



Equity of Opportunity and the Baltimore County Public School District

How BCPS Uses Digital Curriculum to Enhance and
Advance its Equity Initiative

[Dr. Lisa Williams](#)

Executive Director of the Office of
Equity and Cultural Proficiency, BCPS

[Jean Sharp](#)

Chief Academic Officer
Apex Learning

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Table of Contents

Equity of Opportunity and the Baltimore County Public School District: How BCPS Uses Digital Curriculum to Enhance and Advance its Equity Initiative

- 03 Equity of Opportunity and the Baltimore County Public School District
- 03 Opportunity Demands Equity
- 04 Narrowing Achievement Gaps is Not Enough
- 04 Embedding Equity in Education Reform
- 05 Baltimore County Public Schools' Steadfast Commitment to Equity
- 07 Using Digital Curriculum to Create Equitable Access, Close Achievement Gaps, and Raise the Academic Bar
- 09 Evaluating Impact of Digital Curriculum on Equity
- 11 Supporting Equity in Your District with Digital Curriculum
- 12 All Students Deserve the Opportunity to Succeed
- 13 About the Authors
- 14 References
- 15 Sponsored by Apex Learning

Equity of Opportunity and the Baltimore County Public School District

Today's classrooms are increasingly diverse. Students learn at different paces and in different ways. Some students accelerate quickly through courses while others lack the basic skills necessary to master grade-level content and need additional educational support.

Students also have varied backgrounds. They might speak many native languages — students at BCPS speak 85 languages from 108 countries. They have different social identities. Some struggle with physical and learning disabilities. Others come from myriad socioeconomic statuses. Just as important, students who are ready to take on additional academic challenges should have the opportunity to excel, while those who are historically underserved deserve the extra time and attention needed for content mastery.

Teachers, particularly in the new era of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), are tasked with the difficult, but important, challenge of meeting the needs of these various student groups and guiding them toward increased achievement. In order for each and every one to achieve, students must have equal opportunity to learn — regardless of their circumstances, aptitudes, or proficiency levels. For districts across the country, the challenge is to address issues such as achievement gaps, low graduation rates, and subpar college attendance in order to give students the opportunity to master the material and skills necessary for future success in college, work, and life.

One tool teachers can use to provide this balance and access at scale is digital curriculum; however, technology that personalizes instruction can't single-handedly create equity. It must be combined with a well-designed and supportive learning environment in which staff are culturally competent. BCPS provides a model of equity that successfully incorporates all of these elements.

Opportunity Demands Equity

Before exploring BCPS' equity work, take time to understand what Equity of Opportunity is, why it's critical to academic success, when it was introduced, and how it has evolved with education reform. According to the Learning Policy Institute: An equitable system does not treat all students in a standardized way, but differentiates instruction, services and resources to respond effectively to the diverse needs of students, so that each student can develop his or her full academic and societal potential.¹

It's important to highlight the clear distinction between equity and equality. Education is equal when students are treated exactly the same and given access to the same teachers, curriculum and academic resources. Equity refers to accessibility. Equity in education demands that every student receives access to the specific and varied resources he or she needs to graduate college- and career-ready.² Equity is not the same as equality in this case, since students with varied learning needs require different approaches to learning. Equity challenges educators to consider the accessibility of the learning environment through the lens of the learner.

Narrowing Achievement Gaps is Not Enough

Lack of equity can be seen in gaps of student achievement. While nationwide gains in closing achievement gaps have been made, research indicates that underserved student populations still achieve at lower rates than their peers in many areas.

- Black and Hispanic students graduate at lower rates than White students (Figure 1).
- Black students are suspended and expelled at a rate three times greater than White students.³
- Students with disabilities are two times more likely to receive out-of-school suspension when compared to non-disabled students.⁴
- Underserved students attend and complete college at lower rates (Figure 2); drop out at higher rates; and are less likely to have access to qualified teachers and high-quality curriculum.⁵

