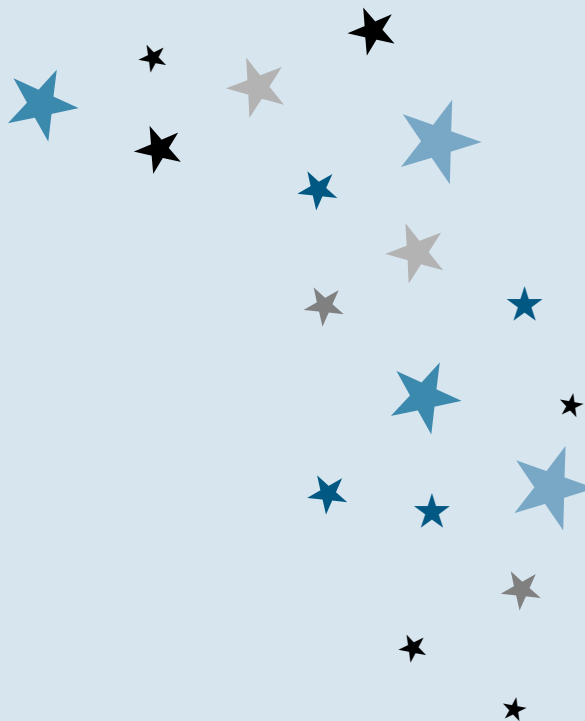
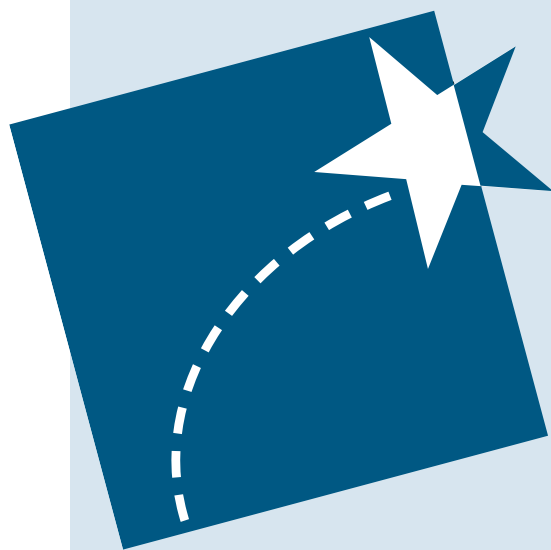




A VISMT PARENT AND COMMUNITY GUIDE

THE Opportunity To Learn

EQUITY IN VERMONT'S SCHOOLS



THE VERMONT INSTITUTE FOR
SCIENCE, MATH, AND TECHNOLOGY

The Vermont Institute for Science, Math, and Technology was established in 1992 as a nonprofit organization to implement a National Science Foundation grant awarded to the Vermont Department of Education. The goal of the project is to dramatically transform science, math, and technology education for all Vermont students.

This booklet is one of a series funded through a grant from the Josephine Bay Paul and C. Michael Paul Foundation. Other booklets focus on assessment, curriculum, classroom teaching, technology, and the Vermont Framework of Standards and Learning Opportunities. VISMT and other education improvement organizations in Vermont are grateful to the Foundation for its thoughtful support of programs that are improving the education of our children.

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The Opportunity to Learn

Over the past seven years, Vermonters have worked together to set shared educational goals. The efforts of thousands of educators, business people, school board members, and community members resulted in a series of documents, culminating in *Vermont's Framework of Standards and Learning Opportunities*. The Framework is a guide to help school districts set standards for student performance and provide the opportunities all children need to learn.

We know that barriers to learning go beyond school issues. We see these barriers in our communities, too. Barriers are sometimes based on gender, race, socio-economic status, ethnicity, or disabilities. Barriers may also result from not paying attention to, or even seeing, specific circumstances, situations, or patterns of behavior that send a message of discouragement, rather than encouragement, to a child.

Opportunities to learn must be created and fostered. An opportunity not provided is an opportunity denied. “Access” is the word used in the Vermont Framework to describe the conditions that must be present in a school to allow a student the opportunities to learn. As adults, we are all part of children’s learning, and we need to try to understand the many ways we can work together to encourage all children to perform at high levels.

Vermont is working hard to create excellence in education. Equity and learning opportunities — opportunities given all children to learn — are a vital part of our efforts. The purpose of this booklet is to help you be part of that work.



