from many individuals and organizations — especially those involved in the racial equity task force — Applegate acknowledges that Bright Futures is still in many ways just beginning their work, having recently adopted the systemic indicators. However, he noted that they have a strong commitment from their partners. This collective commitment to the work, he said, will move them toward “greater breadth and depth.”