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Equity in School Forums: An Interview with John Landesman

Carolyne Abdullah

Everyday Democracy, cabdullah@everyday-democracy.org

Christopher F. Karpowitz

Brigham Young University, chris_karpowitz@byu.edu

Chad Raphael

Santa Clara University, craphael@scu.edu

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Equity in School Forums: An Interview with John Landesman

Abstract

American school boards, parent teacher associations, and other school forums are crucial sites for participatory and deliberative democracy, yet they often involve debilitating inequities of power among school officials and parents, adults and students, and parents from more and less privileged backgrounds. In this interview, John Landesman, a Senior Associate at Everyday Democracy, discusses how he addresses power differences in dialogues aimed at improving parental participation and student learning in a diverse school district outside Washington, DC. Landesman argues that developing a robust equity strategy from the start is the only way to meet the aims of dialogue that strives to include a variety of perspectives. Landesman also shares insights into how to practice equity at each stage of organizing a dialogue, from inclusive recruitment and retention of participants, to forum design and facilitation, to evaluating and implementing the group's plans. Like many contributors to this issue, he argues that specific equity strategies should flow from the goals of a particular dialogue. He also discusses how Everyday Democracy has employed affinity group discussions, which create safe places for members of non-dominant groups to speak with each other as one stage of a community-wide dialogue.

Author Biography

John Landesman, a Senior Associate at Everyday Democracy, coordinates the Montgomery County Public Schools Study Circles Program, outside Washington DC. The program engages parents, students, staff, and administrators in dialogue to address racial and ethnic barriers to parent involvement and student achievement in a multi-lingual, multi-ethnic school district.

Keywords

equity, equality, deliberation, inclusion, democracy, marginalization

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For adults and youth, American public schools are a major entryway to public engagement. Not only are public schools charged with preparing students for civic life, but they are the custodians of parents' educational and economic aspirations for their children, often the largest recipients of taxpayer funding in a community, neighborhood hubs that host public meetings and events, and institutions that are formally accountable to the community through school boards, parent teacher associations, and other public forums. Schools need active support from their communities to approve school bonds, attract donations, enlist mentors and volunteers, approve (or at least accept) curriculum reforms, engage parents in supporting their children's learning, and address social problems such as academic achievement gaps among students of different racial and income backgrounds, bullying, and gangs. Yet, like other institutions of democracy, public school governance is often dominated by the voices of politicians and policy makers, professionals (administrators and teachers), and privileged citizens (parents of higher socio-economic status) (Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015).

In Maryland, the Montgomery County Public School system offers a hopeful example of how public dialogue can improve school governance. John Landesman, a Senior Associate at Everyday Democracy, coordinates the Montgomery County Public Schools Study Circles Program. The program engages parents, students, staff, and administrators in dialogue to address racial and ethnic barriers to parent involvement and student achievement in this multi-lingual, multi-ethnic school district. These dialogues have helped to build trust and collaboration, and increased involvement by parents of color, as well as diminishing differences in achievement among students from more and less advantaged backgrounds (Childress, Doyle, and Thomas, 2009; Orland, 2007; Fagotto & Fung, 2009).

In this interview, Landesman explains how Everyday Democracy thinks about equity and equality, and how the organization integrated equity considerations throughout the process of organizing study-circle dialogues in Montgomery County, including recruiting and retaining diverse participants, forming agendas, facilitation, small group discussions in affinity groups of less-powerful participants as well as mixed groups, evaluation, and implementation of plans. The techniques discussed here can be adopted or adapted to forums on schooling and many other issues.