Why Equity?

“Equity” in education means providing equitable learning opportunities for all students. This does not mean treating all students the same but rather treating students in ways that encourage each to develop, learn, and perform at his or her best. We must recognize the fact that people are different and have different needs. A method of teaching that helps one child learn may very well prevent another child from learning. Schools use a variety of approaches to teaching to assure that all children get the opportunities they need to learn.

Equity is created when teachers, administrators, students, parents, community members, and school boards:

- Create learning environments that encourage students to learn in many ways
- Accommodate different styles, cultural values, ethnic backgrounds, and socio-economic influences.
- Work together as a community where all students learn and succeed.
- Understand their own biases about people and work to counteract them.

In a school committed to equity, all students:

- Feel a sense of belonging, safety, and comfort.
- Are accepted by others.
- Respect others.
- Feel invited to learn and achieve.

Equity is limited when:

- Teachers’ preconceived notions of students and their backgrounds determine how they communicate and teach.
- Students’ preconceived notions of each other determine how they behave together in school and learn together.
- School boards, community members, and administrators legislate rather than live equity.
- Understanding of equity is narrow, including only financial resources, gender, or race.

Without equity, two things happen:

- Many students are excluded from full participation in learning and therefore aren’t adequately prepared to become contributing members of society and the workforce.
- Exclusion sends a message that discrimination and bias are accepted.

Inequitable conditions can greatly affect people’s lives:

- Many people may never reach their full potential.
- Others are denied the benefit of their contributions.
- Inequity is continued for another generation.



Moving Toward Equity and Learning Opportunities

In this guide we have identified seven key areas or issues that can help you understand equity efforts and the learning opportunities at your school. These are:

1. How can my school work best for all students?
2. How do my children feel at school?
3. How is technology related to equity?
4. What are students learning at school?
5. How can teachers help?
6. How well are students learning at my school?
7. Are our parents, teachers and community working together?

Following a short description of each question are a sample situation, things to consider, suggested “better ways” to handle the situation, and a series of questions you can ask about your school. You might use these questions to discuss equity issues at your school.



1. How Can My School Work Best for All Students?

Schools are managed by administrators (usually a principal who is managed by a superintendent) and governed by the elected school board. The board's role is to establish policies to be followed at the school, and the administrators' job is to carry out the policies by working with school staff. Effective school administrators maintain a positive social and learning environment in addition to taking care of details such as class schedules, attendance, and safety concerns.

Through good policies, an effective school board can set important standards for equitable learning opportunities for all students. Effective administrators work with staff to make sure the policies are implemented and applied consistently across all grades for all children.

Parents and community members should feel free to discuss the policies and implementation with the principal or the school board. Sometimes policies need revision, and sometimes a fresh point of view can help improve implementation. Sometimes additional training will help people deal with situations and implement policies.

Board and staff members send important messages about equity through the way they interact with each other, with students, and in day-to-day situations at the school. Respect for one another as unique individuals with valued abilities and skills is reflected in their equitable treatment of each other.

Example:

A community member recently mentioned to a school board member, when they met at the grocery store, that she'd heard some students had been heckling others at the school bus stop. The victims of the heckling were two of the 10 students of color enrolled in the school. Though other people also commented on the matter informally, the board members who heard about it decided not to bring it up at a meeting since there were no formal complaints and the children had "not actually been hurt, just offended."

Things to Consider:

- School administrators, school boards, and staff are models for students. Students learn by what they see more than by what they are told.
- Ignoring a problem sends a message.
- School administrators and school boards are responsible for working together with staff to create a school that models fairness and cooperation.
- Situations that seem just "uncomfortable" at first can grow far worse later.

A Better Way:

The board member tells the principal that the problem seems serious, and they work together to address the issue immediately. They follow the school's harassment policy, investigating the alleged incidents and gathering student and staff input to help set up a



school-wide program for creating a respectful learning climate. They also involve a community arts group so students can bring the issue to the public in a non-threatening way.

How Is My School Doing?

- What equity issues has my school board discussed?

- What equity policies exist?
- How do the staff and principal carry out board policies?
- How does my school communicate with parents and community members when it is developing new policies or revising existing ones?

