

Pillsbury United Communities Office of Public Charter Schools Two-Year Pilot of the Equity Framework

*Report Prepared in August 2025 for the Minnesota Legislative Committees
with Jurisdiction over Kindergarten Through Grade 12*

Introduction

Pillsbury United Communities (PUC) is a nonprofit organization in Minneapolis whose mission is to co-create enduring change toward a just society where every person has personal, social, and economic power. PUC's Office of Public Charter Schools (PUC-OPCS) is a charter school authorizer based in Minneapolis, Minnesota, for 16 charter schools serving more than 11,000 students in the Twin Cities metro area and across the state "designed so that the children and families whose needs are not being met by traditional public schools have access to relevant education that supports each student's personal, social, and academic achievement." Currently, our eight high schools serve an estimated 4,952 high school students, approximately 91% of whom identify as Black, Brown or Indigenous (MN state definition), 25% of whom are English Learners and ~82% of whom are eligible for free or reduced price lunch (based on 2024/2025 available data).

In 2021, PUC-OPCS redesigned our high school performance framework to align with our values as an organization and the assets in our high schools. The new framework, called the Equity Framework, complements other elements of our authorizing process. It has been designed with deep community input to ensure it is relevant to students' culture, life goals, strengths, and needs. Schools submit a completed Equity Framework annually to show progress in meeting student academic needs, as well as creating the conditions for student success (e.g., providing social-emotional support, encouraging identity development, and being responsive to culture and community).

Responding to education and testimonials from the PUC-OPCS team and a group of student leaders, the 2023 Minnesota legislature passed [H.F.No. 2497, Chapter 55](#).

[Article 2, Section 62](#), which formally recognized the PUC Equity Framework to “evaluate school performance in improving educational outcomes for students.”

This legislation established that up to eight PUC-OPCS-authorized schools would participate in a two-year pilot of the Equity Framework. Schools that participated in the pilot “[we]re not required to submit reports under Minnesota Statutes, section 120B.11 to the Department of Education,” known to many as the “World’s Best Workforce” data reporting, for the 2022-2023 and 2023-2024 school years.

The legislation also required that PUC-OPCS prepare a report:

Subd. 3. Report. By September 1, 2025, Pillsbury United Communities must report to the legislative committees with jurisdiction over kindergarten through grade 12 education data on school and student performance measurements based on the goals established for each participating school. The report must identify the percentage of each goal that each school attained.

This document serves to fulfill that requirement.

Equity Framework History and Purpose

Why an Equity Framework?

Over the past thirty years, high-stakes school accountability systems have overshadowed the potential for schools and communities to use data in proactive, equity-focused, and student-supporting ways. “Too often in education, data is seen as a hammer—a tool of accountability to ensure that targets are being met,” writes the Data Quality Campaign. PUC-OPCS aims to instead use data as a flashlight, guiding a way forward by shining a light on assets and actionable areas for growth, always with equity as a north star.

PUC-OPCS recognizes that our communities have long faced an unjust choice between attending a culturally affirming school or one that produces high test scores. To address this, we have developed the Equity Framework, a performance framework and evaluation tool approved by the Minnesota State Legislature and developed in partnership with our community. This new framework holds schools accountable for delivering a high-quality education *and* a culturally affirming environment.

In addition, PUC-OPCS recognizes that the pervasive use of test scores as a primary measure of school accountability has its foundations in institutionalized racism and has caused harm to many students and communities. Recognizing that standardized tests fall short of capturing the full spectrum of learning and development within a school, the Equity Framework is a comprehensive, assets-based, and actionable accountability framework. This framework, rooted in community wisdom, is designed to redefine the concept of what makes a school successful. It is the only known alternative accountability system of its kind in Minnesota.

Vision for the Framework

To become a charter school authorizer in 2010, PUC-OPCS was required to submit a school performance framework. The framework our office submitted was heavily reliant on state standardized test scores. While this initial framework met the requirements of the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE), the PUC-OPCS team felt that it provided a narrow view of their schools that ignored important elements of quality and success.

