

# **A Tale of Two Evanstons?**

## **A Call for Racial Equity at Evanston Public Library**

While many are proud to live in Evanston, we continue to hear, especially by Latinx and African American residents, that there are “two Evanstons,” one white, the other black/brown.

There's an observable history of institutionalized racism in our community, as there is with most communities. We need to examine that history and commit to the change needed to stop replicating patterns of loss, lack, and inequity. To be committed to equity means looking at how to direct resources to those most in need and not to the most systemically privileged neighborhoods.

*Evanston Township High School and District 65 have been addressing the issue of equity in those institutions in important ways. Unfortunately, Evanston Public Library has been lagging behind. It is imperative that EPL conduct an intentional, direct, and public racial-equity audit as part of its library's strategic plan.*

### **Q: What exactly is a racial equity plan and how would it be helpful?**

A: Library board and staff would develop a plan after an audit that examines service deficits and how different racial and ethnic groups are affected by each of the library's proposed actions or decisions. It may work to prevent institutional racism and to articulate new ways to remedy inequities that have been in place for many years. The plan would also show our community that an institution is seriously committed to addressing disparities and is holding itself accountable.

### **Q: What issues should the library's racial equity plan address?**

A: The library should examine all decisions, budgeting and policies in terms of becoming more equitable from its branch locations and access, collections, staffing, salaries, services, community engagement, leadership structures, and programs.

### **Q: How can the library achieve equity in its collections?**

A: Ideally content, authors, and programs should reflect the diversity of our community. That includes the assurance that diverse materials are available in all formats, including electronic, audio, and print. Evanston Public Library, like many other libraries, is spending more of its budget on digital books, which feature an infinitesimal percentage of titles by and about African Americans and Latinxs. The library should also consider and make decisions with an acknowledgement that eliminating conventional print resources may have a disparate impact on lower income families who are less likely to have broadband internet access.

The reality is that publishing, especially children's publishing, is not reflective of our country's racial and ethnic diversity. But when there isn't a large selection, the library needs to at least make sure it has enough copies of the books that are available, so that they're on the shelves when Latinx or African American patrons visit the library.

**Q: How should the library address equity in its staffing?**

A: The library, like the schools, needs to intentionally hire and retain staff who aren't white. At the moment, the library has a very low percentage of staff of color and that sends a message to the community, intentionally or not. The EPL board should engage, recognize, and create a plan to diversify and understand why it will be beneficial to do so. They must be intentional about recruitment for new staff, advertising, and goal setting for hiring, mentoring, and retaining people of color. The library and the community will directly benefit from establishing mentorship and develop African American and Latinx paraprofessional and clerical staff, and prepare them for professional and managerial positions.

**Q: What about the library branches?**

A: Branches must be accessible and easy to get to, regardless of race or income. Some families who live in the 5th ward and most of West Evanston do not have easy access to a library. We need to ask, how physically close are African Americans, Latinxs and low-income residents to a library location?

The branches have long been a contentious issue in Evanston, largely because there are two locations (at Main and Chicago and on Central Street in Northwest Evanston) that cater to fairly well-off, and in the case of North branch, extremely well-off, residents. Meanwhile, there are no public library locations close to higher-poverty areas. The library plans to open a branch in the Robert Crown Center, and offers limited programming at Fleetwood-Jourdain and Gibbs-Morrison in the 5th ward. These are positive steps, but they do not address overall systemic, sustainable equity.

**Q: How should the library begin to address all these issues?**

A: Solutions aren't quick or easy. They require the time and commitment to adapt to the documented needs of our community. An equity audit and a subsequent plan including community stakeholders will encourage the library board and staff to think beyond their own experience, normalize accountability, and act with clear intention. Meaningful change must be embedded and embodied in practice, not slogans.

**Contact the Evanston Public Library Board:** [www.epl.org/essentials/board-of-trustees](http://www.epl.org/essentials/board-of-trustees)