2. How Do My Children Feel at School?

Children need to feel safe and welcome at school in order to learn. Opportunities to explore a wide range of subjects are lost if a child feels threatened by others, feels different, or is treated unfairly. A positive school and classroom atmosphere is important to make sure all children have the chance to succeed.

In a safe and welcoming school, each student feels accepted by students and staff. All members of the school community are respected and interact with mutual respect. Each student feels invited to learn. When problems arise, they are dealt with swiftly and consistently according to established practices. Teachers ask for student feedback, student are comfortable offering their reactions, and teachers help to improve the learning environment. We call the atmosphere that is created “school climate.”

Everything in school has an impact on climate and equity. For instance, written classroom materials should not use stereotypes in referring to individuals or groups. The school library should contain books that describe contributions made by men and women of different ethnic, racial, social, and economic groups.

Example:

John and his two friends dread their walk to science class every day. They have to pass through a narrow hallway where a large group of students gathers between periods and bothers them as they pass. Occasionally things get physical, and one of them will be tripped or bumped. To avoid the situation, John and his friends take a longer route to class, which often results in their being late. They are not the only students who face this dilemma and choose alternative routes to move throughout the school.

Things to Consider:

- Schools must be physically and emotionally safe in order for students to learn.
- Schools must have methods for dealing with issues of fairness and respect.
- Students should not have to avoid threatening situations to feel safe; instead, the underlying problem must be eliminated.

A Better Way:

Leah, another student in the science class, heard many complaints from students about behavior in the hallway between the math and science classrooms. She decides to take



the issue to the “climate” discussion in her homeroom. Her homeroom discussed the problem and made a list of suggestions, which they took to the principal and the student council. After considering all the students’ discussions, the principal met with the school’s “Climate Committee.” They recommended teams of teachers and students be present in the hallway to talk with students who may be harassing other students. Teachers are also encouraged to review the school’s harassment policy, and to discuss it with students during homeroom.

How Is My School Doing?

- Do students treat one another with respect at my school?
- Do staff treat each person respectfully as an individual?
- What policies does my school have on handling harassment and discrimination?
- How often do staff members and students receive training about policies?
- Are textbooks, library books, and other curriculum materials reviewed to be sure they provide positive encouragement for all children, without stereotyping?
- When I walk into my school, do I see bulletin board displays that portray people of different genders, races, cultures, and abilities portrayed in non-stereotyped ways?
- Are school and classroom climate surveys conducted and the information used to make improvements?
- When a visitor enters my school, is there a welcoming atmosphere?

3. How Is Technology Related to Equity?

Technology — computers, printers, modems and other equipment - is an important part of classrooms and a tool for equity, especially in a rural state such as Vermont.

Technology can provide every child with access to a huge, nearly limitless library of resources. It’s as though a whole caravan of mobile libraries pulled up in front of your school and opened their doors.

Keys are needed to enter this “virtual” library, however. A school must have the resources to purchase and maintain computers and software, and to pay for the telephone lines that provide the connection to the Internet. Staff need training in how to use computers so they are skilled in teaching children how to use these new tools.

Not all children have equal chances to learn about computers, even if your school has good computer facilities and trained staff. A child who comes from a home with no computer is likely to feel left behind in a classroom with children who have grown up with them. Young girls and boys who dislike violence and war games, and have only seen computers used for these games, may not want to use computers. Girls who have not seen their mothers or other women using computers may feel technology is not for them.

Schools committed to equity address these issues and try to help each student find a way to relate to technology, whether it is through art, music, math, science, or communication.

**Example:**

Monday morning, while riding the bus to school, the students in a science class are comparing their graphs and reports on rainfall. Many of the reports and graphs were completed using home computers. Matt and Carla don't have access to a computer outside of school, however, and feel intimidated by the quality of their classmates' work. They listen to their friends talking about using the Internet and CD-ROMs to access information and prepare their homework. Matt and Carla realize their classmates were able to get more up-to-date information in less time than they. They don't feel good about their work when they walk into class.

Things to Consider:

- Inequitable conditions arise when some students have access to computers outside of school and others do not.
- Imbalances can result in some students feeling discouraged.
- When adults feel uncomfortable with technology, they pass their feelings on to their children.
- Unequal access to resources results in unequal opportunities to learn.

