

ADDRESSING EDUCATIONAL EQUITY

As educators tackle the complex issues around creating and sustaining schools that meet the needs of each student, the dimensions of equity must be understood in order to be effectively implemented. With a social justice lens, educators have a moral obligation to provide multiple pathways for success not just in school, but in life for every student. Equity is all about fairness and there is nothing more unfair than to treat people who are diverse in needs, talents, life experiences and historical legacies, all exactly the same. As a society that promotes a belief in equality with respect for all, there must first be equity to enable each person to have access, opportunity and support before true acceptance and inclusion can be achieved.

“Inequities occur when biased or unfair policies, programs, practices, or situations contribute to a lack of equality in educational performance results and outcomes.” (edglossary.com) Therefore, all of us working toward educational equity must find ways to actively address the predictability of who will be successful based on any identity factors and historical barriers or sources of privilege. It means identifying and dismantling the dominant culture practices that serve to maintain the status quo and reproduce practices that negatively impact vulnerable and marginalized students. Equity work needs to focus on assets not deficits as educators look for and nurture the talents, gifts and interests of every student. Schools that truly nurture and support each student, shift communities so that they benefit from these changes as we become more inclusive, interdependent, supportive, connected and appreciative of diversity.

Generally, education equity reform efforts have been reactive. They seek to address inequities identified through test scores or other sources of data. They are ineffective because they look at the symptoms not the root causes and make little change to the beliefs and behaviors that created the policies and practices that lead to disparities among different groups. We tinker with the ways things are and do not address the inherent barriers and hindrances within the structures and culture of our educational system. Educators see the deficits within students, families and communities and apply a “fix-them” mentality that does not honor or respect individuals in all aspects of their essence. Educators’ propensity to try to “fix” students leads to perpetuation of the dominant culture and assimilation into that dominant culture as the only way for students to “fit-in” and succeed. “While countless



advancements in civil rights have arguable led to greater equality, many would contend that diminished societal inequity, or a greater understanding or awareness of inequity does not mean that inequities no longer exist.” (Edgossary.com)

Instead, educational equity needs to be proactive and pervasive in how we think and act in all areas of schooling. Equity is a belief and a stance one takes to close the gap between the espoused goals of public education and the reality of the actions and outcomes within schools. Before we ask ourselves: What should I do? each educator must confront Who am I? and How will I be in every interaction I have? It means embracing social justice leadership. Those working toward equity and social justice must take on issues of “race, class, gender identity, disability, sexual orientation and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States central to their advocacy, leadership practice and vision. This definition centers on addressing and eliminating marginalization in schools” (Theoharis 2007, 223)

Equity work is complex and challenging but should not be considered hard. It is work that reaps amazing results. Being an equity leader allows us to look at ourselves in the mirror and surface conscious and unconscious biases that get in the way of understanding and connecting with students. It means holding self-compassion and grace as we acknowledge our intentional and unintentional actions that have harmful impact. It means acknowledging and learning from our imperfections as humans and striving to be better and more loving next time. Developing our equity lens enables us to clearly see the students and families that we serve in all of their wonderfulness. For that reason, educational equity work is truly a gift not only to others, but to ourselves as we realize, at least in part, our moral imperative to bring about meaningful change to the systems in which we work.

Equity-focused educators employ a variety of frames of thinking into their work. They address the needs of the whole-person by attending to not only cognitive development, but social, emotional and cultural connectiveness. Through the lens of multi-culturalism, there is a strong focus on respecting and celebrating diversity, communicating and interacting across differences and exposing all students to diverse curriculum and multiple perspectives. Through the lens of social justice, equity-minded educators guide students to explore diverse life-experiences, historical and current issues of oppression and privilege, and engage in raising consciousness around inequity in everyday social, environmental, economic and political aspects of life. A focus on social justice empowers students and staff to interrupt and address patterns of inequities. Educators must know how to employ culturally responsive teaching and learning that focuses on facilitating multiple pathways to learning and methods for demonstrating learning. There must be clear focus on variety and choice in improving the learning capacity of diverse students who have been marginalized. It means focusing on both



