President's Corner

It's hard to believe the 2022-2023 school year already has begun! So much already is underway for each of us, and a valuable part of school board work this year will be educational equity efforts.

As you know, Maryland law makes school boards responsible for the creation of educational policies designed "to provide quality education and equal educational opportunity for all children," and boards also are directed to seek ways to "promote the interests of the schools" within their systems. With this charge in mind, this issue of The MABE Scoop dives a bit deeper into educational equity, courtesy of an interview with MABE strategic partner Newsela. Hasan Rafiq, who serves as Newsela's VP of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion & Belonging, shares his perspective on the strengths, opportunities, and benefits of educational equity as a central component of thriving communities. We also share related resources and headlines from this important realm.

Lastly, if you haven't already registered for MABE Annual Conference 2022, there's still time! Conference registration is open until Thursday, Sept. 22nd, and MABE's discounted room rate at The Westin Annapolis is available until Friday, Sept. 16th or while rooms last. (Rooms throughout town definitely are booking quickly due to the Annapolis Powerboat Show taking place the week of our Annual Conference, so we urge you to book your room if you haven't already.)

We hope you enjoy reading Newsela's interesting perspective below, and we look forward to seeing you in Annapolis this October!

~ Ginny McGraw (Charles County)
MABE President

Educational Equity Q&A: A Conversation with Hasan Rafiq, Newsela's VP of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion & Belonging

Q: What was the inspiration for Newsela's support of and commitment to educational equity as a whole?

A: Equity starts at home—whether you're looking at representation of BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, or women employees; how to build systems to attract more diversity; or ensuring people have an exceptional experience before and during their time at Newsela, and that the exceptional experience lasts a lifetime. Our mission is to build meaningful classroom learning for every student. We cannot do that if equity isn't embedded into everything we do.

Q: Based on Newsela's experience and areas of expertise, how would you make the case on whether educational equity can benefit communities as a whole?

A: Educational equity is a key component of a thriving community. When we have massive achievement gaps between low-income school systems and high-income school systems, or between students of color and white students, we are shortchanging the potential of our youth. Equity means creating opportunities for all students. If more students are graduating, more people are entering the workforce and taking on jobs, which in turn means our communities are growing and strengthening.
Q: Newsela writes, "We shouldn’t settle for content that doesn’t change in a changing world." Can you give a specific example of your team's thinking on this front?

A: No two classrooms are the same, and content that works for one school’s class may not work for another. Students engage most with content that is relevant to their lives and that reflects their own stories. Unfortunately, outdated textbooks that remain static year over year too often fail to reflect diverse narratives. Teachers will tell you that it’s harder than ever to engage students — providing them with relevant texts is key to growing engagement.

Q: On Newsela’s “Commitment to Equity & Access” page on your website, it caught our eye that you write, “Every student deserves to have access to instructional content that excites, empowers, and unlocks their potential.” Can you share more specifics on this? Who benefits?

A: We’re proud to deliver instructional materials that aim to benefit every student, specifically those with disabilities. Our conformance to Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.1 AA standards, which are guidelines for making web content more accessible to people with disabilities, reflects our efforts to provide content that is accessible to all learners. We incorporate accessibility best practices into every step of our design and development process with the support of a full-time accessibility-focused staff member and partnership with third-party accessibility services companies.

When students with disabilities cannot access or engage with the digital content the rest of their classmates are working on, they miss out on engaging materials, and their classmates miss out on their contributions and perspectives during group discussions and activities. This is not an ideal learning environment for anyone, and we’ve made it a priority to ensure that students’ ability or their use of assistive technology does not exclude them from our platform.

Some of our accessibility supports include things like a built-in “Read Aloud” feature, articles with adaptive reading levels and activities, platform navigation using only a keyboard, and colors that meet both text and graphical color contrast standards, among others.

Q: Do you have a particular success story or a challenge your team has overcome when it has come to educational equity?

A: At Newsela, we set out on a mission to increase representation in our own ranks and ensure that Newsela is a place where all people belong. We established systems to check for equity within our hiring process. We implemented customized training and optimized our systems, policies, and processes to create a more equitable hiring environment. Our goal is to ensure that bias is identified and removed from the hiring process to create a fair and transparent pathway to working at Newsela.

Q: Why did you decide to partner with MABE on its educational equity efforts, including our "Leading for Educational Equity Through School Board Governance" workbook?

A: We partnered with MABE because of its membership's commitment to educational equity, and MABE's connection to leaders in school systems who are making decisions that will affect diversity, equity, and inclusion at public schools across Maryland. Equity is strongest when it’s made a practice by all administrators in each school system, every day. MABE’s Leading for Educational Equity workbook will empower boards with the tools they need to create an equitable learning environment for all students, and we applaud MABE members' prioritization of this important work.

