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Note on Racial Equity in School Systems

Overview

While the purpose of U.S. public schooling has yet to be agreed upon, it seems now more than ever that schooling can and should be designed to support young people of all identities and backgrounds as they self-actualize, realize their full potential and participate in a democratic society. It also seems that schools today must focus relentlessly on the social-emotional, academic and healthy identity development of every child. And yet, the full realization of what schooling could offer evades educators despite their best intentions and considerable effort. Even more, disparate academic outcomes on standardized assessments between white students and students of color have persisted despite decades of trying to close both opportunity and achievement gaps, and with few exceptions.[1] It leaves many educators wondering what they can do to dramatically disrupt the reproduction of racialized outcomes in our nation's schools.

District leaders today are seeking ways to develop and strengthen a critical lens for seeing the inequities that exist within their organizations so that they can address barriers to progress and their root causes more directly. This note is designed to support district leaders in doing so. It proposes that to attain high performance on a more holistic set of quantitative and qualitative measures, as described above, a district must ensure that all of its organizational elements --its culture, systems, structures, resources, and stakeholders-- are being utilized to enact a theory of change that is grounded in racial equity and a strategy aligned to a robust vision of excellent teaching that is culturally responsive. Even more, that theory and strategy must be co-constructed with the community it serves. It is not enough to develop a coherent strategy that positively influences the quality of instruction for all students. The district's strategy must be both coherent and equity-focused.

It is also important to note that equity work in school districts is still emergent, often defined narrowly as the work of an "equity office" or "equity officer" or focused primarily on professional development and anti-bias training. There is no blueprint for systemic equity work that permeates every facet of the organizational culture, which means that district leaders across every function must take calculated risks to chart new and unforeseen paths, learn collaboratively as they go, while resisting the temptation to fall back into previous patterns. Ultimately, this note is meant to support district

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leaders in designing new strategies that promote racial equity in school systems so that this work can move from emergent practice to a collection of actionable best practices that substantially change outcomes for students of color in meaningful ways.

Why Racial Equity? Making the Case

This note focuses on racial equity because racial *in*equities are so pervasive in the U.S. and in American schooling. Racial inequity exists when two or more racial groups are not standing on approximately equal footing.[2] Inequities in education are the manifestation of a history of racist policies and practices that privileged whites and excluded and exploited Indigenous people, Black Americans, and other marginalized groups that spans centuries. Our country's racist past, left largely unreconciled, influences every aspect of our present as evidenced by the durability of racial disparities that persist across almost every measure. For example, recent data show that in the U.S.:

- The median net worth of white households is about ten times the median net worth of black households;[3]

- The national poverty rate for Native Americans is 25.4%, 20.8% for Black Americans, and 17.6% for Latinx, while whites have a poverty rate of 8.1%;[4]

- And the incarceration rate for Black Americans is more than five times the rate of whites.[5]

In the U.S. education system:

- Black students are suspended and expelled at a rate three times higher than white students;[6]

- Students of color are consistently under-enrolled in advanced coursework. For example, while only 24% of all 8th graders are enrolled in Algebra I, only 12% of African American students, 13% of Latinx students, and 13% of Native American students are.[7]

- And in 2019, the average 4th grade reading scores on the NAEP continued to show significant disparities between white students and Black students where there was a 27-point difference, Native American students with a 26-point difference, and LatinX students with a 21-point difference.[8]

While it is important for education leaders to share the data, the data has clearly not been enough to make a compelling argument for racial equity. Education leaders need to ground the data in history and bring it to life through stories. That is because these disparities aren't simply "gaps" that educators can close, but evidence of systemic racism and oppression at work. Racism and systemic oppression manifest at the individual, the interpersonal, the institutional, and the structural levels (see **Exhibit 1**). Until school districts can address racial inequities, which are rooted in systemic racism in and beyond school systems, they will continue to persist. When left unexamined, these practices can morph into new forms of oppression that push people of color, as well as other groups like undocumented immigrants, to the margins of society.[9] And while racial inequities affect the oppressed in devastating ways, everyone suffers as a result. Beverly Tatum says that racism is like smog in the air. There are times when the smog is thick and visible, and other times when it is less apparent, but always we are breathing it in.[10] Leaders must employ an intentional racial equity lens if they are to see the organization and its operating environment in new and revealing ways and to unlock ways of working that propel all of their students forward.