affective and cognitive learning through relevant and rigorous curriculum and instruction. Being culturally responsive means building resilience and positive mindsets by pushing back on dominant narratives about historically and currently marginalized people. (Z. Hammond 2016) It means helping members of the dominant culture see the significance and positive impact of diversity and inclusion. Multicultural, social justice and cultural responsive self-development is an essential aspect of equity education for dominant-culture students as well. “Through the social construction of a more multifaceted self, students can begin to critically examine personal and historical perspectives and practices underlying the opportunity gap between dominant and dominated sociocultural groups.” (Houser 1999) It affords them the opportunity to address the uncomfortable, unequal, ineffective prejudicial conditions and relationships that not only harm individuals, but society. Racism, Sexism, Classism, Ableism, Heterosexism, Religious Intolerance etc. are, by their very nature, the products of design and therefore with courage and conviction they need no longer function in our schools and communities. We can redesign how we treat one another.

To many leaders, the challenge of taking on and undoing inequities in schools seems daunting and too complex to address in meaningful ways. However, when we embrace the concepts of diversity, inclusion and equity as lens through which we view all decisions and situations we are better prepared to look at the variety of ways that inequities play out in schools. A focus on equity does not come with a position or title. It is a way of being that demonstrates care and concern for making a difference by challenging the status quo. Often, we begin equity work in schools by looking at disaggregated data from the standardized assessments and practices we currently use to report learning performance. This Data Approach can stall meaningful action because it usually involves either admiring gains or loathing lack of achievement without significant understanding of causes or effective systemic changes. Too often addressing equity has either used a Hammer Approach that shames and blames educators thereby closing them off from creative and inspired actions. The “Kumbaya Approach” also does not work well. Just celebrating and accepting everyone where they are and providing encouragement is not enough. There is real danger in a culture of low expectations.

The Oregon Center for Educational Equity believes that through active love, educators must look deeply at beliefs, behaviors, practices, policies, structures, systems and culture ---- investigating how they impact ourselves and others to understand who benefits and who is harmed. As bell hooks says, “To begin by always thinking of love as an action rather than a feeling is one way in which anyone using the word in this manner automatically assumes accountability and responsibility.” Responsibility is the ability to respond and being



accountable for one's choice to either act or not take action. Active love prompts educators to look at the contributing factors and intentional and unintentional consequences of a variety of different types of gaps and inequities. Gaps represent the impact of conscious and unconscious inequitable policies and practices that create barriers and disparities in how systems treat and support different people. There are also forms of inequity that stem from broader beliefs and behaviors that represent underlying norms and assumptions that play out in schools and communities in a variety of ways. These gaps and inequities are evident in the culture, systems and structures that perpetuate barriers to realizing the goals of honoring diversity, providing inclusion of all, ensuring fair equitable treatment and realizing social justice. To bring about meaningful change, it is essential to investigate and address educational equity through understanding of multiple, interconnected gaps and inequities.

Educational Equity Gaps:

“Achievement Gap” is often the term used to point out the significant, persistent and predictable disparities in academic performance based on standardized assessment measures by groups of students who share characteristics like racial and socio-economic status.

“Opportunity Gap” is closely aligned with the achievement gap. An “Opportunity Gap” exists when “race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, English proficiency, community wealth, familial situations, or other factors contribute to or perpetuate lower educational aspirations, achievement, and attainment for certain groups of students.” (edglossary.com) It is often a result of the unequal or inequitable distribution of resources to meet the needs of individual students especially those who have been historically marginalized by the dominant culture.