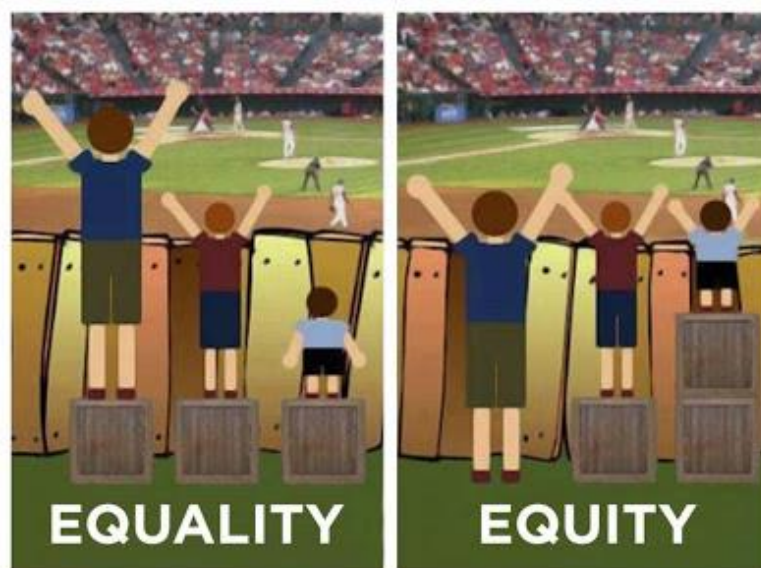
Equity and Equality

Abdullah, Karpowitz, and Raphael (AKR): Some people working in dialogue and deliberation have argued that instead of practicing equality by treating people

similarly, we should strive for equity by treating participants differently in order to create conditions that achieve fair discussion and decisions. Do you see this distinction between equal and equitable treatment as useful to our field and in your own work?

Landesman: I do see a distinction. There's a picture that we often use in our presentations of three boys trying to look over a fence at a baseball game (see Figure 1). In the first panel, which shows equal treatment, each boy is standing on a box that is the same height. The tall boy can see the game over the fence, the middle boy can barely see, and the shortest boy can't see at all. In the next panel, which shows equity, the tall boy's box has been given to the little boy, so now all three of them can see the game. The idea is that everyone needs something different to participate in whatever they're doing.

Figure 1. Equality and Equity



But to me, this feels like the wrong question. The question should be, “What is the goal of the dialogue, and who needs to be in the room to make the dialogue effective?” If the goal is to have a variety of perspectives deliberating together, then organizers need to think about how to recruit for those different perspectives. If there are people who need something different to be part of it, but having their voice will make the deliberation more effective, then organizers have to use different strategies to get them there.

Think of successful companies like Coca-Cola. Their goal is to sell more of their products. They don't just develop their product and then say, "OK everyone, come get it." They spend a lot of time and resources thinking about how to get different kinds of people to buy their products. If the goal of deliberation is to have a richer understanding of an issue based on all the different perspectives that are in the community, than we need to spend time thinking about how to ensure that we get all those perspectives in the room.

In my experience, organizing for diverse perspectives is often an afterthought. Organizers plan the way they always have, and then say, "How do we get Latino participants or low-income folks, or people who have different political perspectives?" That never works, because all we're doing is adding an extra strategy to what's already been put in place. Successful organizing starts by asking, "What is the goal of the dialogue, and who needs to be in the room to reach that goal?" Then every piece of the organizing—whether it's the outreach, the facilitation, the setup once you get there, where it's located—all of those things are driven by who you want in the room and what perspectives you need to hear to make your dialogue effective. That's a very different way of looking at it than saying, "We're going to do it the way we've always done it, and now we're going to develop a strategy to get to these so-called marginalized people."

Equitable Recruiting

AKR: What equity strategies do you use to recruit and retain participants?

Landesman: The most important equity strategy is to plan with your goal and target audience in mind. We have several different dialogue formats: some are with parents and staff, some are with students, and some are with leaders in a school building. With each one, we need to think about equity in a different way. We start by defining the goal of the dialogue and then who needs to participate to reach that goal. Then, we discuss what the barriers are to engaging the targeted audience. The outreach, agenda, and facilitation must then address the goals, target audience, and barriers. We created a tool that helps organizers think about the needs of their target audiences [see <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1WxXCOViyNxIoX9H1PIZIZ3gJpsmMDOYzP7gmlSTm87I/edit>].

