Equity Today: The Region VIII EAC Podcast
Episode 106 – Returning from the EAC All Staff Meeting

The Region VIII Equity Assistance Center at Metropolitan Statue University of Denver is guided by its vision to provide, upon request, technical assistance, training, and staff development for school boards, school districts, tribal education agencies, charter schools, and other responsible government agencies. We strive to promote equitable education opportunities and access for all students. We seek to improve equity, access, and participation and high quality, research-based opportunities for all students. We work to reduce disparities between and among groups where they may arise.

Tyler: Hello, and welcome to Equity Today, the Region VIII Equity Assistance Center Podcast. I’m Tyler, and today we are sitting here with the whole EAC group, and you guys were recently at a whole nationwide EAC conference, I understand.

Kathy: This is Kathy Rigsby. Yes we were, it’s something that we do once every grant cycle. And it’s a real help to everybody in the ten Equity Assistance Centers. Most of the directors know each other and some of their own staff; but that doesn’t mean that the staff members of each other knows either all the directors, or even their counterparts in the ten centers. So it’s an opportunity to, one, get to know each other, and also share what each of the centers is doing, because each center has its own personality, and its own particular equity specialty. We have some centers that do more work in English language acquisition than others. Our center happens to be one that works in all three areas of race, gender, and national origin. One that is stronger in the gender equity issues than its counterparts. So it’s an opportunity to share, it’s an opportunity to learn, particularly. We were, well, it was a privilege to meet the heads of the various civil rights divisions within with the government, both Justice as well as the Department of Education, Indian Education, and other areas that we’ll talk about as we go through the agenda that we had. But it was a chance to meet and to catch up on what is the newest and latest in Washington. One of the things that I think was reassuring to those of us working in Equity Centers, because there will not be a significant change in the administration, many of the programs that we started will be able to continue. And that doesn’t always happen when there is a change in the White House. So in that sense the work we started will continue. So with that I’ll let Tyler see what else the others got from the, from our meeting.

T: Yeah, yeah.

K: And it was a busy meeting! Spare time was hard to come by.

T: Yeah, we can kind of just run through the agenda, or jump around it as you guys see relevant to our work that we do here, kind of talk about that.
K: Amber, why don't we start with you, because this was your first trip to Washington, as well as finally getting some faces with some names.

Amber: Yeah, it was great, really, to start putting some faces to the names of people that I hear throughout this office. You know, the rest of the staff has been working in Equity Assistance Centers, or working in equity for a considerably longer time than I have been, so it's nice to kind of piece those together. I think one of the best things from the agenda that happens to be the very first evening, was just kind of an open reception for everybody to get to know one another, and it’s a lot of “Hi, I’m Amber Mozet from Region VIII,” “Where’s Region VIII? Where are you guys based?” That sort of thing. And just trying to meet some of the other folks that have been doing equity work for a while, and also just trying to meet other people who are doing jobs similar to my own, was nice. So it was very good.

K: Were there any particular insights that you gained from your counterparts?

A: Well, the person that was closest to my job is Ronna from Region VI?

Marcela: VII.

A: Region VII, and they are in Kansas, Manhattan, Kansas. She’s worked with Marcela before. Very nice woman, and she’s been doing this work for about 20 years. So, just getting to speak with her about, sort of her role at the center, and trying to match it a little bit with mine, and it was just nice to meet somebody who’s kind of almost on the same wavelength as I am, so it was nice.

Janelle: This is Janelle, it was also my first trip to DC for one of these meetings, and I thought it was interesting. We started out talking about some of the trends and what’s happening to education today with the secondary education act, and the number of states that have gone to the common core state standards, and the states that aren’t, the kinds of things they’re doing, and some of the complexities around that. So that was educational to sort of hear what other peoples ideas are, and projects that they’ve got going on to help schools adapt to the new system.

Marcela: This is Marcela. One of the biggest trends that I saw, which I think we’ve all had over the years, is how can we all collaborate together, identify areas that we’re all working in, and not have parallel efforts, but work together to help make each center stronger in whatever it is that we’re seeing come up in the different regions. Also, technology was a big area of discussion. How to use it more effectively, efficiently, doing more virtual conferences, cost cutting, and also keeping our role within Office for Civil Rights and Department of Justice more defined, more effective on our part.

T: Did you guys see a lot of other similar podcast-like activity from any of the other centers? I know the MEAC has theirs, maybe still going, what was the other centers’ take on technology?
K: Some were using the technology more than others. Podcast and webinars are the two vehicles that are seeming to be used the most. This center has not done a webinar to date, but I think that by the first of the year, that will be remedied. We have a little more technical information than we had at the beginning. I think the other is that the use of Skype to do some of our conversations is going to be probably more frequent, not only with our own clients but with other Equity Assistance Centers. It’s nice to meet in person but it’s a luxury that the budgets do not allow except on the odd occasion. Marilyn, you had been a while since you’d been to an all-hands meeting.