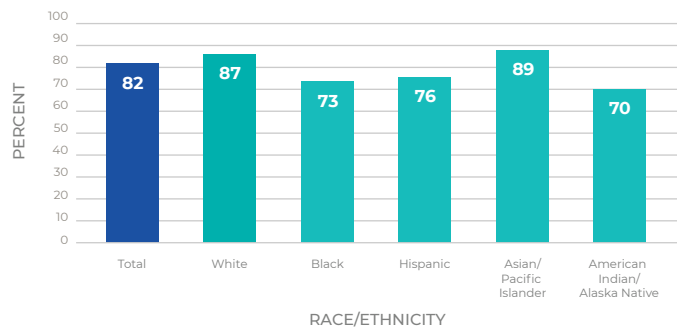
Embedding Equity in Education Reform

New educational policies have made efforts to address equitable access since the landmark Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*. Over time, schools have been increasingly tasked with providing more opportunity for historically underserved student populations — students of color, English Language Learners, low-income and homeless students, and students with disabilities — to succeed.

The latest move to close achievement gaps has been driven by ESSA. ESSA addresses equity by challenging districts to revamp their education systems to ensure that underserved students are equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to succeed in the 21st century.

FIGURE 1:

Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR) for Public High School Students, by Race/Ethnicity: School Year 2013-14



NOTE: The adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR) is the percentage of public high school freshmen who graduate with a regular diploma within four years of starting ninth grade. The Bureau of Indian Education and Puerto Rico were not included in United States four-year ACGR estimates. Race categories exclude persons of Hispanic ethnicity.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, Consolidated State Performance Report, 2013-14. See: [Digest of Education Statistics 2015, table 219.46](#).

FIGURE 2:

The Higher Education Pipeline, by Race/Ethnicity

Percent of public **high school graduates**, 2011–2012 school year



Percent of 18-24 yr olds enrolled in college, 2012



Percent of 25-29 yr olds with a **bachelor's degree** or higher, 2012



● WHITE ● HISPANIC ● BLACK ● ASIAN ● OTHER

Note: Hispanics are of any race. Whites include only non-Hispanics. For the high school graduate and bachelor's degree attainment figures, blacks and Asians include both Hispanics as well as non-Hispanics. "Other" includes small groups such as American Indians and those identifying as multiracial.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics; Pew Research Center Tabulations of the March 2012 Current Population Survey Integrated Public Use Micro Samples (IPUMS); October 2012 Current Population Survey.

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Baltimore County Public Schools' Steadfast Commitment to Equity

Even before the passage of ESSA, BCPS established an Office of Equity and Cultural Proficiency with the mission of creating, sustaining, and investing in a culture of deliberate excellence for every student, every school, and every community. The Office of Equity and Cultural Proficiency also promotes systems of structure and support for BCPS students, teachers, and other stakeholders in which equity and fairness are embedded in all areas of the district's academic, social, and cultural programs.

In 2012–2013, senior leadership began a listening and learning tour throughout the district that confirmed the need for further equity work. While inequity was a common overall theme throughout these conversations, two particular areas of inequity were addressed: student access to academic rigor and technology resources.

“They heard consistently how in various parts of the system, there were some opportunities for some students, but not all opportunities for all students.”

The effects of this discrepancy, though masked by BCPS' high average student performance, could be uncovered. The school system is diverse, and factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, income level, English Language Learner status, and special education status all impact student achievement.

“Parents told administrators that they wanted to make sure their students had the same opportunities as all other students in the system, and that they wanted to make sure they had a rich and engaging learning environment. That information went into the development of the district's strategic plan: Blueprint 2.0.”

Baltimore County Public Schools Profile⁶

- 25th largest school district in the U.S
- Grade span: PreK-12
- Total schools: 173
- Total students: 112,139
- Total teachers: 9,076

Student Population Profile

- Special education students: 11.7%
- ELL students: 4.5%
- Number of languages spoken: 85 languages from 108 countries
- White: 40%
- Black or African-American: 38.9%
- Hispanic or Latino: 8.9%
- Asian: 7.1%
- American Indian or Alaska Native: 0.4%
- Hawaiian or Pacific Islander: 0.1%
- Students of color represent 57.9% of enrollment
- Percentage of students eligible for free and reduced-price meals: 45.1%

United Front for Equity

Development of Blueprint 2.0 began shortly before the Board of Education of Baltimore County established its own equity commitment. Board Policy 0100 states:

“Disparities on the basis of race, special education status, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity (including gender expression), English language learner (ELL) status or socioeconomic status are unacceptable and are directly at odds with the belief that all students can achieve. While complex societal and historical factors contribute to the inequities our students face, rather than perpetuating disparities, the school system must address and overcome inequity by providing all students with the opportunity to succeed.”

