

CASE STUDY



Equal Opportunity Schools (EOS)



Year established:
2010



Goal:

Ensure students of all backgrounds have equal access to the most academically intense high school programs (AP and IB, specifically)—and particularly that low-income students and students of color have opportunities to succeed at the highest levels.



Impact:

Since its founding, EOS has helped more than 540 schools in 29 states identify and enroll more than 36,000 “missing students” (students of color and low-income students who meet AB and/or IB program qualifications but are not enrolled in such programs) and support their success in rigorous academic programs.



Change strategy:

(1) Introduces positive disruption by centering equity in a school’s work, first by enrolling missing students in advanced classes. (2) Focuses on the “whole learner” by collecting and sharing a fuller picture of each missing student through the Student Insight Card. (3) Fosters supportive relationships among educators by setting up an equity team in each school and working with school staff to reinforce equity goals, and by connecting a broader network of educators through the Equity Leader Labs.

Helping Teachers Close the Classroom Equity Gap

By Lija Farnham

The Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) programs offer high school students college-level courses and the opportunity to earn college credits. More than two million students enroll each year, predominantly in AP. Participants, however, include relatively few students of color and students from low-income backgrounds, despite the fact that three-quarters of a million such students meet the program qualifications.

Equal Opportunity Schools (EOS) set out in 2010 to identify and champion enrollment of these “missing” students in AP and IB programs. That’s when Reid Saaris, the organization’s founder and former CEO, first began helping such students enroll and succeed in advanced courses as a high school teacher in South Carolina. Today, EOS’s portfolio includes 345 schools in 108 school districts, such as New York City, Chicago, San Francisco, and Prince George’s County, Maryland. Altogether, EOS has worked with 540 schools in 29 states and helped to enroll more than 36,000 in AP and IB programs.

Despite initial skepticism by many teachers, adding previously excluded students of color and low-income students to advanced classes typically has had little to no effect on average course outcomes. Seventy-five percent of EOS schools maintain their average AP/IB exam pass rate and overall class GPA. EOS is not surprised. On average, EOS finds that across its partner schools, outside of AP courses, only 14 percent of students of color report being challenged by their courses. That means 86 percent of students of color are not getting challenged enough to be engaged and taken to the next level.

EOS begins its work with a school or district by collecting and sharing data—both enrollment data and the results of a survey of all students and staff. “Our starting point with the schools is establishing an urgency about increasing opportunities for students currently in their building—and having a solution-centered approach,” explains Sasha Rabkin, EOS’s chief strategy officer.

Many schools have not considered the extent to which some students are steered away from advanced classes. Nor have schools taken stock of student and teacher attitudes.

“[Missing] students’ aspirations for college tend to be higher than staff estimates of these aspirations,” says Adam Kay, EOS’s former director of effectiveness and learning. “This highlights the barriers these students face in pursuing AP classes. They think: ‘I don’t feel encouraged, I don’t feel welcome.’”

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ADAM KAY, FORMER DIRECTOR, EFFECTIVENESS AND LEARNING, EOS

EOS also asks students to list the adults they trust—to both ensure that all students have positive, caring relationships with educators in their schools, and also to know which educators could lead outreach to missing students. “People are afraid that students will say, ‘I don’t trust anyone,’” says Bernadette Merikle, EOS’s senior director, strategy for racial equity impact. “Time and time again what we find is that students have multiple trusted adults. And for those students who don’t, we can work on that.”

EOS shares its analysis with the school “equity team,” made up of administrators, teachers, and counselors in charge of designing and implementing strategies to enroll the missing students and support their success. “We find when we get into the work that they have intuition about the disparities, but rarely do they know or appreciate the actual disparities,” Kay explains. In the vast majority of schools, a clear pattern emerges of students of color and those from low-income families being excluded from advanced courses. The equity team grapples with the reasons for these disparities, including school policies that create barriers for some students to pursue advanced classes, as well as the biases and assumptions teachers may have that prevent them from encouraging some students to pursue advanced courses. EOS’s school survey data set the stage for developing goals and strategies for enrolling more students of color and low-income students in AP and IB programs.

Throughout the first year of its involvement, EOS works with school staff and leaders to develop a set of approaches and tools that work for that particular high school, building on the experience the organization has had in hundreds of other high schools. One especially important tool for helping schools find and support missing students is the Student Insight Card, which leverages survey and administrative data to outline student aspirations, strengths, learning mindsets, barriers to learning, academic track record, and teachers' recommendations for the student. The information on this one-page resource document helps educators to tailor outreach and build trusting relationships with students. The insight card "challenges the erasure and invisibility students of color experience and provides over 40 different data insights on each student," explains Rabkin. With that information in hand, the school can facilitate "belonging rich" experiences for each missing student and say, "we see you."

Insight cards also provide important information about student mindsets, a critical factor in academic success typically overshadowed by grades and test scores. In fact, EOS data show that schools frequently "only look through the lens of grades and test scores, which tends to marginalize a lot of students," says Kay. "However, teachers are all saying that learning mindsets are also important."

In the second year of EOS's work with a school, as a more diverse group of students enters AP/IB courses, teachers use the insight cards as a reference point to connect with these students on a personal level and support them to address barriers they may be facing. "When teachers finally receive their students' first semester grades, that can be powerful" says Kay. "A number of teachers come around in their predictions that some students will fail or struggle."



Equity Leader Lab participants collaborate in school groups to plan next year's activities that will sustain the equity momentum in each school. (May 2019) Credit: Chris Wojdak Photography/Equal Opportunity Schools ©2019

Also in the second year, EOS works to build supportive relationships not only within the school's equity team, but among a cross-section of school leaders and staff whose participation is essential to sustain the school's policy and practice shifts around AP/IB courses. EOS coaches share best practices and examples from other EOS sites, facilitate activities to help teachers share best practices with each other, and introduce research-based activities aimed at improving student sense of belonging.

In the third year, EOS uses training sessions called Equity Leader Labs that tackle difficult subjects like implicit bias and seek to build support to sustain the new policies and practices beyond the equity team. "There is always an expectation that the equity team alone can't get this work done," says Merikle. "Even if you have conversations with 200 or 300 kids to get them into AP, they could be in classes with teachers who have never heard about this work. Schools have more success when they take the time to bring more people into the vision of the equity team." Equity Leader Labs enable equity teams to deepen their capacity individually and collectively to sustain the work within their schools.

EOS provides coaches throughout implementation and during the Equity Leader Labs to support each school's efforts. Educators also can reach out to other schools and districts in the EOS network for advice and tips. This enables school leaders and teachers to share best practices and build a network of equity-focused practitioners.

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The author thanks Bridgespan Editor Bradley Seeman for his help in drafting this case study.

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BERNADETTE MERIKLE, SENIOR DIRECTOR,
STRATEGY FOR RACIAL EQUITY IMPACT, EOS

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