Marilyn: That’s true. This is Marilyn. The last time I was in Washington was in March, Kathy, when you and I went for the leveraging conference. But this one was totally different because it was only the EAC< and as you had said earlier, it was perhaps our first opportunity for the rest of the staff to get to meet almost all of the directors – I think maybe one or two were not there – but to meet all the directors and our counterparts, and then just to hear, I just say, a grand sense of pride in the long list of accomplishments of the Equity Assistance Centers. As the different speakers came from the various governmental agencies and offices, I noticed that the EAC directors had no hesitancy whatsoever in saying to each of those high-power speakers, that we are here, and we can help YOU to do your job. One of the speakers said that she was stunned at the small size of the EAC group, because we do so much; she thought she was coming to address about 500 people. And I thought that was a high compliment. So I think all of us just had the good feeling that we were part of a very, very important group, and we see each other here, but to actually see where we fit into that larger picture, is just great.

T: Yeah, I was going to ask if it was a more heartening, or more, kind of disheartening thing, but it sounds like it was more of a heartening experience.

Marilyn: Oh yeah, I would say heartening.

K: I think, Tyler, that sometimes, this has been a month, at least for this center, where there’s been a lot of travel, a lot of work, and we’re tired. And it’s nice to know that we’re not the only ones who are tired, and I think there is a lot of pride in the work that we do, and how much we are able to accomplish on a shoestring, and so, to know that we aren’t the only ones hanging on to this frayed shoestring. So it’s renewing in that sense. And it’s also confirmation that what we have been doing is right to. Right in terms of we’re doing it in the correct manner, but it’s also right in the ethical, moral sense, too.

Marilyn: I’d like to throw this out to the listeners of our podcast. One of the speakers, presenters was our own director, Kathy Rigsby, who talked to the entire group on Title IX, and the work that it has done over many years, and the future, the things that are going to happen. She carried that ball very, very well, and we were all quite proud to be associated with her.
A: Yeah, you did a great job. And that was one of the things that came up in this meeting, the two days that we were there, everybody kind of broke out into little groups, and it was race, gender, and national origin. And Janelle and I happened to end up in the gender group which was the smallest of each of the three groups, and there was some very interesting conversation; about why was it the smallest, and how every piece actually integrate together. You can’t have just a race issue; there would be something with national origin or gender as well that you would have to take into account when you’re trying to solve the problem.

J: Amber, I’m curious, since you mentioned, I know you’re new to Equity work; what was something that you heard in that discussion that, you know, when you’re talking to someone who doesn’t do this kind of stuff, what would be something that you would explain that you took away from that conversation?

A: Well, for me, like, I always like to give examples and relate this back to what I call, quote-unquote, “normal people,” people that don’t talk about equity every day. And to give the example of, you know, just a simple example, of girls not being asked to join into a science group, an after-school science group, or given the chance to apply to be in AP classes. I mean, little things like that that I didn’t even think about when I was in school, but just that kind of make people aware that those opportunities are there, and you can always ask, you know, being given that access.

J: And another gender issue that we were talking about as a theme throughout the conference was the issue of disproportionality, which is the concept of overrepresentation of certain groups, and retentions and discipline issues or getting thrown out of school, that kind of thing, and the kinds of group limitations that the impact that has no just on some individuals, but on very large groups of people; and you can see those patterns you know, when you look at the data you can see those patterns.

Marcela: We’re touching on disproportionality, the indicators 9 & 10 over- and under-representation, special-ed was a big discussion topic as well. Which, we heard at the previous one.

K: Well, it’s been, that under-over representation, has been a concern for really a very, very long time, and it will continue to be a concern as long as we have students who are not represented throughout education in their numbers in the school population. But the other, we tend to address things as a single issue as opposed to seeing all of the intersections and addressing those, frankly, as one. And that I think is going to take us a change in attitude, but it’s also going to end I think, in some turf wars, in the sense that “well, I’m in Special-Ed, therefore I don’t have to consider other equity areas, when in fact, all of them need to be looked at as a whole, because simply to look at the sum of the parts is not to look at the whole child.
T: It sounds like sort of a critical, holistic approach.

K: It is, I think it is, and Janelle brought up, and I think Marcela have talked about this, is this is the common core. Standards that are being used in more and more states, and the fact that as they are written, there are going to be a lot of students who are not able to achieve them because of language issues, because of previous histories, and that’s one of the things that was brought up particularly among the directors, is to start looking at how we make those common core actually work for all students. Because when you start reading them you go immediately that there are a lot of kids coming into kindergarten that are not going to be able to add and subtract as five-year-olds.

Marilyn: I think one of the directors, one of the vocal gentlemen, said the common core standards are for all children, but just not some. So that’s incongruent. That’s incongruent.

K: So that’s something I think the Equity Centers and anybody in education is going to have to realize is when you look at the common core standards, what has to be done to make sure that it is for all students, not just some.

Marcela: For all students, but just not some.

K: And I think that’s going to be, I know everything is a critical issue, but I think that’s going to come more and more to the forefront as this push for testing and achievement becomes even stronger than it has, because you know, you also want to look at children and not have schools turning out to be testing factories.