Building Equity into Blueprint 2.0

Blueprint 2.0 is the BCPS' five-year strategic plan for school years 2013–2014 to 2017–2018. When reviewing Blueprint 2.0's basic components, it's easy to see the underlying theme of equity. The plan is made up of four goals: Academics, Safety, Communication, and Organizational Effectiveness. Its overarching mission is to ensure that every student graduates prepared for his or her chosen college, career, and life path.

Vision of Blueprint 2.0

Baltimore County Public Schools will be among the highest-performing school systems in the nation as a result of creating, sustaining, and investing in a culture of deliberate excellence for every student, every school, and every community.

Purpose

Baltimore County Public Schools will provide for every student the highest-quality, 21st century education in a safe, secure and positive environment conducive to high levels of teaching, learning and student engagement, resulting in globally competitive students prepared for their chosen college and/or career path.

In the case of academics, the Office of Equity and Cultural Proficiency alone couldn't fulfill equity goals. Learner-centered environments needed to be deeply embedded in classrooms throughout the district to personalize learning and provide every student with access to the resources he or she needs for high academic achievement. To do this at scale required a strong combination of technology tools introduced via the Students and Teachers Accessing Tomorrow (S.T.A.T.) digital learning transformation, and a supportive learning environment developed through equity leadership coaching.

BCPS Blueprint 2.0

Goal One: Academics

Every student will experience high academic achievement and continuous growth by participating in a rigorous instructional program designed to raise the academic bar and close achievement gaps so that every student will become a globally competitive citizen in a culturally diverse world.

Goal Two: Safety

Every school and office will be safe and secure, promote individual wellbeing, and provide positive, respectful, and caring environments for teaching, learning, and working.

Goal Three: Communication

Every stakeholder will experience clear, timely, honest, transparent, and widely available communication about system initiatives and activities that engage them in building a culture of trust through action and establishes BCPS as a world-class school system.

Goal Four: Organizational Effectiveness

Baltimore County Public Schools will maximize organizational efficiency and effectiveness by engaging in strategic efforts that employ rigorous, relevant, and reasonable performance standards that provide for all employees' professional growth and shared accountability for student, school, and organizational performance

Personalizing Professional Development

BCPS leaders knew that in order to create supportive learning environments, they had to garner buy-in and support for equitable access to learning opportunities from classroom teachers. For this reason, professional development in equity leadership is a key component of BCPS' equity work. This equity training equips staff with the skills, knowledge, and capacity to personalize learning for their students. When talking about equity, BCPS found that these conversations must reflect the same personalized approach to learning it was trying to establish in classrooms.

The work requires 1:1 conversations because it's not the type of professional development where it's a 'sit-and-get,' one-shot deal. It requires reflection and it requires evaluation of efforts and monitoring. The district is finding is that when those conversations are also personalized, then they are also more powerful. Professional development then feels small despite the size of the school system.

Tapping into Technology

Technology is another key component to the district's equity plan because it makes sure learning is accessible.

Technology not only facilitates personalized learning, but also helps create learner-centered environments. Blueprint 2.0 has driven the implementation of two important technology initiatives at BCPS:

- BCPS One — Promotes user access, collaboration, and productivity while streamlining administrative processes. This online environment is accessible anytime, anywhere and has integrated tools and resources for BCPS staff, students, and parents. One includes six major subsystems: Learning Management, Student Information, Digital Content, Employee Effectiveness, Reporting, and Professional Learning Systems.
- S.T.A.T. — Launched in 2013, S.T.A.T. is an effort to use technology to personalize teaching and learning and increase student engagement through the digitization of curriculum. Digital courses are available through the One Learning Management System. Through S.T.A.T., classroom teachers and students have access to high-quality content and resources that integrate into a blended learning environment and place a strong emphasis on the critical thinking and analytical skills needed for 21st century learning. S.T.A.T. is critical to equity at BCPS as it facilitates equitable access to learning tools and resources to all students.