The idea was to replace our MDE-approved performance framework with one that would accurately highlight the successes and challenges within our schools and communities. The new framework would allow PUC-OPCS to better understand and showcase the positive difference our charter schools were making for students and communities, while also surfacing areas for support and improvement.

PUC-OPCS did not know of any existing tool for evaluating a school's cultural and community responsiveness from an authorizer point of view. What's more, they believed a tool from elsewhere would not be the best fit for their schools' unique context. It was important that the new Equity Framework be designed based on the perspectives of local communities.

Community Listening Process

With an assets-based and racial-equity lens, the PUC-OPCS team set out in 2021 to develop a new performance framework, with consultation and technical support from a nonprofit organization called Future Focused Education. We decided to start with the high schools in our portfolio; we intend to create a K-8 Equity Framework in the future.

PUC-OPCS undertook the work of developing the High School Equity Framework as a research project guided by this question: ***How do those most affected by the high schools in our portfolio define school success?***

To address this research question, PUC-OPCS employed a qualitative research design, supported by quantitative survey data. We used an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach to design focus group protocols and a survey. PUC-OPCS facilitated 26 focus groups of students, families, teachers, staff, employers, and community members to define the characteristics of a successful high school. As part of the focus group experience, 90 people (77% of focus group participants) completed a survey.

Analysis of focus group and survey data resulted in 12 important themes. These would become the 12 performance areas in the Equity Framework. Figure 1 provides sample quotations from the focus groups and survey responses for each of the 12 important themes that became performance areas in the Equity Framework.

Figure 1. What Focus Group Participants Value Most in Good Schools

Theme	Subthemes and Sample Quotations
Enrolled Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Left traditional schools: "These kids have left their school, these schools have failed them emotionally, socially, or physically- they come to us because they need someone to catch that ball and we are there to do that." (School staff) Immigrants: "A lot of our kids come from different countries and districts, struggle at the beginning" (School staff) Mobility: "I would also say that our students have been to a LOT of different schools, from kindergarten through when they get to us. 6-8 schools is common." (School staff) Older students: "We have started to also serve true freshmen as well, although many of our students are older, trying to recover credits, and dealing with a lot of adult things outside of school." (School staff) Houseless: "They also have a lot of resources for homeless youth" (Student) Young parents: "The moms, kids, the girls with babies or are pregnant. The teachers help us find housing and toys and they really help us out." (Student)
Basic Needs Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Housing support: "The teachers help us out with housing. The moms, kids, the girls with babies or are pregnant. The teachers help us find housing and toys and they really help us out." (Student) Food and financial assistance: "We set up a grocery store. Numbers were astounding. People came for food, to get rent paid." (School staff) Community Hub: "[It would signal to me that a school is a really good school if] the school would be a central hub for the community clinic , food

Theme	Subthemes and Sample Quotations
	<p><i>shelf, resource place, maybe a small room or two to stay if needed. As we do have a lot of homelessness in our community.” (School staff and community member)</i></p>
Mental Health Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trauma and healing: “This benefits parents and students who prefer a small, intimate environment and is responsive to trauma that students have been through.” (School director) • Student groups: “There’s a men’s group but we need a women’s group for us to heal as well.” (Student) • Counseling: “A friend of mine, her mother died when she was 16. Counseling and mental health support was great, got her what she needed to get her through.” (Community) • Mental health professionals on staff at school: “Through all the mental health complications I’ve been through, our social worker has been there for me through all of it. He is really helpful.” (Student) • Connections to community resources: “[School] helped me get therapy.” (Student) • Student care teams: “Also we have care teams. Like educators, social worker, special education advisor, guidance counselors. The team goes through each kid to touch base on where they are at. We always follow up, provide multiple levels of support, and multiple adults check in.” (Teacher)
Flexible and Personalized Instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexible schedules: “[Student] Had to work during Covid to support her family, but our school is so flexible that I was teaching math to her at night.” (School staff) • Tailoring to students’ interests: “Personalized learning plans, personalized projects, focusing on what students want has been great.” (School staff) • Different learning styles: “There are three or four ways to access the information in my class. When I talk to people who enroll in our school, we have students who are high achievers, students who work at their own pace, and students who have been failed at other schools. We provide support dependent on their needs.” (Teacher) • Give students more time: “Also, if kids don’t pass tests, they should give students more time after school.” (Community) • Honoring home culture: “Understanding what it means to be Black in America and Somali in America. … A girl mentioned that she wanted to be a psychologist, but it was hard navigating that conversation about mental health with her parents. We found a way for her to … get what she needed while being respectful of her parents’ cultural needs.” (School staff)
Culturally and Real-Life Relevant Curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competencies important to local community/culture: “We have a competency based-learning approach. We create a flexible environment for young people, like labs and activities but grounded in competencies