A Better Way:

A school with fine computer facilities has opened one of its larger computer labs for community use weekday evenings and Sunday afternoons. Some nights it bustles with activity as students prepare reports for school, but it is

equally likely to be busy with residents of all ages. Some students work alongside adults to assist those unfamiliar with the machines: it is just as likely to see a third grader helping an elder neighbor write e-mail messages to grandchildren across the country as to see a group of teenagers retrieving data for a science project. Even students with computers at home choose to work at the computer lab with their team, or to use appropriate software.

How Is My School Doing?

- Do all classrooms in my school have computers?
- Are all school computers linked to the Internet?
- What percent of students in the school consistently use computers?
- Do some groups of students consistently get more "seat time" using computers than other groups? Are differences among the groups based on gender, students' perceived abilities, socio-economic background, or special education needs? How are choices made?
- Do all staff members have the training to use computers in the classroom and to encourage students to use them?
- Does my school use on-line telecommunications to link up with other schools or education agencies?
- Has my school found ways to encourage community use of technology?
- Does my school have a technology plan?



4. What Are Our Students Learning at School?

Curriculum is the system of courses offered at a school, as well as the content of the courses. Educators may use the word “curriculum” to describe what is taught in a specific subject, such as “math curriculum,” or they may use it in a more general way to describe all the subjects taught at a school.

A good curriculum consists of courses that build on what a child has learned the year before, without unnecessary repetition. *Vermont’s Framework of Standards and Learning Opportunities*, approved by the State Board of Education and many schools, provides a general direction for what students should know and be able to do. Educators use the *Framework* to help them choose textbooks and develop lessons that will help students meet performance standards.

A strong curriculum, offered to all students, is an essential way schools provide students with equitable learning opportunities. Strong curriculum includes material from a broad range of people from many socio-economic, racial, and cultural backgrounds. It expands students’ thinking and ability to see others’ points of view.

Curriculum strongly influences students’ future lives. Equitable schools offer all students the opportunity to take challenging courses, such as calculus or physics, as they progress through the grades. Math and science courses are “gateways” to many careers. At very early ages, students are shut out of many opportunities if they can’t take challenging math and science courses.

You can work with your school’s guidance department to make sure your child is taking advantage of everything your school offers,

as well as good programs outside school. Most jobs and careers now require some studies after graduation, so you should pay particular attention that your student is taking all the courses required by professional training programs or colleges.

Example:

A middle school science teacher is using several old science texts to supplement her class’s study of chemical reactions. She is not concerned with the age of the books “because basic chemistry doesn’t change much over the years.” Two students, Jordan and Ann, are working together, using one of the texts to gather information. As they work through an experiment in the textbook, they see photographs of scientists mixing chemicals. “Look at these guys in that lab,” says Jordan. “I bet that might be something interesting to do.” He goes on to conduct the experiment and tells Ann what to write down. “These reactions are cool,” he comments. Ann writes down what Jordan tells her to.

Things to Consider:

- Students often see stereotyped images in textbooks and other learning materials, and unconsciously play out limiting roles (investigator and note-taker).
- When students work in groups, teachers must make sure they all actively participate.
- Books communicate more than subject matter. They should be reviewed and chosen carefully.
- Students learn in a variety of ways and should be given a variety of opportunities.



A Better Way:

In the chemistry class several teams are established, and there is a system for each member of the team to perform each part of their experiments. The teams monitor their activities so they are sure everyone gets a chance. For some aspects of the course, teams conduct different types of research, including Internet exploration, interviews in the community, meetings with businesses that utilize chemistry, and data-gathering. The teacher serves as a resource when teams need help and designs a wide range of assessments including presentations, written reports, graphs and charts, and journals. At the center of all the study is the basic chemistry that must be learned.

How Is My School Doing?

- Does my school have a curriculum plan showing what children are learning subject by subject in all grades?
- Do all students have equal chances to take a wide range of courses?
- Does my school have up-to-date curriculum materials such as math manipulatives, computers, and scientific apparatus for all students?
- What are the process and criteria for reviewing and updating curriculum materials?

5. How Can Teachers Help?

Vermont is dedicated to assuring high performance for every child. Teachers and other staff in Vermont schools are expected to be able to work effectively with children from all types of backgrounds to ensure that all children have opportunities to succeed.

Teachers must succeed, too, keeping skills sharp, increasing their knowledge, and staying curious. They need opportunities to increase their ability to serve children. Academic courses, workshops, and time to share experience with other teacher are essential.