Using Digital Curriculum to Create Equitable Access, Close Achievement Gaps, and Raise the Academic Bar

One of the most important technology tools BCPS utilizes to further its equity work is digital curriculum. Through the use of a rigorous, well-designed digital curriculum, BCPS creates conditions that allow equitable access by granting educators a resource for enhancing instruction and stimulating content mastery for marginalized student groups while also providing others with advanced placement opportunities.

In a traditional classroom setting it's difficult to personalize learning for all students without digital curriculum. A single BCPS teacher might teach six 50-minute instructional periods per day with 30 students in each class. All of those students learn differently. Some students are more advanced; others need additional support to master grade-level content.

However, every student is capable of learning within their “zone of proximal development.” This refers to a student’s ability to learn challenging material with the help of personalized support. Teachers may struggle to work with underserved students while also supporting advanced students who need further enrichment. Digital curriculum can accommodate these zones more effectively by granting struggling students access to the same rigorous materials as high-achieving students. At the same time, BCPS teachers can personalize learning at scale to promote content mastery.

Personalizing learning is not only about closing achievement gaps; it’s also about raising the bar for all students. Meeting students where they are and allowing them to work at their own pace is critically important.

Digital curriculum also helps BCPS educators:

- **Provide individualized support** — Student engagement with digital curriculum starts with an assessment to determine what students know and what they still need to learn. Students are able to bypass course content they’ve already mastered and immediately start learning newer and more challenging concepts. If any of these concepts prove too difficult, digital curriculum uses built-in scaffolding to introduce higher-level information while providing guidance and support students need to achieve content mastery.
- **Promote active learning and critical thinking** — An effective digital curriculum that is designed to engage students in every step of their learning gives students more than one way to learn and encourages them to interact with digital course content. Information is presented in a variety of ways to teach and prove learning, such as through drawing, charting, graphics, writing, speaking, and even presenting. Students can demonstrate knowledge not only through tests, but also projects, performances, discussions, and interactive simulations. Information is delivered in small chunks to make it more manageable.
- **Provide data-driven intervention** — Once a BCPS student interacts with digital curriculum, the system begins to gather data about his or her work and reports regularly on performance and progress. If there are gaps in learning, the digital curriculum can help guide teachers in building an early and effective intervention plan.

BCPS has been strategic in introducing digital curriculum to schools throughout its district with a very slow, methodical rollout of technology so they could allow time for professional learning. Knowing that teachers were essential to the success of its digital curriculum program, BCPS issued teachers devices first — a full year prior to rolling out pilot programs in trial schools.

Evaluating Impact of Digital Curriculum on Equity

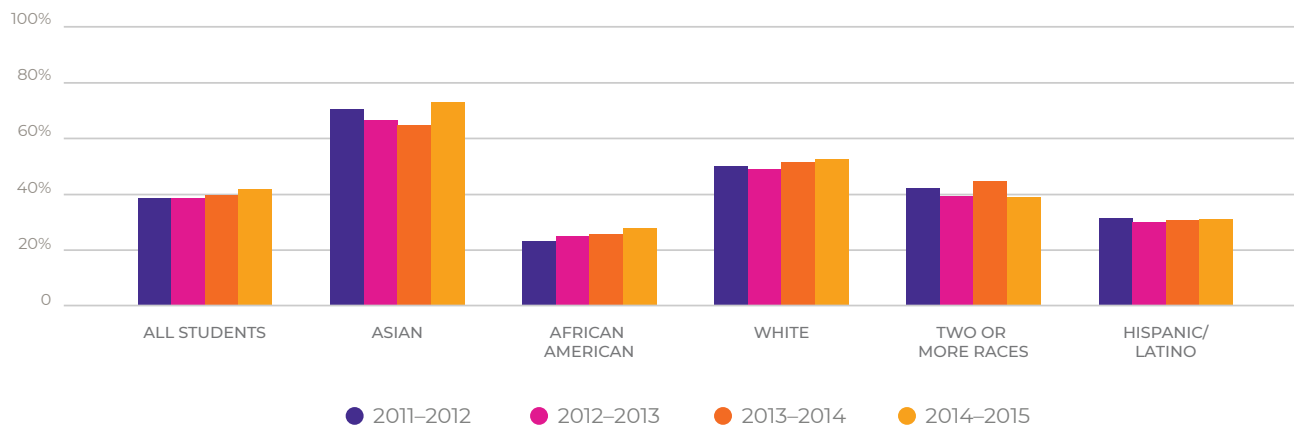
BCPS is in the third year of its equity program, and student performance is an essential evaluation metric when measuring the success of the work. Since 2013, BCPS has increased opportunities for students to access high-quality content, including expanding course offerings and credit recovery options through digital curriculum. Gaps between student groups have narrowed as well, thanks to staff support and a system that provides equitable access, flexible options for students, and early warnings for intervention. BCPS data shows that when access to digital curriculum is combined with supportive instruction and learning environments, it's possible to create equity of opportunity and begin to close achievement gaps.⁷