For example, the goal of our Parent/Teacher study circles, one of our formats, is to improve parent engagement. The participants we need are teachers, parent leaders such as PTA, and parents who traditionally do not participate. The barriers to getting this last group may include: they don't understand the information schools send home; they don't think the meetings is really for them; it's not part

of their culture to participate at school; their past experiences with the school or organization may have been negative; they don't have transportation to get to the meeting; or they are nervous that the other participants will make them feel stupid or uncomfortable.

To get these parents to attend, we create flyers that speak to both the goal and the barriers. We send personal letters and make personal phone calls. We stand in front of the school when parents are dropping off their children and have even recruited at bus stops. We have moved the dialogue to community centers that are more accessible for our target audience and typically hold brief information meetings where the parents can learn about the dialogue without making a big commitment.

Once you get people to the dialogue, you have to think about how to keep them there. We have people at the door welcoming them into the room. It sounds silly but most times when we invite people to public meetings, whether it's a school meeting or organizational meeting, it's nerve-racking for a lot of families because they're intimidated. Having someone who is smiling and greeting them when they walk in the door makes a huge difference. If we know that we've invited parents who speak different languages, then we have people who speak those languages at the door to greet. Signs in different languages are also a big deal. We try to make sure that our facilitators and our greeters reflect the community's diversity, whether it's socio-economic, racial, linguistic, whatever.

The agenda is designed to consider the needs of the different audiences and the barriers that were listed at the beginning of the organizing process. We spend a lot of time building trust and connections between the participants. Little of the dialogue is in the large group. Questions try to level the power dynamics and distrust that participants may feel. For example, before we address the specific issues, we ask people to talk about the community in which they grew up, or their hopes for their children.

After the first session, we know that there are parents who may be reluctant to come back. We make sure to call them afterwards and say, "How did it go? Any concerns? Do you think you're going to come back?" For the parents in our circles, we make a lot of follow-up phone calls to remind people to come. Often, people want to be there, but they get busy or they're not sure they feel comfortable. Through our phone calls and e-mails, we make it clear that we want to see them, and that we're hoping they're going to be there.

Forum Design and Facilitation

AKR: In what other ways have you designed and facilitated forums to promote equitable participation?

Landesman: When we first started doing this work, there were a lot of activities in a large circle. But we realized that large forums lend themselves to people who are typically the ones involved in public meetings, know how to participate, and feel very comfortable in that situation. It feels intimidating to a lot of parents just to walk into a room with a lot of people. If you have to speak in front of a lot of people, that's intimidating if you're not used to public speaking, because you're not sure how you're going to be received. Our dialogues are typically around 15 to 20 people, which are larger than some people like, but we feel that we can get more diversity that way, so it's not just one person representing everyone from their background or their racial, socio-economic, or political group.

Within that group of 15 to 20 people, we make sure that there's a lot of small group activity, which better engages people who are more marginalized. We do a lot of paired conversations that then lead to a bigger conversation. You pair up with someone, and then someone shares out. If you're a person that doesn't like to speak in a large group, you might be paired with a person who has no problem doing that. You're still participating because you're speaking in that paired group. We do some fun things in the beginning to help people that feel nervous in this kind of situation. For example, we sometimes play a game called "Where the Wind Blows." It's a kid's game, but adults love it. Another activity is "Cultural Jeopardy." We put up questions about different ethnic and cultural groups making sure that they reflect the diversity of the community. Participants, who may be intimidated when they walk in, get to share about their own culture. Fun changes the dynamic in the room, and it also changes the power level in the room. It helps put everyone on the same page.

We spend a lot of time with activities that develop relationships and empathy among the participants. Some organizers and facilitators skip over the relationship-building piece of a dialogue because they don't feel like there is enough time. Or, the relationship-building part is just surface level. In my experience, this part is the foundation before you can effectively address challenging issues, and it's vital to ensuring everyone feels safe to participate. People want to come back because they feel connected to the other people in the room, even if they have opposing views.

