

# EVANSTON ROUNDTABLE

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## Cradle to Career Team Discusses Equity

By Larry Gavin

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On July 20, the Large Group Solution Design Team of the Evanston Cradle to Career (EC2C) initiative met for two hours at Evanston Township High School to discuss equity and how to keep it at the forefront of their work. About 35 members of the team attended.

“I don’t think any of us who thinks about what’s been happening in our nation cannot be painfully aware that equity is the most important issue that we have to tackle right now,” said EC2C Executive Director Sheila Merry. “We really want to make clear and want to embrace that Evanston Cradle to Career at its core is about equity.

“We are focusing initially on literacy as a way to tackle issues of equity. But the bottom line is addressing the issue of equity,” Ms. Merry added.

EC2C, which now has more than 40 partners, is built on the premise of collective impact. The plan is to address the needs of Evanston youth, starting at birth, in a holistic fashion and to focus on all factors that impact learning, health, and social and emotional development. The vision is “By the age of 23, all Evanston young adults will be leading productive lives.”

A recent article, “The Equity Imperative in Collective Impact,” presented at the meeting, highlights the need to keep equity at the forefront. In the article, authors John Kania and Mark Kramer say, “If participants in collective impact initiatives are to make the lasting change they seek, they must pay explicit attention to policies, practices, and culture that are reinforcing patterns of inequity in the community. They must develop targeted strategies that specifically and differentially take into account any underlying advantages that some people have, as well as the disadvantages that other groups face. And throughout every aspect of the collective impact process, they must bring to the table those whose lives are affected by the results of the work.”



### Engaging the Community.

The Parent Summer Ambassadors, a group of parents engaged in the Evanston Cradle to Career initiative (EC2C) through the Community Engagement Team, sponsored a program for children, pre-K through five years old, in a park-like setting adjacent to the Robert Crown Center on July 23 from 10 a.m. to noon. Children and their parents participated in literacy crafts and games, and children could select a book to take home. The purpose of the program was to engage children and parents in early literacy activities and to generate more awareness of EC2C. The program was conceived and organized by a core group of the parent ambassadors, said Ismalis Nunez, Family and Community Engagement

Reverend Patricia Efiom, of Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, and Eileen Heineman, Co-Director of the Racial Justice Program at the YWCA Evanston/North Shore, led the discussion. The two offered a practical way to address equity and to use an equity lens. Some basic premises are to develop relationships with the people EC2C is intended to serve, to listen to their voices when evaluating existing programs or designing new ones, to remove or address barriers and inequities faced by specific groups or populations, to form true partnerships with the people intended to be served and with others to achieve a goal, and to be vigilant and constantly evaluate.

## **A Basic Premise**

Ms. Heineman said, “The best way for us to interact and to know our community, to know the people that we are trying to serve, that we are trying to lift up, is face-to-face contact, even though it may take more time, or even though it may mean we see fewer people. That’s where you’re going to get everything, plus the things we need to think about.

“We want to have it clear in your heads, when you talk about equity, when you talk about the notion of an equity lens, that face-to-face interactions, real relationships, is what creates a true sense of equity.

“If we don’t have that, it diminishes our credibility. It also diminishes the value of what we’re trying to do.”

Ms. Heineman continued, “Hopefully, when you’re looking through an equity lens what you come to understand is it’s a lot of work, “The challenge is ‘Where do I hear those voices? How do I find those voices? How do I make sure that all can hear those voices?’”

Ms. Merry said, “This is something every collective impact initiative is struggling with. This is hard stuff.”

One team member said, “For me, it’s how do we stop making assumptions about the people we serve, constantly making decisions top down. Because it’s for the people, it has to be by the people.”

## **The Equity Lens**

“The equity lens is a set of questions,” said Ms. Heineman.

“When we put equity in that place at the top, it fundamentally changes the way we think about organizational change,” she said. “Equity isn’t always the first thing considered, and we’re saying we want it to be. We are committed to the structure of fairness, of providing people what they need. It means removing the barriers to their access to whatever it is we hope they have access to.

“Besides being a fundamentally different approach, it’s practical,” said Ms. Heineman. “It helps us – the change-makers or change-agents – to do our work much more effectively and much more successfully because we are not stuck in the place of assumptions. It’s talking to find out things not only about the people we’re serving but about ourselves.”

Rev. Efiom and Ms. Heineman offered a list of 10 “Equity Lens Questions,” which Ms. Heineman said seemed to make sense to use in Evanston “as we think about doing this work in ways that will be the most effective and the most successful.” The questions include the following:

- Who is a program meant to serve, and who is actually served?

- What data do we need to gather to assess the program’s effectiveness?
- Did we use information based on community priorities and culturally-specific feedback?
- What does our data tell us about inequities and injustices in this issue? Are there barriers/inequities faced by specific groups or populations (racial, immigrant, refugee)?
- How do we reduce or remove the barriers?
- What changes have you made to the policy/program/service so that diverse groups will benefit from it?

Additional questions are posed regarding funding, identifying and allocating human and budgetary resources, measuring results to see if the program or policy successfully removed barriers or created opportunities for diverse groups.

“When you look at the questions, these serve as models,” said Ms. Heineman. “Some of them you’re going to use every time, and some won’t apply sometimes.

“The more we use this as a tool, the more we use it collectively, the more we use it in how we approach things, that’s how we become real change agents. We change the way we think about how we operate in the community.”

### **Examples of How the Equity Lens Might Be Used**

Rev. Efiom gave many examples of how the Equity Lens might be used, drawing on things observed or learned in implementing the Freedom School, a summer program started this year for 50 students who live in the Fifth Ward, 35 of whom are African American and 15 are Latino. Five college students from the area, who went through a nine-day training session in Knoxville, are the teachers.