Indicator: Grade 8 Algebra 2012–2015

The percentage of Black or African-American students completing Algebra I with a B or higher increased 4.9 percentage points. The gap between White and Black or African-American students decreased 1.8 percentage points.

The percentage of Algebra I completers increased among students who receive special education and free and reduced-price meal services.

Percentage of Students with a Grade of B or Higher in Algebra I by the End of Grade 8, by Race/Ethnicity*

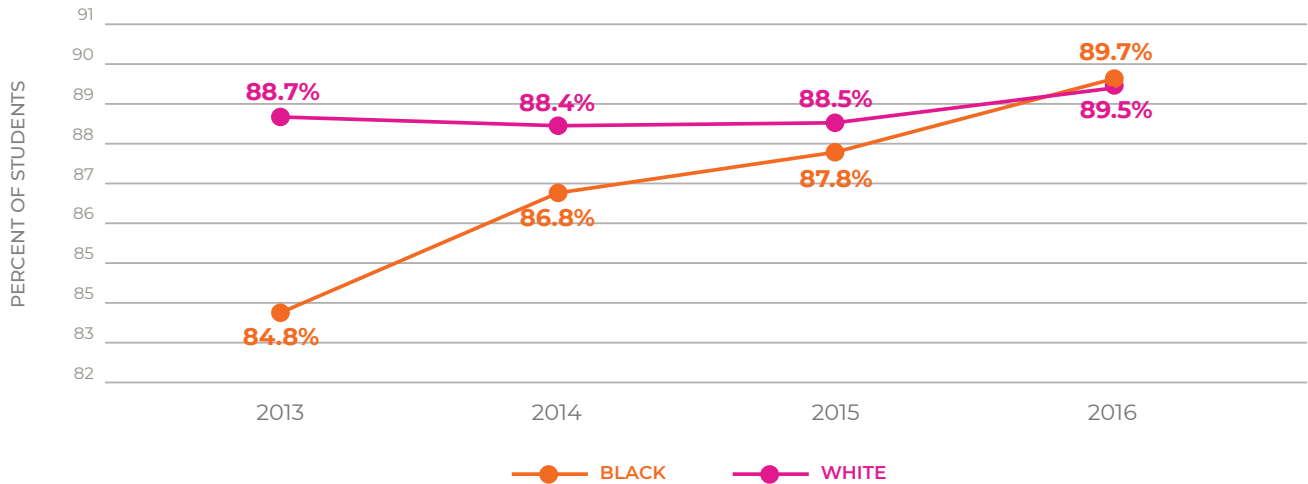


*Data suppressed for any subgroup with student count <10.