We recently did a study circle with police officers and students and parents of color. All sides were nervous. Police were worried they would be verbally beat up. Some of the students and parents were scared because they had negative experiences with some police officers. The early activities however, created empathy and a forum that allowed the participants to listen to each other. These include activities such as “Speed Dating,” where people pair up to learn some things about each other, or “Cultural Timeline,” where participants share stories about different events that have impacted their lives.

The fears and concerns are similar even in school study circles. Therefore, the initial activities need to address power dynamics. For example, if a forum includes parents, teachers, and a principal, the parents are often afraid to speak up because they think that the principal and the teachers have all the knowledge. This is especially important because we have parents who come from cultures where it would be really rude to argue with someone in a leadership position (like a teacher). We have to change the dynamic, and we ask a lot of questions like, “Where did you grow up?” and, “What is your family like?” and, “What do you hope for your kids?” before we ask, “What do you see as some of the challenges of school?” People are experts in their own life experiences, and asking about their personal histories helps people feel like this is something that we as organizers really do want to hear from them.

For school staff, the power dynamic is different. Typically, they’re on the same level unless there is a principal in the room. In most of our schools, even in schools that are incredibly diverse, the teaching staff is mostly white and so are the leadership teams, including the administration, the heads of different departments, and heads of some content areas at the grade level. When we do these dialogues, we have to consider how they are going to participate. We know that if there are only one or two people of color in the room, they’re going to feel nervous about speaking up about what they’re seeing. It could easily feel like they have to represent all the students who look like them. We do a lot of things to try to bring different voices into the room. This gets to equity too. For example, we’ll bring in videos and articles that have other people of color speaking to these issues, so it’s not just one or two people having to represent everybody that looks like them. We know that when it comes to conversations of race, sometimes white teachers don’t feel comfortable speaking up about what they’re seeing or what they really believe. So we have to create our activities in a way that slowly brings people into the topic.

With our facilitators, we spend a lot of time making sure they know they’re neutral, but that they’re not just robots. We typically have them sitting, not

standing, and our dialogues are always in a circle without tables. It's really important that the facilitators aren't hiding behind something, and can see everyone, and aren't standing like they're the experts. During the relationship-building piece, whenever we're doing an activity where people are talking about their personal experiences or who they are, the facilitators model that. It helps participants understand how to respond to the questions, but it also makes the participants have a better connection to the facilitators. When the facilitators can show their own vulnerability, it helps people who are more marginalized progress.

We always have a team of at least two facilitators. We try as much as possible not to have two people who would be perceived as coming from the same background, whether it's racial, ethnic, gender, socio-economic, in the school system and outside the school system, and so on. In a variety of different ways, we try to do that, because that makes participants feel more comfortable if they see a facilitator who they feel can connect with them.

We have been trying to figure out how to include more about equitable participation in our facilitator training and our discussion materials. For example, if you're doing dialogues with students and adults, very often the adults will take over the conversation or they will become like the parent or the teacher to the kids, telling the students what they should be thinking rather than hearing the students and their perspectives and discussing issues on an equal level. That's natural if you're a parent or a teacher, but it's not going to help us with our goal of getting to understand the different perspectives in these dialogues. Facilitators need to pay attention to this. We also have to pay attention to how young people have different comfort levels and experience in participation. You need to set it up that way so you don't get the same three people responding to every question. Some students are in classes where they're constantly being asked to give their opinion and their perspective. But a lot of students are never asked their perspective, they're not used to being called on, or they're just used to taking tests. We can't plan for everything—every dialogue is different—so we need to train facilitators to adapt in the moment to dynamics like these.

Evaluation

AKR: What measures of equality or equity have you used in evaluating your work?

