

EDUCATION WEEK

6 Ways District Leaders Can Build Racial Equity

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If the coronavirus pandemic placed issues of racial equity to the front burner, the historic weeks of protest have brought the topic to a rolling boil.

When the pandemic struck, forcing a haphazard shift to online learning, many children in low-income families—disproportionately black, Hispanic, and American Indian—were left behind because they don't have access to computers or high-speed internet.

Then came the death of George Floyd in police custody, forcing anguished conversations about racism in law enforcement—and society at large.

Some districts have responded by reaffirming their commitment to racial equity, or by pledging to evaluate their teaching for bias. Others have severed ties with local police departments that have provided security in schools.

But those who work to promote equity in schools see an opportunity to attack the deeper-rooted structures in school that perpetuate racial bias—if leaders are willing to see opportunity in the turmoil.

Education Week asked six district leaders to share specific practices and processes they use in their school systems to promote equity. A common thread? All of them require deep, sometimes difficult reflection on district and school practices and assumptions that might otherwise go unexamined.

"The floodlights are on the education system," said Stephanie Hawley, the chief equity officer for Austin, Texas, public schools. "I hope we look and say that we need to blow this thing open."

1.) Define the Terms

In Omaha, Neb., the work has started at the beginning—with a common definition of terms.

Barry Thomas, the district's director of equity and diversity, has been in his position since March 2019. He saw one of his first goals as ensuring that district leaders have a common definition of educational equity and the district's goals in promoting it.

A committee of equity-minded educators and community members “wrestled for a good four months about our definition of education equity,” Thomas said. In November, he presented the wording to the district’s leadership team.

Omaha’s exact language isn’t yet ready to share, but the importance of the exercise was creating a set of common themes that apply to anyone in the school district, no matter where they work, Thomas said.

“These definitions have got to be applicable to classroom teachers, to school nurses, to bus drivers,” Thomas said. “Equity is everywhere. We’ve got to make sure everyone can see this language in all the work that we do in our district.”

2.) Draw on Community Expertise

The Akron, Ohio, district has enlisted the help of community leaders for a deep self-evaluation.

The district’s school board made news earlier this month when it declared racism a “public health crisis that adversely impacts our students, our families, and our community” and recommitted itself to racial equity in many forms.

But where to start? To dig deep into its own practices, the district enlisted the support of the Greater Akron Chamber of Commerce, which is helping other community businesses that want to examine their equity practices.

“We have uncovered areas where there is work to be done in every category,” said Carla Chapman, the district’s director of community relations and diversity, equity, and inclusion.

This analysis is something that the district could have done on its own, but “the power of our relationship is the diversity in thought and expertise that we have access to” through that partnership, she said.

One issue the analysis raised is faced by many school districts—the district needs to work hard on recruiting, retaining, developing, and advancing a diverse workforce. But the evaluation also raised another point that is not often spoken about: how Akron Public Schools functions as a business in the community, and the lack of diversity among the contractors that it uses for goods and services.

“We don’t often look at the business side,” Chapman said.

This analysis, completed in March, will guide further action, she said.

“We want to be sure that where there are best practices that exist and we adopt and adapt them to the education environment,” she said.

3.) Rethink Boundaries, Resources, and Staffing

Oklahoma City pressed forward with dramatic, districtwide changes in school boundaries, staffing, and resource allocation. It has invited the community to keep direct tabs on its work.

In March 2019, after more than a year of work, the Oklahoma City district moved forward with a plan it calls “Pathway to Greatness.” It closed 15 schools, reconfigured attendance boundaries, and added resources many schools had never had before, like full-time art, music, and physical education teachers.

But Superintendent Sean McDaniel acknowledged that no change so sweeping could come without hard feelings.

“The reality is that this system has had winners and losers for a long time—some families have had access to schools with enough resources, quality teacher teams, and reasonable class sizes and some families haven’t. Now more students have these, and that means that we all win,” he said, in a January message to families.

But the job of ensuring equity isn’t over. The district has enlisted 80 people, some of whom have been district critics, to monitor the “**dimensions of equity**” identified by the Alliance for Resource Equity.

The **Student Experience and Equity Committee** is still getting started on its work, and the coronavirus pandemic disrupted meetings, said Marsha Herron, the district’s executive director for equity and innovation.

But it has already yielded some results: A subcommittee focused on school financing noticed that many of the schools in the city’s south side, which has a growing Hispanic population, had not applied for a federal program meant to help schools deal with the impact of the pandemic. That disparity might not have been noticed before, Herron said.

“When you think about systems-level thinking, sometimes you’re missing the lower parts of that piece, and often that’s not intentional,” Herron said. The committee is meant to keep the district focused on what it might otherwise miss.

“It’s our job to keep watch,” she said.

4.) Build a Framework to Guide Decisions

In Austin, an equity-focused decision-making matrix gives leaders a framework to follow before decisions are made.

Hawley, the Austin district's chief equity officer, oversees a department of three. There's no way that she and her staff can be at the table every time that important school policies are under discussion.

So her department has rolled out a **framework that leaders can use to guide their work**. It asks whether diverse voices, with actual power, are represented in the process; if the solutions proposed actually work for marginalized populations; and if there are built-in accountability measures so that school leaders can see the true impact of their decisions.

"A tool is not going to solve everything," Hawley said. "But these are the key pieces. If you really want to champion equity in an authentic way you can't just do the parts you like and skip the parts you don't."

Importantly, Hawley said, the framework is intentionally meant to slow down a decision-making process. Ensuring equity is urgent, she said, but a focus on efficiency tends to leave out important perspectives. In contrast, a slow process is often a respectful one.

"People who are being adversely affected have to be at the table to have the conversation about impact and not as an afterthought," she said.

5.) Identify Key Questions to Ask

In Jefferson County, Ky,, district decisions are run through a protocol with equity at the forefront.

The **Racial Equity Analysis Protocol**, or REAP, asks eight questions that must be answered for new practices and policies, and the district is also using it to evaluate policies already in place.

"The questions are used as measures to see and think about, before you make a policy that might marginalize, mute, or mistreat a particular group of students," said John Marshall, the district's chief equity officer.

That might apply to a wide-ranging set of activities, he said. The district has REAP teams in areas such as finance and human resources, he said.

“It’s absolutely one of the best things we are doing,” Marshall said. And it has forced thoughtful conversation. For example, punishing a child too young to drive for being tardy to school—is that an appropriate punishment for the child, or do tardies merit a conversation with parents?

“We are not in a position to be holier than thou or to scold,” Marshall said.

6.) Build an ‘Equity Dashboard’

The Ithaca, N.Y., district created an equity dashboard, allowing the entire community to evaluate its progress.

Ithaca does not force its community to dig deep for data on how its students are doing on a variety of academic measures.

Instead, the district has developed an **equity report card** that allows users to sort various indicators, such as graduation rates, grade-level reading rates, performance on state assessments, suspensions—even the percentage of elementary students who are participating in instrumental music.

But it’s important not to use that data to reinforce the idea that some students are destined for poor performance, said Superintendent Luvelle Brown. Instead, the data offers multiple entry points for inclusion.

Since Brown arrived at the district, it has created graduation coaches and eliminated high school tracking, all with an eye to boosting the district’s graduation rate for its black and Hispanic students.

“Young people were getting very, very different experiences in one of the best districts in the country,” Brown said. The equity report card allows for easy monitoring, and also prods the district to look at a student’s entire educational experience.

“We’re going through every single policy with a culturally responsive, inclusive, and loving lens,” he said.

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