Indicator: Graduation

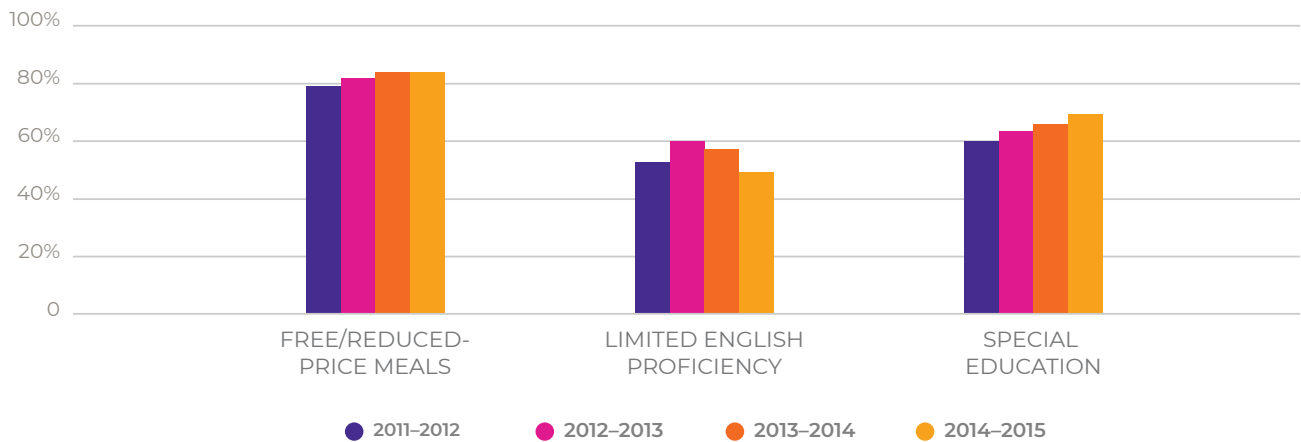
The four-year cohort graduate rate for the BCPS class of 2016 was 89.2%, marking the sixth consecutive year of gain in graduation rate. The graduation rate gap between Black or African-American and White students has disappeared completely.

Graduation Rate Gap Disappears, 2013–2016



Students receiving free and reduced-price meal services and students receiving special education services realized a graduation rate increase of 5.5 and 10 percentage points, respectively, from 2012 to 2015.

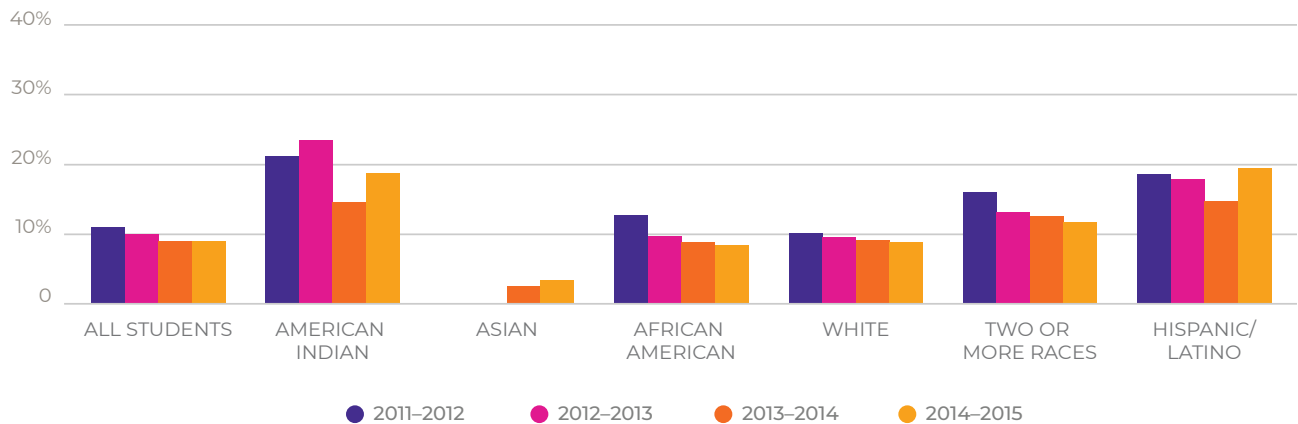
Graduation Rate, by Special Program



Indicator: Dropout

Dropout rates declined from 11% in 2012 to 8.8% in 2015. The rate declined consistently across gender and most student subgroups as well.

Dropout Rate, by Race/Ethnicity*



*Data suppressed for any subgroup with student count <10.

Supporting Equity in Your District with Digital Curriculum

Implementing a digital curriculum program, when combined with intensive training to build capacity to apply an equity lens to decisions, has allowed BCPS to enhance learning opportunities for every student, drive student engagement and motivation, and close achievement gaps. District Administrators offer this advice to education leaders interested in launching a similar equity effort.

1. Take the time for proper implementation. When taking on systemic work, there are key factors that always need to be considered whenever you're rolling out any kind of initiative. It needs to become part of the fabric of the system itself, and that means thinking about all of the components that could be impacted.

It's important to first work to create a teaching and learning environment that maximizes the impact of digital curriculum. Have conversations with teachers and administrators about what is needed to ensure that the classroom instructional environment is one that is personalized and supports digital curriculum.