“Access Gap” exists through the policies and practices within schools that limit or block certain students from taking full advantage of all courses, programs or activities that schools provide. To address the Access Gap generally requires schools to provide additional services and/or remove the actual or potential barriers that prevent some students from key learning situations. (edglossary.com)

“Behavior Management Gap” Explicit and implicit bias and negative stereotypes cause disparities in the range of responses leading to unfair and often unwarranted disciplinary actions. For students, especially those who experience marginalization, exclusion, “othering” and oppression, discipline practices often lead to anxiety, anger, disengagement, increased absenteeism and potential for dropping out (being PUSHED-OUT). Behavior management actions too often stem from race and gender-based beliefs around appropriateness and expectations of students’ attitudes and actions. Teachers’ differing responses to perceived disruptive and/or disrespectful behaviors create disparities in school discipline. Schools need behavior management systems based on relational trust that shift students’ and teachers’ mindsets from rule compliance and punishment to interventions that address social and emotional dynamics of groups and deterioration of student-teacher interactions and relationships.

(NAACP Legal Defense/ Education Fund, 2017)



“Teaching Gap” is often present due to low expectations by teachers of some students. It leads to systems of tracking and ability grouping where students are “instructionally impaired” because they never get the chance to learn essential knowledge and skills necessary for success in schools.

“Learning Gap” describes “the disparity between what a student has actually learned and what he or she was expected to learn at a particular age or grade level.” (edglossary.com) Attendance issues certainly can be a factor. Yet, even students with regular attendance may fail to acquire essential knowledge and skills because they are not taught in ways that effectively engage them in active learning. Without effective interventions, the cumulative effects of Learning Gaps create a system whereby students reaching high school are “pushed out” (not drop out) because they cannot meet the requirements of graduation. Time has run out!

“Grading Gap” Traditional grading systems are inconsistent and inequitable. Two students with identical academic performances get different grades from different teachers. Grading systems need to use formative assessments to provide feedback and guide learning and instruction. Teachers must move away from the unsound practices of averaging and 0-100 scales to use instead 0-4 based specific rubrics and a summative assessment system that reflects the most recent evidence of learning. Restructuring grading to be clear and consistent changes teachers’ beliefs and behaviors around how to support and motivate student learning.

“Worthiness Gap” exists when students internalize the discrimination, marginalization and exclusion that they feel in schools and society in general. When only their deficits are seen and their assets ignored, students believe they are worthless and stupid outsiders. They internalize the negative messages they receive repeatedly in schools. They lack the confidence to try because they believe they will fail or fear they will fail. This fear may lead to an impairment of their performance.

Looking at these different gaps within the educational system is an important way to address issues related to institutional inequity. There are also several different lens through which we can view students and families to determine how best to support and address both individual and groups of students in our quest for excellent and equitable public schools for every student and community.



FORMS OF INEQUITY

Societal Inequity: It means acknowledging and addressing the historical legacy and current realities of bias, prejudice and discrimination based on race, ethnicity, language, gender identity, sexual orientation, physical/cognitive abilities, etc.. There must be attention to understanding and addressing the cumulative effects of overt and covert assaults, insults and invalidations that create and sustain hostile environments for students who do not feel they fit in with the dominant culture.

Socio-Economic Inequity: Family resources as well as school resources are not distributed equally. With many neighborhood schools reflecting segregated housing and communities based on wealth, there are both school-wide and individual concerns around economic privilege and struggle.

Cultural Inequity: Schools are institutions created based on dominant culture beliefs, values and experiences. They have changed little as more diverse students have come to attend. The norms, customs, social expectations, and pathways to success may not be known or understood. Often there can be cultural conflict and forced assimilation into the dominant culture ways as the only avenue to success. Many students must learn to “code switch” to try to maintain their own cultural identity and still function within the school setting.

Familial Inequity: Supportive families and encouraging caring adults are important in every student’s life. Some children have a wealth of positive support, while others find themselves in challenging situations lacking the nurturing they deserve. Too often assumptions are made about students and families from lower socio-economic levels or diverse cultures around the levels of familial support. Schools must provide information and support so that the significant adults in students’ lives have what they need to support students. Schools must also continue to take on responsibility for advocating for and providing necessary interventions for students who are not in supportive family settings.

