

December 18, 2020

## #ReopenStrong Equity Spotlight: Youth Services Center (YSC)

### Spotlights

*Written by Ivan Johnson, Special Education Chair*



### **What expectations or policies have you advocated for/set for your students and school to keep equity front and center during virtual learning?**

I have a unique role as a Special Education Chair and teacher in Youth Services Center — the only juvenile detention center in D.C. My student rosters fluctuate because we have a transient student population. I may have a student for a month or up to a year. It always varies because of our students are coming to YSC for various reasons — and many have come in the midst of the pandemic.

As a Special Education Chair, I see a lot of students who come to YSC with outdated IEPs. It is my expectation that every student with an IEP is given a fair chance. I work with my colleagues to review present levels of performance, behavior observations, and more from an equity lens to ensure our students are given the appropriate instructional supports in this new setting. Reviewing IEPs from an equity lens requires more than the logistical aspects of paperwork and documentation.

It comes with the responsibility of ensuring every students' goals are being implemented with fidelity and integrity. It requires reflecting on the context of Black boys being overidentified as requiring specialized services to ensure implicit biases are not leading to more inequitable outcomes. I have an expectation that regardless of a student's background or past experiences, they are coming to my classroom with someone that believes they can succeed, holds them to high expectations, and will work with them to meet their personal goals.

### **What keeps you going during these difficult times?**

I want to bridge the gap of regression because, before COVID-19, long periods without in-person learning were identifiers for students falling behind. But in the virtual space, I can't allow that to happen. That's what keeps me going — the responsibility of making sure my students are getting more than what they need to excel in the virtual setting.

When people ask, "What are we going to do about learning?," I am reminded that I as a Black male teacher, I am needed right now. I need to have a seat at the table. I need to be in the room. I need to be aware of the national dialogue in addition to the conversations happening at the school-level. I need to be front and center.

In addition to being the best teacher I need to be for my students, my loved ones also keep me going during these difficult times. I'm reminded of our present reality. I am humbled by my faith that keeps me going. I am reminded of how blessed I am. And ironically enough, the uncertainty of what's next keeps me going because one thing that is certain is that our students need their teachers more than ever before.

### **What best practices have you leveraged in your role to ensure equity for your students in the virtual space?**

Breakout rooms have been the best feature for me in the virtual learning space! I am able to give every student an opportunity to meet one-on-one or in small groups for more focused learning and support. It's been extremely helpful in the co-teaching model. One-on-one time is still important in the virtual space so students can feel like they are in control of their own learning. I have also been able to expand my teaching platform by using social media for students at other schools in DCPS and across the country.

Through Educadoors, I have been able to provide virtual instruction for students around the world as well as tips for fellow educators who are also adapting to virtual learning. Educadoors started out as a platform for bringing innovation to common spaces. But during the pandemic, it became so much more as a space for shared learning, best practices, and instruction in the virtual space because learning never stops.

#### How have you continued to create an inclusive and educational culture in the virtual space?

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is the key to creating an inclusive and educational culture in my virtual classroom. I start class by asking my students a simple relationship-building question, "How are you doing? I'm not talking about the surface level, "How are you?" I'm talking about the intentional, "What's going on? How are you doing? What did you eat?" and more. I do this with intention to bring normalcy to an unprecedented dynamic.

I want to carry conversations outside of the pandemic, so students feel comfortable enough to talk to me through this virtual platform. I may not be physically present in a classroom, but I am still here to support them and will have the same level of rapport no matter the medium or platform. We don't just jump into the lesson — we take 10-15 minutes to have a conversation and thoughtful dialogue. Those are sometimes the most important 10-15 minutes of class. Our scholars are not just there to receive information from me as a teacher — they are there to build a meaningful relationship with a trusted adult and mentor.

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