2. Effectively address the existing culture for teaching and learning to enhance learning opportunities.

Technical solutions are insufficient to address historical patterns of underservice that characterize our collective engagement of diverse student groups. As a result of this recognition, prioritizing time for courageous conversations about staff identity, students' identities, and the communities we serve is essential to maximizing the possibilities that a digital learning environment can provide.

3. **Be strategic in the selection of digital curriculum.** When selecting digital curriculum, White says it's important to consider how students are reflected in it. The digital curriculum must represent diverse student groups with myriad approaches to learning. In order for students to truly engage with and connect with digital curriculum, they must see themselves in the content and in the resources provided to them. In a way, the digital curriculum itself must be personalized to each and every student.
4. **Provide ongoing, personalized professional development.** Consider how you can equip school principals and other administrators to coach their faculties in best practices and instill the skills, knowledge and capacity necessary to personalize learning for students. Professional learning and equity coaching opportunities should be face-to-face and varied in format to keep them engaging. Consider one-on-one coaching, webinars, and in-school and regional opportunities.
5. **Provide leadership as you gain buy-in and consensus for your equity efforts.** Provide leadership as you gain buy-in and consensus for your equity efforts. This support should extend throughout the district. The fact that the Board of Education adopted an equity policy was essential because that equity policy demonstrated the board's commitment to equity and serves as the anchor for the work the district's doing. Any other system moving forward should consider where their Board of Education is with the work and consider steeping the work in an equity policy.

All Students Deserve the Opportunity to Succeed

BCPS is an outstanding example of the positive impact equity of opportunity can have in raising the bar in education. Realizing its vision to create instructional environments that support academic rigor and cultural relevance, BCPS is igniting the potential of each and every student through digital curriculum.

"BCPS, and many of our district partners across the country, are using digital curriculum to expand access to quality education, making it possible for classroom teachers to personalize instruction to meet the needs of all students," says Jean Sharp, Vice President of Content Development, Apex Learning. "The result is higher achievement for all students."

While there has been progress in advancing equity in education, there remains tremendous potential to ensure that every student receives access to the specific and varied resources he or she needs to graduate college- and career-ready. By supporting every teacher and every classroom with personalized learning, we have an opportunity to better meet the needs of all students in our quest to increase academic performance across the nation.

About the Authors

Dr. Lisa Williams

Executive Director of the Office of Equity and Cultural Proficiency, Baltimore County Public Schools

Dr. Williams has held the position of teacher, mentor, university professor, and Title I director, and has presented nationwide on improving outcomes for marginalized student populations. She has expertise in educational equity, culturally responsive practice, and school transformation. At BCPS she is responsible for all educational equity and access initiatives. She co-authored *When Treating all the Kids the Same is the Real Problem: Educational Leadership and the 21st Century Dilemma of Difference*.

Jean Sharp

Chief Academic Officer, Apex Learning

Ms. Sharp has held leadership and management positions in the education and software publishing industries. Her expertise includes software design, project management, implementation, curriculum strategy and development, and instructional design. As Vice President of Content Development at Apex Learning, Sharp oversees the teams responsible for creating content and curriculum solutions. Prior to joining Apex Learning, Sharp served as Vice President of Curriculum and Instruction for AdvancePath Academics, partnering with schools to support the needs of at-risk students and implement strategies for credit recovery and initial credit to support student pathways to graduation. Her responsibilities included oversight of curriculum design, implementation, professional development, and efficacy. Sharp holds a Master's Degree in Educational Technology and Instructional Design from the University of Oklahoma.

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Founded in 1997, Apex Learning is the leading provider of blended and virtual learning solutions to the nation's schools, including the Baltimore County Public School District. Our digital curriculum provides an active learning experience that engages all students in rigorous coursework to prepare them for college and career. The standards-based digital curriculum in math, science, English, social studies, world languages, electives, and Advanced Placement® is widely used for original credit, credit recovery, remediation, intervention, acceleration, and exam preparation. Quality digital curriculum, excellent services, support, and program success management combined with robust reporting is our commitment to you. More learning happens with Apex Learning digital curriculum.

Contact

Apex Learning

1215 Fourth Ave., Suite 1500

Seattle, WA 98161

Phone: 1 (206) 381-5600

Fax: 1 (206) 381-5601

ApexLearning.com