Theme	Subthemes and Sample Quotations
	<p>identified locally. The projects they do are relevant to their lives and shape their lives and are responsive to them culturally." (School leader)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Culturally relevant: "One of the things I'm really proud of and that keeps me working there is how we have focused on culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy -- conversations about racism and colonialization. I am proud that we have staff willing to have those conversations and to check ourselves. We've been doing that consistently for 8 years." (School staff) • Learning the history of their own cultural groups and others: "We need to change the way we talk about history. The lack of understanding of how people of color have a place in history must be changed." (School staff) • Current events, government: "We are not getting taught what's going on now. We should also know about Afghanistan or stuff going on in our government, changes. We aren't learning that." (Student) • Life skills: "We have a teacher in there doing taxes with them because no one showed them- a lot of life skills that the students come out of there with are important. Communication is one and responsibility - to maintain a job, to get there on time. Just that life experience and being able to share when you need help is something they learn at [PUC school] I hope they walk away with. How to ask for help and when to ask for help is a struggle in our community because it can be viewed as a sign of weakness. So learning that at [PUC school] is important." (Parent) • Critical consumers of information: "It's important that when kids reach high school age, they should be critical consumers of education and news. There is lots of misinformation. I don't want kids to fall into stuff. I want them to be informed and responsible consumers of education, and be able to read research." (School staff) • Technology/computer skills: "We are seeing companies closing their doors and moving online. A lot of our students are scared of Google Docs and Google Slides.... I'd like to see more technology integration in our curriculum. Not knowing how to use a computer is a huge issue for our kids when they get to jobs." (School staff)
Student Identity Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students forming and understanding their own identities: "But my concern is identity..... students need to understand who they are and what they need" (Family) • Understanding their identity in their cultural context: "Being Black and Muslim in a school is hard while you are trying to become someone.... You may be East African but you are also an African American. We help them see that they are both. They have a Black principal and he's helping make that happen." (School Staff) • Self-Awareness and Reflection: "The critical skill they need is to be self-reflective and identify where their strengths and weaknesses are so they know what they can do on their own and what they need support on. (School Staff and Teachers)

Theme	Subthemes and Sample Quotations
Student Career Exploration and Preparation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Traditional and non-traditional pathways: "Sometimes they don't want to be a doctor, you say ok. You have to focus on helping kids as they figure out who they want to be." (Family) Internships and vocational training opportunities: "I'm in an internship too. The school sets you up for life after high school, like helping you apply to college. School helps a lot." (Student) Networking/ Social capital: "They also need to be able to make connections with people. As this world becomes more hybrid, our entry level employees need to be able to connect with people in the org, esp. as a large org." (PUC staff/Community) Professional role models: "When we bring in mentors from outside that look like our students, it's good. Like doctors, engineers, versus bringing in correction officers to tell them about prison. We need to look to adults in the community." (Staff) Help transitioning to college: "The prep for college is important. Understanding post-high-school life. Preparing students to excel at college or understanding how to do college apps or secure scholarships." (PUC staff/Community)
Extra-Curricular Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sports: "We could use more sports, like football, soccer, sports activities." (Student) Importance of arts: "We struggle to engage students, and art/music is engaging. We in society missed how music is an engagement tool. Kids come to the studio to make songs about concepts we learn. If you want to learn about a society that existed, look at art and music and you will understand that. If you want to understand what kids are feeling, use art." (Teacher) Transferable skills: "Students learn crafts and things, but I would also like to see bookkeeping, something transferable, or more computer skills. Or maybe things they can learn, a trade, and are transferable. (Teacher)
School Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Welcoming across diversity: "These kids describe this high school as they feel like they don't compromise in diversity in this school, they feel supported, valued, and included." (Community) Advisory: "My son was a kid that came from another state and entered into the school and I've seen so many different changes with him. He was fairly shy at first and with the support of his advisor, and just - it's that support." (Parent) Sense of community within school: "Building community is what [PUC school] does best. Whether that be inside the school with students, or with families, or building bridges between students and families." (Parent) Support embedded in school culture: "[PUC school] helped at a time when we're not really looking at the mental health of students. ... Being at [PUC school] where it's built into the culture... That doesn't exist all the time." (Parent)