Linguistic Inequity: Students who are not yet proficient in the English language will face challenges in schools especially in English-only environments and where there is little support for accessing learning through multiple modalities. Most students get the message early, in Kindergarten, that speaking a language other than English is negative. In the 21st century, schools need to shift toward valuing multi-lingualism and not always treating English Language Learners as if they have only a deficit and not an asset.

Programmatic Inequity: School programs may be structured in ways that are unfair and contribute to inequitable educational experiences. Educators must look at and deal with the disproportionate representation of students of color, especially boys in disciplinary actions. Over-identification of some groups in Special Education and a culture of low expectations often creates inequalities that must be addressed. Incentives, pre-requisites, traditions and in-group behaviors often limit access to programs for some students while encouraging others.



Staffing Inequity: Most schools are adult-centered even though they proprot to be student-centered. Staff often choose to work at schools that reflect a higher socio-economic community and use the concept of seniority to ensure that they work with students who are compliant and achieving academically. The schools with the highest needs students often have high turn-over rates. Matching the most effective teachers with the students who need the best our educational systems have to offer is too often not the norm.

Instructional Inequity: Especially in an age of standardization and fidelity to a pre-packaged curriculum, many students do not learn via relevant and rigorous curriculum and instruction. Diverse students need multiple-pathways to learn and demonstrate their learning. Teachers also must understand that they teach who they are before they ever teach the subject area information. Teachers must be prepared to be culturally responsive to the diverse students in their classes. It is more about how you are in your interactions with students and how you teach rather than what you teach.

Assessment Inequity: Beyond the inherent biases and flaws in test design, assessment continues to be a sorting process far more than an effective reporting and supporting process. Students should not only have multiple pathways to learning and achieving essential outcomes, but they should be able to employ a variety to means for showing what they know and can do. Grading and assessment systems can create failure and often provide little focus on how to help students learn and grow.

By understanding the nature of the various gaps and exploring different sources of inequities, educators can have significant influence within their spheres of influence. When equity is internalized as a key non-negotiable aspect of every action and decision within each of our realms, we can have impact directly on the students we serve and bring the needed, essential change to the systems in which we work.

Here in Oregon, the Eugene 4J School District’s Equity Committee has provided us with a Decision-Making Tool that will help guide us to stop and ask questions at all levels of our work to address equity to bring about necessary change.

A belief in and educational equity change the beliefs,

EQUITY DECISION-MAKING TOOL

commitment to enables each of us to behaviors, practices,

policies and programs that currently do not support each student to learn and grow. It is time that schools transform into places where there are many ways for students to learn and succeed. We must work to provide schools where all educators embrace diversity and inclusion as they work diligently to change our educational system into a places where each student is supported to progress on a pathway to success.



In every decision we make, it is important for us to consider equity and the impact on all students and families, especially those in underserved demographic groups and protected classes. Some key questions to ask about any proposed change:

STAKEHOLDERS: Who are the different groups of people _____ would affect? How have they been meaningfully engaged? Who has been missed?

PURPOSE: What are we trying to achieve with _____? How would it reduce disparities and advance equity and inclusion? Are there better ways to do this?

INEQUITIES: Would _____ affect different groups differently? If so, in what ways? If we don't know, how could we find out?

NEGATIVE EFFECTS: How could _____ be bad for different groups? What could we do to prevent or reduce negative effects and unintended consequences?

POSITIVE EFFECTS: How would _____ be good for different groups? What could we change or add to increase positive effects on equity and inclusion?

ROOT CAUSES: Why would _____ affect some groups unequally? What could _____ do to address these root causes?

SUSTAINABILITY: Is _____ realistic and adequately funded? Does it have what it needs to be successful?

EVALUATION: How do we measure _____'s success? How can we share that information with people?

