The Foundation for Education Equity Systems Change

Equity in education is realized when the achievement of all students is raised while narrowing the gaps between the highest- and lowest-performing students; and when both predictability of outcomes by race and racial disproportionality are eliminated.¹
INTRODUCTION

Over the past several years, there has been much reflection, examination, and discussion around issues of equity in the education system—both at a national and local level. The pandemic and its impact exacerbated existing systemic inequities and laid bare the educational disparities that many students experience every day. This infographic is based on REL West’s Equity in Action project which supported district teams in addressing issues of racial inequity within their district. It outlines foundational steps that a district can take as they begin an equity improvement process.

Advancing equity in the education system includes addressing long-standing disparities that minoritized students and communities face in achieving equitable education opportunities. Through work with several partners, REL West heard from multiple district leaders who wanted more information and guidance about asset-based strategies for reshaping their district systems and structures to promote equitable learning environments. Specifically, these districts wanted to know how to identify and change existing policies and practices that reinforce inequities, especially those that are barriers to success for Black and Latinx students and their families. They wanted to enact change so that Black and Latinx members of their school community would feel a greater sense of belonging and believe that their cultural identities are valued as assets and strengths.

The Equity in Action project was developed in response to these requests. Five California school districts who were committed to racial equity change participated in the project. Centering racial equity is important because developing policies, practices, and supporting beliefs about racial equity within a school system contributes to a student’s path to prosocial identity and improved student social and academic outcomes. The foundational activities shared in this infographic are some of the initial steps the five districts in the Equity in Action project took.

Because the policies, practices, and beliefs that have perpetuated systems of racial inequities are often deeply embedded in educational systems, racial equity systems change is complex and challenging. It requires a solid foundation and deep commitment to change from those doing the work. In preparation for a district to take on a racial equity improvement process, the district should first assemble a racially diverse District Equity Team, and then prepare for the work ahead by building an equity mindset and understanding the implications of bias-based beliefs and understanding the community context.

**Step 1**
Assemble a racially diverse District Equity Team.

**Step 2**
Build an equity mindset and understand the implications of bias-based beliefs.

**Step 3**
Understand the community context.

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**ASSEMBLE A DISTRICT EQUITY TEAM**

The first step to prepare for equity improvement is to build a District Equity Team. The goal is to assemble a broad, racially diverse district team of education partners to work together on a particular focus area to advance equity.

A District Equity Team develops members’ capacity to lead equity-focused initiatives that are intended to change inequitable district policies and shape adult practices. A strong District Equity Team can include one or more individuals from the following groups: teachers, family or other caregivers, executive-level representatives, school administrators, equity directors (or similar leaders focused on equity issues), district staff, behavioral health personnel, or community representatives.

Each of these individuals will contribute their lived and professional experiences and perspectives that can change policies to be more aligned with the district’s racial equity goals.

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**Questions for District Leadership to Consider**

When thinking about who should join a District Equity Team, district leadership should consider the following to ensure commitment to the purpose of the team:

- Do they represent the local education community in terms of race, ethnicity, language, religion, and other identities?
- Do they represent the school community across district departments, grade spans, and content areas?
- Are they interested in and curious about working on issues of equity?
- Are they willing to self-examine and build their own critical consciousness?
- Are they willing to commit to this long-term, challenging work?
Once the District Equity Team is established, it is important that the group builds a shared understanding and language about equity mindsets and how they are manifested, both within the Equity Team and in the district or school community. An equity mindset consists of a set of equity-focused/aligned beliefs, dispositions, and values practitioners hold. Those with an equity mindset hold thoughts and beliefs that drive equitable actions, practices, and habits that contribute to a narrowed gap between highest- and lowest-performing students and mitigate racial predictability.

Adopting an equity stance, which refers to the district’s commitment to equity in education, is needed in order to replace bias-based beliefs with an equity mindset. To that end, the team should work on understanding and assessing expressions of explicit and implicit biases.

**Explicit Bias** - Overt or covert conscious beliefs that assume superiority over others and/or attribute desirable traits to some but not others.

**Implicit Bias** - Refers to the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner.

Through reflection, a District Equity Team should consider how explicit and implicit biases are present in their own belief systems as well as identify the ways bias-based beliefs are present and have shaped the policies and practices that have perpetuated racial inequities. Later, as part of the change process, they can identify what systemic factors are contributing to these beliefs and inequities and develop ways to reframe those beliefs and biased norms.

For more information about surfacing and addressing bias-based beliefs in education communities, see, for example:

- **Solving Disproportionality and Achieving Equity: A Leader’s Guide to Using Data to Change Hearts and Minds** [https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED573400](https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED573400)
- **Confronting Bias and Building Trust: Strategies to Create Inclusive Environments for Black Teachers** [https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/Products/Event/1304](https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/Products/Event/1304)
- **The Content, Predictive Power, and Potential Bias in Five Widely Used Teacher Observation Instruments** [https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/Products/Publication/3788](https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/Products/Publication/3788)
- **Equity in Action Resource: Bias-Based Beliefs Reflection** [https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/Products/Region/west/Resource/100602](https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/Products/Region/west/Resource/100602)

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7 USC Center for Urban Education. (n.d.). *Equity mindedness*. Retrieved from [https://cue.usc.edu/equity/equity-mindedness/#:~:text=The%20term%20%E2%80%9CEquity%20Mindedness%E2%80%9D%20is%20the%20process%20of%20equity%20in%20student%20outcomes](https://cue.usc.edu/equity/equity-mindedness/#:~:text=The%20term%20%E2%80%9CEquity%20Mindedness%E2%80%9D%20is%20the%20process%20of%20equity%20in%20student%20outcomes)


Before engaging in the deep work of racial equity systems change, the Equity Team should develop a common understanding of the community, students, and families on whose behalf they are working. Knowing the community context and understanding the lived experience of the students and families will help ensure the District Equity Team will take an asset-based approach as they identify root causes and plan for systems change.

**Key Activities to Understand the Local Context**

- Conducting asset mapping in the community and identifying people and organizations that support students and families
- Conducting focused interviews with individuals and families representing different racial groups within the community
- Evaluating district commitments to racial equity as evidenced by external and public-facing communications
- Understanding the economic and demographic landscape through data analysis for labor statistics, access to technology, health and human services indicators, and education achievement
- Analyzing staff, student, and family survey data
- Conducting an equity audit to identify areas of focus

When these three foundational steps have been taken—forming a District Equity Team, investigating bias-based beliefs, and understanding the local context—the district is well prepared to take on the challenging but necessary work of addressing racial inequity in policy, practice, and beliefs.

*Content source: [https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/Products/Region/west/Event/100616](https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/Products/Region/west/Event/100616)*

*Much of the information shared in this infographic is drawn from the REL West project, “Equity in Action.” For more information on the Equity in Action project, including several resources, please see: [https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/Products/Blog/100235](https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/Products/Blog/100235)*

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