Marilyn: I would say that the race group, as Amber explained already, there were the three different breakouts, and mine was the race, and I think we met maybe a total of three times over those two days; as Kathy said, it was a very compact schedule with just every minute of moving. But each time that we met, they had to literally come and pull us out of the room almost physically because we were so deep into the conversation and apparently the same was true with gender and probably ELL and everything, because the issues are just so critical, they’re just so pertinent, and I think it was just good, as Kathy said, to know that others are struggling with some of the same things, but also to know that we had a voice, that somebody was listening; really, somebody was listening to what we were saying.

K: Marcela, what was your stance on the common core standards, and concerns?

Marcela: One of the biggest concerns I heard there and I’ve heard elsewhere, is they’re developed with economics in mind, you know, the Governor’s Association is part of it; the chief state school officers, those are the driving forces behind it. It’s more to make sure the workers are up to par, is the biggest criticism, to have them be able to do the basic read, write, a little bit higher math than usual. So that’s why they’re not for everybody, but they should be; another, they’re not ELL friendly.
They're starting to develop their English Language Learners, or Acquisition standards, a lot of states have. Of the 50, four states do not have the common core. They've opted out. I think Texas might be one of them. I'm not sure. And they're, Texas is a political powerhouse in English Language Acquisition, so we'll see what comes up.

K: And of course one of the other things that is the perennial problem, is the implementation of common core, as with race to the top, is going to demand more of our schools and our teachers, with no more resources than are already in the pipeline. So it's not just enough to say that we have to work smarter, or we have to work harder, um, which we do. But I keep thinking there's got to be another dimension in there without putting it all on the little red school house. And I have no idea what it is, I am open to any and all ideas on this one. Having more of a national standard does have its plus with the mobility in this society as people move from state to state; I found that out, not only as a parent, but as a parent of a service brat, somebody who moved a lot in school anyway. I know I certainly had higher standards than some of the states I've lived in. So, that leveling of standards may be good, but how do we make sure that it doesn't leave kids in the lurch?

T: Kind of taking a look at current events, separate from politics in general, is Barack Obama being re-elected going to be beneficial for the EAC? Do you see any change coming from that, or?

K: I don't think it's going to make a change in our work, that was set under the 1964 Civil Rights Act; but what it does mean is there's a continuity in philosophy, so in that sense it will make things easier every time you have – oh, Marcela's making the gesture, no it's not going to mean any more money, as much as we would like. But, those of us who have been around the block more than once have seen, when there's been a change in the administration, there's been a change in what Equity Centers can or can not do, and the work we're doing will continue.

T: So, we're not going to have new hoops to jump through?

K: No, and the walls aren't going to be painted a different color either. We will maintain our playing field.

Marilyn: And I think, again, the various speakers seemed to voice that, without just proclaiming it from the housetops, which you definitely heard that trend, that thread going through all of them, was a sense of relief and assurance as it were, to use Kathy's word, that the continuity would be there at least four more years.

T: That's nice.

Marilyn: I think it was a good thing.

T: I think so too.
K: Well it’s a good thing for schools and it’s certainly a good thing for Centers; the past history has been, under some administration, the Equity Assistance Centers were not allowed to do anything.

T: Oh really?

K: Or they were being given directions on what they may or may not do.

T: What kind of Equity is equitable?

K: So, yes. What we’ve been doing, what we’ll continue to do, and one of the things I have to break for us, is, of the Centers, we are one to the few addressing all three areas, consistently, and with essentially the same emphasis. So one is not taking precedent over the other.

T: Right in the middle of the country.

K: Right in the middle of the country, and we are.

Marilyn: The three areas being:

K: Race, Gender, and National Origin, and we are doing that in a very balanced fashion.

T: Awesome, cool.

Marilyn: Tyler, I like what you just said, “what kind of equity is actually equitable?” And that’s a discussion that I think a lot of our school districts are having, and coming up with no answers, and that’s where we fit in to the occasion. So if you don’t mind, I’ll just borrow that, unless it’s been out there for years.

T: No, please! Cool! Well, on that note, we will wrap it up for this special Thanksgiving EAC Family episode.

K: Oh, one thing, Tyler: I hope our listeners would let us know if there are particular areas that, in which they’re interested, for which a podcast would be appropriate because we would be very happy to make sure that these are more than family conversation.

T: Totally, we have not emphasized enough that this is a two-way conversation, so, um, our contact info is of course included at the end of the show, and so you can reach us any number of ways, and yeah, we would love to hear from you, for both equity reasons and, you know, podcast discussion questions, topics, um, if you have a guest that you want interviewed on the show, or you yourself would like to come and discuss something, please let us know. We are very open and flexible.
K: Thank you Tyler.

T: Thank you guys! Until next week. After the turkey!

T: If you would like to contact the Region VIII Equity Assistance Center, you may do so at our website, metrostate-eac.org, phone 303-556-6065, or via email, at eac@msudenver.edu. Listeners are also invited to join the conversation by following us on twitter @EACRegion8, or by liking the Equity Assistance Center Region VIII facebook page. Special thanks to the band Northbound for the use of their song Forward in this podcast. Thank you.