Revised version from Applied Research Center

Using this Equity Decision-Making Tool is not just a simple process of asking the above questions when proceeding through the established ways of planning courses of action. To



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address equity, educators need to bring equity forward as a prime objective in a deliberate and focused way. It starts with **Identifying a Choice Option**; recognizing opportunities to make or influence a decision to achieve better equitable outcomes. The process also involves **Assessing Impacts**, focusing on how decisions and actions may unintentionally reinforce bias, barriers or inequities. **Generating Options** is essential as educators look for a variety of alternative action options that could produce better, more equitable outcomes. When **Deciding Action**, attend to which option(s) will generate the most leverage, momentum and gain towards advancing equity and inclusion. Ultimately to achieve equity, organizations and individuals must work on **Changing Habits**. There must be reminders and “equity primes” structured into the routine practices and protocols to make equity an ongoing priority and habit. Relationships, supports, incentives and accountability measures must be in place to sustain and monitor progress toward success indicators of the desired equity goals. Terry Keleher: 2012.

Part of an effective equity approach to decision-making is to ensure that there is on-going analysis of current situations and issues, an opportunity to develop and advance proposed changes and the chance to evaluate current proposals from a variety of perspectives. These deliberations should be used to anticipate, assess and prevent potential adverse consequences of proposed action on diverse (racial and other) groups. These questions and an equity-based decision-making process should not stall actions or be used to avoid making decisions. Instead, they can be helpful in moving forward toward significant actions. This process is fluid and adjustments will come as more information is learned and progress is monitored. These Equity Decision-Making Tools are designed to help guide the process because there is urgency and the real need to make significant changes in education to provide equitable and inclusionary education for each student.

Throughout the process there are several key questions to consider:

Analyzing Current Problems: What are the adverse effects that different disadvantaged and marginalized communities experience under current conditions, policies, practices and expenditures? What are the causes or contributing factors that produce or perpetuate these inequities? What data, evidence or testimony is available or can be collected to demonstrate the racial (or other) inequities, adverse effects, contributing causes, trends and current needs?

Developing and Advancing Proposed Changes: What steps can insure public input and participation by the most disadvantaged communities and stakeholders in developing proposed policies and budgets? What new policies, programs, funding streams are needed to address the needs and inequities that different underserved and marginalized communities face? What changes in existing policies, programs, budgets would reduce inequities? What new



opportunities can be created to enhance equity, inclusion and unity? What specific equitable outcomes will this action achieve and what are the success indicators? How can these proposed changes be effectively designed in such a way to make them most viable, enforceable and sustainable.

Evaluating Current Proposals: Will the proposal reduce, limit or eliminate programs that are vital to or disproportionately needed by different disadvantaged, underserved or marginalized (racial/ethnic or other) communities? Will the proposal increase, expand or create programs that are vital to or disproportionately needed by different disadvantaged, underserved or marginalized communities? Will the proposal miss or create opportunities to benefit and unify people across different communities? Will there be enough money allocated to address real (racial or other) inequities with fair sustainable revenue streams? Will there be adequate provisions to ensure success and fairness, including sufficient public participation by stakeholders in development, implementation and evaluation? What modifications in the proposal are needed to maximize (racial or other) equity and inclusion?

A comprehensive approach to Equity Decision-Making strives to identify and engage **diverse stakeholders**, identify **root causes** and document inequities, **clarify the purpose** of planned actions, consider potential **adverse effects** while **advancing the equitable impacts**, examining **alternatives** for improvements, ensuring **viability and sustainability** with a system for monitoring **success indicators and progress benchmarks**. Terry Keleher: 2009.

A belief in and commitment to educational equity enables each of us to change the beliefs, behaviors, practices, policies and programs that currently do not support each student to learn and grow. It is time that schools transform into places where there are many ways for students to thrive. We must work to provide schools where all educators embrace diversity and inclusion as they work diligently to change our educational system into places where each student is served equitably and supported to progress on a pathway to success.

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