Theme	Subthemes and Sample Quotations
Family Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Communication with families in home language: “Communicating with parents. Doing events for high schoolers. One barrier for families (and me; I have a 5 year old) is the language barrier. Teachers/parents need help communicating. There are not enough interpreters. Sometimes parents don't know when the parent conferences are.” (Community) ● Cultural awareness & responsiveness: “The school always brought parents around for community discussion. There was connection and culture and smaller classes. Homework was always sent in English and Spanish. This was very thoughtful, considering parents' needs.” (Latine Community) ● Staff-Parent relationships: “Engaging with parents to make them feel like partners with the school and the future of their kids. They are busy though, working 2-3 jobs is hard. Following up is hard. If I imagine a good school, one that PUC should authorize or build, it's got to be focused on engaging parents.” (PUC staff/Community)
Community Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Valuing Community Wisdom: “Resolve needs in community versus by people who don't live in community, that is problematic. People who know each other can come up with solutions. Like people who live on your block.” (Paraprofessional) ● Students as community assets: “I want our students to be a good member of the community because they have strong voices and opinions. They are good at riling people up. Channeling that energy and power to help make changes in our communities, which are suffering and struggling.” (School staff) ● School as a community asset: “The reason I am excited is because of how much community is involved in creating the space outside the classroom. They let me and others start a free grocery program there. Different community programs have asked to borrow the space. And having those community programs in the space happens because of the [school]'s value of involving community in the process of learning.” (School staff)
Teachers and Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Collaboration and collegiality among staff: “I think as a whole school, we have become really good at coming together. We are good at collaborating -- PLCs -- even staying tight knit and supporting each other across four sites.” (School staff) ● Staff communicating about students: “I get emails from counselors and support staff all the time for students in our class. Our school is a team for our students. We are trying our best to have them on the radar all the time and we communicate with each other as a team to make sure that student has what they require to be successful.” (School staff) ● Staff communicating with families: “My first year teaching was at a big public school and we never discussed how to reach out to the whole family. Our school revolves around the family. I know all the families, all the students. I will call home and talk to parents and they all know me.” (School staff)

Theme	Subthemes and Sample Quotations
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff diversity / teachers of color: “Acknowledging people of color and the need for teachers of color. The Principal of the school is a person of color. It's an important message for young people and families so that they can see themselves as possible leaders.” (School staff) • Teachers with asset lens/ growth mindset: “When I talked to our principal he hooked me up with our Indigenous Board to improve my language - there wasn't any blame, but now that unit is better...I felt very supported through the system to make our curriculum even stronger.” (School Staff)

Developing the Equity Framework

The 12 **performance areas** outlined in Figure 1 above became the organizing structure of the Equity Framework. Next we identified **performance measures** under each area.

In the Equity Framework, a “performance measure” is a unit of data or evidence that informs the annual assessment of how well a school is performing. The performance measures in the Equity Framework operationalize the ideas of school success that matter to students, families, communities, educators, and PUC-OPCS.