Curriculum, equipment, and materials are constantly changing, and in many fields knowledge is constantly growing. Teachers need on-going training to communicate all this to a changing population of students, and to help all students perform at high levels.

Example:

An elementary school is implementing a new math curriculum for the upcoming year. The school has purchased new textbooks for Grades 1-4. The principal has arranged for a trainer to come to the school for four hours to lecture about the new curriculum and how best to teach it to students. At the end of the lecture, most of the teachers have many questions. They are nervous about teaching in a new way, and know they need more training to be prepared. However, the budget was nearly used up on the textbooks, and the school board does not have funds for additional training sessions.

Things to Consider:

- When teachers are asked to change and teach differently, time and training must be provided to help them prepare adequately.



- Professional development is most effective when it includes time to digest new ideas, to ask questions, and to meet in follow up sessions.
- When new materials are purchased, training must be included.

A Better Way:

After assessment results showed that their students needed to improve dramatically in math, the Grade 1-4 teachers decided that they needed a new approach. They carefully reviewed the new math curricula available and recommended their choice to the principal. She then took the suggestion to the school board, along with information on the cost of textbooks and the recommended training that would be necessary for the teachers. The board was surprised that a change in textbooks would necessitate so much training, but after a presentation on the differences in teaching methods, they approved both the texts and the training. Because of the cost, the program would be phased in over two years and teachers would be trained during the spring and summer before the school switched to the new

curriculum. This delayed implementation a bit, but it allowed a careful learning process for the teachers. By the time teachers started using the new texts in their classrooms, they were able to work confidently with their students and offer parents good suggestions for how to help at home.

How Is My School Doing?

- Does my school encourage staff to view themselves as learners, and support them in taking advantage of training opportunities?
- Are the training opportunities offered to teachers in my school closely related to children's learning needs?
- Does my school recognize teachers' concerns about time?
- Are training opportunities spread over time to allow full understanding and follow-up?
- Does our community and school board understand the need for teacher training?



6. How Well Are Students Learning At My School?

Testing, or “assessment,” is taking place in all Vermont schools, all the time. As part of the Equal Educational Opportunity Act passed by the 1997 Legislature, assessment results must be collected and reported to the community annually. Schools need to use a variety of tests to guarantee that all children will be able to show what they know, even if they are not good at taking certain types of tests.

Assessment data tell a great deal, including indicating whether equitable learning opportunities are present. When patterns of either high or low scores emerge, we should ask what they mean. For instance, if girls perform at a lower level in math or science than boys, we should ask why this is happening and what can be done to make sure all students succeed. Data can also reveal strong and weak points in a school’s curriculum.

Many schools host a “report night” to present and discuss the data. Community members can attend, and ask questions. The information provided should be clear and understandable for all.

Example:

A school’s staff members are reviewing how the past year has gone in terms of student achievement. Their discussion focuses on results of standardized tests that placed their students, on average, in the 43rd percentile, meaning that students in 57 percent of all other schools taking the test had performed better than their students. The staff members cannot tell from the test report how they can help their students improve. They are discouraged.

Things to Consider:

- Some common tests only tell how well students compare to other students in taking tests.
- Test results should include data on what students know and don’t know, so that teachers can develop ways to help students improve.
- By giving several different types of tests, teachers can see whether certain groups of students are being “left behind.” They can also tell what is working and what “needs fixing.”
- Assessment should not be the end of the process; instead, it should show ways to improve.

A Better Way:

Because they were frustrated by the limited information they got from standardized tests last year, the teachers decided to use several different kinds of assessment this year. They sought comparative data about other students taking the tests, but also spent time understanding trends in each individual student’s performance. By comparing the results, and reviewing student portfolios and presentations, they were able to draw some conclusions about what was working well and what needed improvement in their classrooms. For instance, when they saw that girls were not doing as well as boys in math, they decided to study the levels of encouragement girls got in and outside the classroom — for instance, in joining math club and competing on teams. These answers seemed a likely beginning for improvement, so the teachers designed several specific changes in their activities.



How Is My School Doing?

- Does my school have an assessment plan and follow it?
- Do teachers at my school use a variety of tests or other performance indicators?
- How does my school use assessment information to improve learning for all students?
- Is test information used to determine if any specific groups of students are being left behind?
- Does my school hold an annual school report night to report results of student performance? Is the information that is given out understandable?

