



Deborah McKnight **Special Education Equity Transformation Specialist**

Deborah McKnight is more than passionate about Special Education. A special educator for over 30 years, she believes in the power of strong and equitable instructional environments to change lives. Upon moving to the US Virgin Islands from her native New York and implementing the first special education model of its kind on the island of St. John she witnessed this firsthand. There she was voted “Best Teacher” by the community and the *Virgin Islands Daily News* because of her ability to positively impact the lives of her students.

She has carried these ideals as an administrator in San Francisco Unified School District where she served as their Executive Director of Special Education Services for 8 years. As the Executive Director she led the district to be the highest scoring large urban school district in California for students with disabilities in both English Language Arts and Math for two consecutive years. San Francisco was the only large urban school district in California to make its AYP proficiency targets for both English Language Arts and Math for students with disabilities in 2007. She designed and taught a highly praised class at San Francisco State University for teachers entitled “*The Child in the Urban Classroom*,” centering the instruction on race and teacher expectations in order to present a counter narrative for students of color.

In 2008, Ms. McKnight began working as an independent consultant and has worked with a variety of school districts to transform change at the district and classroom level. While working in Compton, California their state test scores for students with disabilities increased 82 points in 2010; the largest increase to date. Also in 2010, she began working with the Pacific Educational Group and developed a leadership domain entitled “*Moving from Compliance to Equity and Excellence*,” operating on the premise that the dramatic and persistent racial disproportionality in special education is both an indicator and outcome of inequitable practices. Most recently, in collaboration with PEG Director, Luis Versalles, the domain has been expanded to critically examine and address the unique needs of students with disabilities and English language learners and the impact of race and institutionalized racism on access to culturally relevant, inclusive learning environments for these two student groups. This leadership domain is referred to as SpELL (Special Education/ English Language Learners).

What calls me to do this work?

“Not everything that is faced can be changed but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”

— James Baldwin

This work is both personal and professional for me. Race has been used to sort and classify students since Brown vs. Board of Education and when I was growing up in New York it was either college track or vocational track in high school. I often think back to my oldest brother, when the White guidance counselor insisted he be placed in the vocation track. He wouldn't be the doctor he is today if my mother allowed this for her brilliant Black son and insisted he be placed in the college readiness courses. Tracking has since given way to our current special education system for too many students of color: racial segregation under the guise of ability and “disability.”