Q: If you could name one thing you’d most like to see achieved in America when it comes to educational equity, what would that be? Why?

A: We have been talking for so long about the achievement gap and opportunity gap, and how we close them. We have the data, and we know what the data is telling us at a high level. But data alone is not enough — because there are real people behind each percentage point. We need to employ strategies to close these gaps by providing opportunities for and investments in all students’ potential. Doing so will help break the historical cycles that disadvantage students of color or low-income students, and help create true equity in education.
Q: What are your thoughts on the workbook itself?

A: MABE’s Leading for Educational Equity workbook allows boards to take an honest look at themselves without judgment, and create a plan that will enable greater equity for their organizations and districts. It’s actionable, which is one of the most important elements of creating greater equity in Maryland schools, and it provides a clear roadmap for any school board to participate.

Q: Who should people contact at Newsela if they’re interested in learning more about your focus and offerings?

A: If folks are looking for more information about Newsela’s equity and accessibility, they can always reach out to us by visiting this page or emailing us at info@newsela.com.

Ed.: You can access a recent, related Maryland Matters opinion piece by Newsela cofounder and chief academic officer Dan Cogan-Drew by visiting here.

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**IN THE NEWS: EDUCATIONAL EQUITY-RELATED HEADLINES**

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<th>Title</th>
<th>Source</th>
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<td>U.S. Department of Education (8/26; press release)</td>
<td>Department Awards Over $29 Million to 10 States for Innovative, Equitable Approaches to Improve Student Learning</td>
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<td>Brookings (9/2)</td>
<td>Emotionally literate teachers help ensure educational equity for adolescent girls</td>
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<td>Insight Into Diversity (8/18)</td>
<td>Collaboration of 50 colleges and universities addresses educational equity</td>
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<td>EdSurge (8/15)</td>
<td>9 ways to enable equitable education in your school</td>
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<td>EdSurge (9/6)</td>
<td>Teaching ‘digital native’ college students who understand TikTok — but not Microsoft Excel</td>
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<td>TIME (9/1)</td>
<td>We just got the best snapshot yet of how much progress students lost in the pandemic. The results are staggering</td>
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<td>PR Newswire (4/5; press release)</td>
<td>First Book, an innovative leader in education equity, releases groundbreaking research illustrating the impact of COVID-19 on emotional wellness of students in underserved communities</td>
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<td>Education Week (8/30; subscription may be required)</td>
<td>Latest round of federal grants aims to make states’ assessments more equitable, precise</td>
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<td>EdSurge (3/21)</td>
<td>To close the educational equity gap, teachers have to understand their position of power</td>
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<td>USA Today (8/27)</td>
<td>For many students across the US, segregated schools are still a reality. Here’s why</td>
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**FROM OTHER STATES:**

- WTTW PBS Chicago (8/30) ‘Black Voices’ community conversation: Education equity as new school year starts
- Los Angeles Times (9/2) Worst national reading and math scores in decades show large pandemic-fueled equity gaps
- University of Virginia (8/26) UVA Law’s first Race, Place and Equity postdoctoral fellow studies policing, schoolchildren
- Cal Matters (7/21) Will billions close California's educational equity gaps?
- WHYY PBS (8/24) Slashed funding, equity, parent choice: Pa. gov. candidates have hugely different education plans
- Montana Free Press (2/17) Montana educators and ‘officials’ debate educational ‘equity’
- New York Daily News (7/13) How to build educational equity and excellence
- Bangor Daily News (9/6) Maine’s teacher quality gap is an equity issue
- Hawaii Public Radio (8/19) State program aims to bring equity, ease cost of school supplies for families
MABE's "Leading for Educational Equity Through School Board Governance" Workbook

Earlier this year MABE's Educational Equity Committee, chaired by Shebra Evans (Montgomery County) and co-chaired by Pam Cousins (Calvert County), launched MABE's "Leading for Educational Equity Through School Board Governance" workbook, designed to support Maryland school boards in crafting related policy, and to equip school board members with the information, scenarios, and relevant resources they need to best carry out their work in this important realm.

If you have not already received your hard copy of the workbook, please check with your board assistant or email tfeith@mabe.org. You are welcome to order additional copies of the workbook for your peers. We hope you find the workbook to be a valuable addition to your efforts during the 2022-2023 school year and beyond.

For further details regarding MABE's educational equity workbook and related efforts, please contact Debra Yerg Daniel, MABE Director of Legal & Policy Services, at Ph: (443) 603-0391 or ddaniel@mabe.org.

MABE Member Benefits

We encourage you to visit the MABE Member Benefits & Solutions booklet for helpful details on MABE's professional development services, publications, insurance offerings and much more -- all geared toward helping you with your much-needed work as a school board member.