7. Are Our Parents, Teachers, and Community Working Together?

Successful schools make sure that every student has the opportunity to learn and succeed. These schools also realize that it takes more than a school to provide this opportunity. The expression, “it takes a village to raise a child,” is true in education, too. The best schools reach out to their community and invite participation. Families are encouraged to get involved in their children’s education. Community members are included because they help strengthen the school as a center of learning.

An important part of promoting equity at a school is demonstrating that people are valued and respected for the unique offerings they can make. People of different incomes, ages, races, ethnicities, abilities, cultural backgrounds, and genders are recognized and accepted for who they are.

School staff, parents, students, and other community members can work together in many ways. Visit your school, volunteer for classroom or special projects, meet with staff, and attend school board meetings. You can get information through newsletters, school report nights, or presentations on specific topics (such as “Family Math” or “Family Science”).

Regardless of your schedule, how much time you have, or even how much you enjoyed school, you can help your child succeed in school. Sometimes all it takes is encouragement! When we help our students and our schools, we help our future, too.

Example:

For many years, people in a particular town were divided about nearly every issue. With a college located at one end of town and a paper mill at the other, the diversity in the population was extreme, especially socio-economically. At the school, parents who worked at the college were often volunteers, but the mill workers seldom could get time off for teacher conferences, let alone school activities. The students definitely felt the tension in town, and their social groups demonstrated that uneasiness. When the sixth grade started to study pollution and found the mill had recently established new water-cleaning methods, students asked to visit the mill on a field trip.

Things to Consider:

- Socio-economic factors may prevent



families from having the level of comfort or involvement in the school that they would like.

- Research shows parental involvement in a child's education has an important effect on student achievement.
- Community issues are school issues: they can bring people together just as well as tear them apart.
- Everyone benefits when a community joins together to help its school and students.
- We often accept things about our school and community that we would not choose, but which have been there so long we don't even recognize the inequities.

A Better Way:

Following its very successful field trip, the sixth grade science class decided to invite parents to their report day. So many interesting issues and questions came up that the manager of the mill, who had a student in the class, suggested that the school and community form a partnership with the local mill, to monitor changes in water quality. They also decided to invite the social studies class and the local his-

torical society to work together on a history of the mill. Eventually, the mill management decided to grant six hours of release time per year for employees to participate in school activities. Over time, parents with a wide variety of skills and experiences began to help on these projects, and many of them got much more involved in their children's school work. The teachers noticed the difference among their students and in their performance, and the general atmosphere in town improved dramatically.

How Is My School Doing?

- Do parents, teachers, and community members work together respectfully?
- Are there cultural, socio-economic, and other differences that need to be addressed so all community members and school members can interact in beneficial ways?
- Does my school offer opportunities for parents and community members to bring their talents, skills, understanding, and expertise into the school?
- How important a part of the community is my school?



If Something Seems Wrong . . .

If you're not happy with something that's happening at your child's school, it is important that you raise your concern with school staff. Your input is valuable because you know your child best.

Your comments are most valued when you work with your school, making sure adequate policies are in place and are followed. Know your school's procedure for handling inquiries and complaints, and follow it. Usually, you are asked to speak first with the teacher or other staff member most directly involved with the situation you're concerned about. If you're not satisfied with the response, speak with the principal, then the superintendent, and finally the school board.

Vermont's educational philosophy is based on the belief that every child can learn. But children can only learn when given the opportunities they need. We are all responsible for providing the best possible learning opportunities for all of our students.



To Learn More . . .

Many educational issues are mentioned in this book: curriculum, assessment, parent and community involvement, technology, the Vermont Framework of Standards, and more. These are important to us all because these are ways to help every student learn. If you have questions on these and other educational issues, please ask for additional documents and further explanations.

If you'd like more information on science, math, and technology education in Vermont, please call VISMT at 802/244-8768. VISMT is also publishing other booklets on many educational subjects, including the issues listed above. Please call and request copies.

To get a copy of *Vermont's Framework of Standards and Learning Opportunities*, contact your school or call the Vermont Department of Education at 802/828-3111.

Please take every opportunity to talk with your child's teacher, and to meet with your school principal and others to learn more about equity issues and how you can help your child learn.