Landesman: Our measurements depend on our goals. What are we trying to accomplish, and if we were going to accomplish that, what should our participants look like? We measure if those folks showed up. We also measure participation

for our multi-session study circles along the way. We may have a great group at the first session, but we also look at who's at the last session, and that will help us measure our effectiveness. Before the dialogue, we define outcomes for each session and we try to make sure that it's a diverse group of people talking about what those outcomes should look like. At our staff and student study circles, we ask them to evaluate outcomes at the end of each session. At our multi-session study circles, our facilitators also answer a series of questions after each session. So, as organizers, we can tell whether they're meeting their goals at each point, and then we can help them adjust and make changes along the way. We don't wait until the end to find out.

I think evaluation is really hard to do when you have a diverse group of participants. We used to do pre- and post-surveys, for example, but we realized that they meant different things to different groups of people. Even though they all had the exact same piece of paper in front of them, or we had everything translated, people were interpreting the questions differently based on their socio-economic status, whether or not they were from the United States originally, or their education level. We've had to adjust and adapt, and I'm not sure we've ever really figured that out. When we're working with staff and students, all of our evaluations are online. You just send them a link. They like it, it's quick, and we get a pretty high level of response. But if we're working with family or a community, not everyone has a computer. That's becoming easier, but it's still not there yet.

Affinity Groups in Intergroup Dialogue

AKR: What do you think about integrating affinity groups, or intragroup discussion, into intergroup dialogue, as a way to promote equity?

Landesman: I think if our goal is to get different parts of our community to talk to each other, we have to acknowledge that there are different comfort levels, different experiences, even different beliefs or trust in what our dialogues could do. Some people have had a lot of experience and success in public deliberation, whereas for other people, public deliberation hasn't worked at all for them. Sometimes, affinity groups can be helpful. We don't do them a lot, but we have done them. Sometimes we'll start off building relationships in affinity groups. Other times, we'll begin in diverse study circles, but when we are trying to get to a particular issue, we'll notice that people aren't yet quite comfortable speaking up about how they really feel, and so we'll break into affinity groups during the dialogue itself.

We've done this in a variety of different ways. With the students and staff, we've broken out students into one group and staff into another. Interestingly, no one ever has a problem with that. They see that there is a reason to do that. Sometimes we'll break up parents and staff just to get different perspectives. Again, no one has ever had a concern about that. We also will break up by race sometimes. It's not typically at the beginning of the meeting but after people have built a connection with each other. It helps us get deeper into the conversation about race. At first, there can be some pushback, but not always. Oftentimes, if the facilitator has done a good job building the connection with participants, then people feel trusted.

Typically the dominant group is the group that doesn't want to be broken into the affinity groups, and so they're typically the ones that have the biggest challenge with it. The non-dominant group usually really appreciates it. It does help us go deeper into the issues. We make it clear that one group isn't right and the other wrong. When they come back to the full group, you almost always see big differences in their perspectives, even as groups. So we talk about that. It's a really good way of talking about why we have different perspectives. That's part of the way we debrief the conversation. We ask, "What did you notice? How do you feel?" They usually say they liked it, or at least they understood why we did it. We always make sure that when we do something that could divide the group that we're bringing the group back together again later. If you're having a multi-session study circle, it's really important to spend time building the bond of the group in the beginning. Then in the middle of the dialogue, it's when you can focus more on differences and have affinity groups or push people to feel frustrated or uncomfortable. But we make sure to end in a way that's going to bring people back together again. If your goal is to have action at the end of it, as a facilitator, you have to understand that you want the folks to work together.

We've also had study circles that are focused on students or parents from one group, such as African-Americans or Latinos. When we've done this, we have teachers and staff who are more diverse. Understanding how power works in a school district is important. This approach definitely helps to build a bond with the parents, but to make change, we had to find a way to get the teachers and the leaders to understand and be part of the group's solution too. For example, we did a study circle last year focused on Latino student achievement that was just Spanish-speaking parents and English-speaking teachers. We did another one that focused on African-American student achievement, and it was half African-American parents and a diverse group of teachers, so they had a dialogue together.