Some performance measures in the Equity Framework are quantitative (e.g., average percentage of credits earned); others are qualitative (e.g., common themes in students’ comments about their level of satisfaction with basic needs supports). No single performance measure tells the full story of a school. Rather, the Equity Framework pulls together many performance measures across data sources and methods to inform a comprehensive evaluation of school success.

We finalized the Equity Framework in the summer of 2022 with input from school leaders and data managers. The Equity Framework is an active expression of Pillsbury United Communities' commitment to resilience and justice. It provides a structure for collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data for several purposes:

- **Authorizer Evaluation:** PUC-OPCS uses the Equity Framework to evaluate schools annually, resulting in a set of ratings and qualitative feedback. This is an important part of the authorizing process and informs school contract decisions, alongside multiple sources of information
- **Continuous Improvement:** PUC-OPCS and schools use the Equity Framework to examine assets and growing edges, with the goal of ongoing improvement.

- **Storytelling:** PUC-OPCS and the schools use the Equity Framework to highlight student stories and celebrate schools' innovative, anti-racist, student-centered, and community-responsive practices—which can be used in media and communications.

Evaluation of Two-Year Pilot

With support from a grant from MDE, in accordance with [H.F.No. 2497, Chapter 55, Article 2, Section 62](#), PUC-OPCS and the high schools in our charter school portfolio piloted the Equity Framework in 2022-2023 and 2023-2024. Implementation required building new tools and systems. After Equity Framework submission, a PUC-OPCS team of reviewers conducts an evaluation of each school based on the Equity Framework data. The schools are rated in two ways:

1. **Data submission:** How clear and complete are the data submitted by the school for each of the 12 performance areas?
2. **Evidence of success:** How much evidence is there that the school is successful in performance areas 2 through 12? (This rating does not apply for Performance Area 1.)

The results of the evaluation in the two years of the pilot are summarized in Figure 2 on the next page.

Figure 2. Equity Framework Ratings During the Two-Year Pilot

Performance Area	Percentage of Schools Receiving a Strong Rating ¹			
	Data Submission		Evidence of Success	
	2022-2023	2023-2024	2022-2023	2023-2024
1. Enrolled Students	81.8%	100.0%	N/A	N/A
2. Basic Needs Support	63.6%	36.4%	72.7%	63.6%
3. Social, Emotional, and Mental Health Support	72.7%	72.7%	72.7%	72.7%
4. Flexible, Personalized, and Innovative Instruction	63.6%	81.8%	72.7%	72.7%
5. Culturally and Real-Life Relevant Curriculum	63.6%	36.4%	54.5%	63.6%
6. Student Identity Development	81.8%	90.9%	63.6%	54.5%
7. Student Career Exploration and Preparation	72.7%	54.5%	72.7%	72.7%
8. Extra-Curricular Activities	72.7%	72.7%	63.6%	54.5%
9. School Culture	72.7%	36.4%	72.7%	54.5%
10. Family Engagement	45.5%	63.6%	54.5%	54.5%
11. Community Engagement	45.5%	63.6%	54.5%	63.6%
12. Teachers and Staff	72.7%	72.7%	72.7%	54.5%

¹ For Data Submission ratings, “Meets” was considered a strong rating. For Evidence of Success ratings, “Generally good” and “Area to celebrate” were considered strong ratings.

As part of the pilot, we gathered feedback from high school leaders on the effectiveness of the Equity Framework and areas for improvement. The following summarizes qualitative findings from our evaluation of the two-year pilot, and actions taken:

- We heard from all schools that the length of the student survey resulted in a lower response rate and lower quality responses because students were fatigued. In response, PUC-OPCS reduced the length of the student survey.
- Two schools shared that surveys are not a good fit for Oromo and Somali cultures, which have traditionally been oral societies. This posed a challenge for administering the family and guardian survey in particular. In response, PUC-OPCS shortened the family and guardian survey and offered an interview protocol as an alternative to the survey so school staff could collect family and guardian perspectives orally if preferred.
- All schools reported that getting family/guardian survey responses was challenging, resulting in low response rates. Schools gave suggestions including those described in the previous point. They also said having access to both digital and hard-copy versions of the survey earlier in the school year would allow them to have the surveys available at family events. In response, PUC-OPCS has established a timeline to release surveys in January each year, including a printable version of the family and guardian survey. PUC-OPCS is providing the student, family, and community surveys in Spanish, Oromo, and Somali in addition to English. PUC-OPCS is also exploring additional methods to support schools in collecting input from families.
- Some schools said the family survey is challenging because many students could not identify a family member or guardian to complete it. PUC-OPCS understands “family” broadly. For the purposes of the family and guardian survey, “family” can include adult relatives and non-relatives who are trusted adults in a student’s life and have an important influence on them. Because some schools reported they have students who could not identify a trusted adult to complete the survey, PUC-OPCS decided to provide a way for schools to document the number of students in this category in future years and to remove those students when calculating the response rate for the family and guardian survey.
- Clear communication about timeline and requirements is important. In the first year of the Equity Framework, several schools did not understand all of the requirements and made incomplete submissions. In response, PUC-OPCS

developed a calendar of email communication related to the Equity Framework to provide important information and reminders.

- One goal of the Equity Framework is that schools will use the data they collect to inform decision making. In the first year of the pilot, schools did not receive their Performance Reports and Evaluations until meetings with PUC-OPCS in May and June. One leader said, “Turnaround has to be faster if we are going to make changes based on the data.” Another said, “Having this meeting earlier would be helpful in giving me confidence that our approach to this was good enough.” In response, PUC-OPCS established an earlier timeline for future years.

School Performance on School-Specific Goals

Every high school in the PUC-OPCS portfolio sets school-specific goals at the beginning of each contract term. PUC-OPCS approves the school specific goals as the schools' authorizer. High schools report on progress on their goals as part of their annual Equity Framework submission. School-specific goals must include both academic and non-academic goals. Figure 3 reports on the percentage of school-specific goals that schools attained as of the second year of the two-year pilot. Goals reported in 2023-2024 included rates of growth and proficiency on interim and summative assessments, course completion rates, graduation rates, college readiness rates, and attendance rates, among other measures of success.

Figure 3. School-Specific Goal Attainment

School Name	Percentage of Goals Attained
Minnesota Internship Center (MNIC)	69.2%
Minnesota Math & Science Academy (MMSA)	71.4%
The Minnesota Online High School (MNOHS)	61.5%
Minnesota Transitions Charter School (MTCS)	57.1%
Ubah Academy (UA)	71.4%

Conclusion

The two-year pilot of the Equity Framework has demonstrated that a more holistic, community-informed approach to accountability can both honor the lived experiences of students and families and provide meaningful data to guide continuous improvement.

Throughout the pilot, schools and PUC-OPCS collaborated to refine tools, improve communication, and ensure the framework is practical, rigorous, and relevant. The lessons learned such as the need for culturally responsive data collection methods, streamlined surveys, and earlier feedback cycles have strengthened both the process and the relationships between schools and the authorizer. These adjustments will enhance the ongoing implementation of the Equity Framework and ensure it continues to serve as a dynamic tool for equity-driven improvement.

As this report fulfills the legislative requirement outlined in H.F.No. 2497, Chapter 55, Article 2, Section 62, it also points toward the future of accountability in Minnesota. PUC-OPCS plans to continue refining and scaling the Equity Framework, including developing a K–8 version and exploring opportunities for broader collaboration with the Minnesota Department of Education and other authorizers. The lessons learned from this pilot will inform not only the ongoing work of PUC-OPCS but also the state's broader conversation about how to measure what truly matters in education.

PUC-OPCS remains committed to advancing this work in partnership with schools, families, and the Minnesota Department of Education. The success of the pilot confirms that accountability systems can be both just and effective, empowering schools to reflect the strengths of their communities while fostering academic, social, and emotional growth for every student. As we look ahead, PUC-OPCS will continue to use the Equity Framework to illuminate what is working, identify areas for support, and uphold our shared responsibility to ensure that all students thrive in schools that affirm their identities, nurture their potential, and prepare them for a just and meaningful future.