The Freedom School is an Afro-centric program, Rev. Efiom said. “It’s meant to strengthen African Americans’ understanding of who they are and the value of their community” and also “to help kids find joy in reading.” One question is whether the program is truly attending to the needs of the 15 Latino students who participate in the program. “That’s something we’re going to attend to at the end of the program,” she said.

But to address that issue, Rev. Efiom emphasized, it is “very important” to get Latino voices to the table. “We’re convening the voices that we believe will be most effective.” She said it is also important to “expand our capacity for hearing” those voices.

Many people in the community expressed an interest to help out with the Freedom School, but Rev. Efiom said, “We haven’t been able to give them tangible ways to do that. We could ask people to drop off things, but that’s not partnership,” and “we’re afraid we’re going to lose people who might be excited because we don’t have a way to partner with them.”

In order to partner effectively with other people, Rev. Efiom said, “It does mean giving up a portion. It’s recognizing that it’s not all about me. It’s about community. If the community has ownership, we will grow, and we will figure out how to serve other populations in larger numbers.”

“This work is meant for us to stop working in silos so much and stop claiming ownership over what we’ve done,” Rev. Efiom said.

The equity lens questions are also designed to get people to delve into issues, to gain a better understanding of the real needs, and to build community.

Rev. Efiom invited police officers to come to the school, located at the corner of Foster Street and Hartrey Avenue in the Fifth Ward, to read to the kids. Five white police officers came, read and talked to the kids, she said. When it was time for lunch, the kids asked the police officers to walk with them to lunch. On the street, the five white police officers and 50 kids passed two men, who gave a stare. Rev. Efiom said she introduced herself to the men and told them the police officers came to read to the kids and the kids asked them to walk with them to lunch. One of the men said, "OK. That's good. I thought you were having them guard our kids. Us against them."

Talking to people turned what appeared to be something negative into something positive, said Rev. Efiom.

When the Freedom School started, there were many assumptions about the needs of the program, including a need for teachers, supplies, breakfast, etc. But Rev. Efiom said the "single greatest need" has been an intangible: "white faces."

"When white people started showing up, and opened up their trunks and started handing out cookies and packages and left, it left the feeling that you're not part of our community. So we worked very hard to bring in readers." She brought in white students from her class at Garret and invited special guests.

"And the kids really began to open up.

"Understanding the equity lens means developing relationships," said Rev. Efiom. "This relationship part is so critical. Do not underestimate that because when we have relationships then I can tell you what we really need. You can talk to our scholars and find out what they need. ... The assumption from the predominantly white team has been [these kids are] poor, they're falling under in reading, they're single parent homes."

But, Rev. Efiom said, "A number of kids are reading at the 11th- and 12th-grade levels. We only have five who are reading below a first-grade level. What are the needs? You can't know that unless you engage.

"What we couldn't put out were the intangibles: the value of your presence for being there and celebrating with them, because the reality is they [the students in the Freedom School] are going back into predominantly white classes. While we have allowed them to go with the rhythm of their beat, so to speak, they aren't going to be able to do that in their [District 65] classroom.

"It's impactful for the whole community, particularly the African American community. This is a bigger issue. ... We're trying to bridge kids back into the school system."

"This equity lens caused us to stand back and ask, 'What is it that I can do?'" she said.

On a different note, Rev. Efiom said, "We talk about your white privilege. Using your white privilege or white power, you might have to bring communities together so they can be in conversation with each other. ... Taking that white privilege and using that is such a significant piece. Do not downplay it.

"When you look at white privilege, it's always lifted up as something very negative. It is not. It is a powerful weapon that you have to connect various people together."

Rev. Efiom gave other examples of how the Freedom School is reaching out to the community. The kids visited the Infant Welfare Society and a senior citizens club. The seniors asked to come to the school's finale

program. The children in the school are making signs asking people to register to vote, and they have a goal that 100% of their parents will be registered to vote. There are meetings for parents every Thursday night to gather input.

These are examples of “connecting communities,” said Rev. Efiom.

“I don’t think we can bring this equity lens collectively unless we all bring that mirror and that lens to the parts of the system that we’re involved in – each of our organizations have got to use that lens and that mirror,” said Karen Singer, CEO of the YWCA Evanston/North Shore.

### **Keeping an Eye on Systems Change**

“I don’t want to lose the system change piece of it,” said Ms. Merry. “I think it’s much harder to think about how we change the system that is keeping people in the position of disadvantage. I don’t want us to get too caught up in what feels like more programming, and to lose sight of our goal which is to really look at what are the systems that have created and sustained the inequities that exist in our community.”

Ms. Merry added, “Talking to people will keep us advised about how people are put at a disadvantage.” But she said the people whom a program is intended to serve will not necessarily have the answers on how to change a system, to make it more equitable. “I don’t think we can expect to go to the community and expect them to have the answers. What they can help us understand is what’s the real problem,” she said.

### **Concerns**

After the group had an opportunity to have small group discussions, several people suggested that EC2C should consider whether it needs to change its structure to be more effective; whether the focus of the Literacy Team, which covers ages 0-23, might be more effective if one age group, such as 0-3, was the initial focus; and whether representatives of the organizations who are going to do the work should have a larger role on the working teams.

Rev. Efiom said when concerns are raised by three or four people, they should be looked at.

Others celebrated the progress that has been made. Marybeth Schroeder, Vice President of Programs at the Evanston Community Foundation, noted that many positive programs and changes are percolating in the community, and that EC2C is a long-term project.

A meeting of the partners of EC2C will be held in August.

### **Related Links:**