I think that if parents whose voices have not been at the table before feel the focus is on their particular issues, or that there will be other people who look like them, feel like them, or have similar experiences, then these parents are more likely to participate. The conversation can focus on a particular goal, whereas if you include everybody in the dialogue, then you have so many different perspectives, and it can go all over the place.

Implementation

AKR: What equity considerations are there when you move toward implementing actions that emerge from dialogue?

Landesman: We've changed our dialogues because we didn't think it was being done in an equitable way. We used to do mostly parent-staff study circles with a few student study circles along the way. We realized that in the institution it's the leadership team that really makes the changes in the schools, and that they were doing these study circles to hear the voice of their stakeholders. But because the leaders often themselves hadn't gone through the dialogue, they perceived the outcomes through their own lens, their own life experiences. Over the last few years, we have changed to work with our leadership teams first and put structures in place so that when we do parent or staff or student study circles, the staff is more ready to hear and understand the concerns.

When we move from dialogue to taking action, we need to pay attention to how we will support different people to be part of the action afterwards. In our study circles, we know that there are people who financially can't afford to or don't have skills to lead the action phase. It could be lack of time or money, but it could also be that they need skills in understanding systems. Typically, our PTA presidents in Montgomery County are white, even in schools where there are very few white students. So the action phase would often get led by very well-meaning parents who didn't necessarily look like a lot of the people who participated. The actions would often be influenced by whoever was taking the lead at that point. We have to figure out better ways of moving to action so that everyone can be part of that.

Balancing Equity and Equality

AKR: Have you encountered any trade-offs between pursuing equality or equity in your work, or between equality/equity and other goals?

Landesman: Almost 30 percent of the students in Montgomery County are Latino, and quite a few of the parents are immigrants. Some don't speak a lot of English. If you want to hear their voice, inviting them to a typical dialogue isn't going to work very well. For years, we provided interpretation, but it was always facilitated in English with Spanish interpretation. It was OK. We would get some voices, but we typically wouldn't get as many Latino parents as we wanted to really be able to hear their voice. So, for the past few years, we've offered study circles that are facilitated in Spanish and interpreted into English. Our English-speaking staff members are the ones with the interpreters and the headphones. It's being facilitated in the language of the parents. We get many more parents to participate. Even parents who speak English often feel more comfortable in this kind of dialogue.

Some people might say, "Isn't that a trade-off? Isn't that making it easier to accommodate one group at the expense of another?" Our goal is to find ways to close the achievement gap among students. Our school district is struggling to be effective teaching many Latino children. If we want to close the achievement gap, and we think it's important to have the voice of parents, then it's not a trade-off to hold the discussion in Spanish; it's actually what's needed to make our dialogue effective. We are very intentional about how interpreting slows down the process. We talk about that and explain that as a group we want to hear everyone's voices because they are important.

When we are organizing people, it's certainly easier when everyone is the same, because we can send out the same flyers and make the same phone calls. That's the only trade-off: it's a lot harder to be equitable than equal. It takes more work, and you have to think of things in a different way.

But it's worth it. If you go to most school meetings, it's the same people that are there all the time. To give a personal example, I was PTA President at one of my kid's schools, and it was a really diverse school. Before I became the President, it would be the same 20 white parents at every PTA meeting. Our goal was to have a group that was inclusive of our school community to really get things going. So in organizing, we had to think about—starting from scratch—who do we want in the room, and how are we going to organize this in a way that would get their participation? When we started organizing in the ways I've mentioned, we got a whole lot more of everybody and people kept coming back. Again, it goes back to your goal. If you want to hear different voices, then I think everything an organizer does—how you organize it, how you design it, how you do outreach, how you greet people when they come in, how you set up your materials, how

you set up the room, how you facilitate it, and how you follow up—all has to be considered, including the people that you think are important to reach those goals.

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