Structure of the Note

The PELP Coherence Framework was designed to help district leaders diagnose how their organization currently works, to articulate their implicit or explicit theory of change, and understand how it influences and shapes what occurs in the classroom. In tandem with the *Problem Solving Approach to Designing and Implementing a Strategy to Improve Performance*,[11] which describes how a school district might take what they have learned and put a strategy into action, the PELP Coherence Framework can help districts (1) identify the key elements that support a district-wide improvement strategy, (2) bring those elements into a coherent relationship and (3) guide the actions of people throughout the district in the pursuit of high levels of achievement for all students. This note can be used as a companion to the *Note on the PELP Coherence Framework*[12] by helping district leaders analyze their school district improvement strategy using a racial equity lens.

Source: Public Education Leadership Project (PELP), *PEL-010 Note on the PELP Coherence Framework*, revised 2011.

The equity note begins with a section on key terms. It then lays out several contextual considerations that are unique to leading racial equity work. It then explores the process of creating a theory of change rooted in racial equity. From there, it explores the five strategy dimensions of the PELP Coherence Framework with an equity lens. Each section offers a brief description, an example, and a set of critical questions for districts to consider as a starting point to analyze their own equity practices.

Key Terms

Organizations committed to racial equity often work hard to establish common language to ensure critical understanding. What follows are a few definitions for key practitioner terminology utilized in the remainder of this note, terminology that would be useful for school districts to define as well, if they have not done so already. Having common language can also help to diminish and eliminate the use of "code words" like "urban," which is laden with racial stereotypes, or "diverse," which is often used to avoid talking explicitly about race.

Racism

The word *racism* is often misunderstood and charged with anxiety, represented as a set of explicit negative beliefs or attitudes directed at a group based on their skin color or other characteristics. According to *Dismantling Racism,* however, "Racism is different from racial prejudice, hatred, or discrimination. Racism involves one group having the power to carry out systematic discrimination through the institutional policies and practices of the society and by shaping the cultural beliefs and values that support those racist policies and practices."[13] Ibram X. Kendi says that "a racist policy is any measure that produces or sustains racial inequity between racial groups" inclusive of school district rules, procedures, processes, regulations and guidelines, written and unwritten.[14]

Anti-Racism

Anti-Racism is the act of opposing racism by advocating for changes in political, economic, and social life. According to Ibram X. Kendi, one can only be an anti-racist if one is supporting anti-racist policies and expressing anti-racist ideas; there is no "neutral."[15] If educators are not working to support anti-racist policies and practices, for example, they are working to uphold racist policies and practices. Therefore, from an anti-racist perspective the question is not, "*Did racism take place?*" but "*How is racism taking place?*" because the assumption is that racism is always at play.[16]

Equity

Equity and equality are often confused. In practice, equity means each individual receiving what they need to achieve their full potential.[17] Equality, in practice, means each individual receiving the same resources regardless of context.[18] While by definition both equity and equality strive to promote fairness and justice, equality as a primary strategy can only work if everyone has the same starting point and the same needs. Equitable practices in education are essential as children, their families, and their teachers are situated differently from opportunity.

Racial Equity

Racial equity is the condition that would be achieved if one's racial identity no longer predicted, in a statistical sense, how one fares.[19] Addressing racial inequities requires moving beyond acknowledging gaps or disparities between racial groups and toward creating a deliberate and intentional racial equity strategy aimed at combating racism in all of its forms.[20]

Power

The dictionary describes power as 1) the "ability to do something or act in a particular way" or 2) "the capacity or ability to direct or influence the behavior of others or the course of events."[21] School districts have generally concentrated the power to act in the hands of a few and the power to influence in the hands of those with the most privilege. It is also important to note that power can be wielded in ways that are hard to see, "activated out of public view, by parties or interests who, while influencing community values and manipulating political processes, keep more fundamental issues and resource distributions intentionally out of such public debate."[22] Understanding power and how it is distributed among students, staff, and families is critical for districts committed to leading for racial equity.

Equity Lens

Employing an equity lens means taking on an intentional disposition so as to see the invisible structures, policies, and behaviors that sustain unequal outcomes and interrupt the ways of working that serve, implicitly or explicitly, to perpetuate gaps in opportunity for vulnerable communities.[23] The development of a racial equity strategy requires that leaders employ a racial equity lens.

Critical Questions:

- Does the district have a clear definition of "equity"?

- Does the district use explicit and precise language to describe their core values and beliefs related to racial equity in schools?

Context Considerations

Strategy development for racial equity cannot happen without attention to the environment in which district leaders are operating. This environment, according to the PELP Coherence Framework, includes the federal and state statutes, contracts, funding, and political dynamics that may constrain or influence strategy development and its execution. Leading for equity, however, requires much more than understanding and responding to these environmental factors. Contextual factors that require special consideration, as they will likely influence strategy development and implementation whether it is intentional or not, are the impact of personal identity, local history, and change. Each of these considerations has implications for leadership development as well.

Personal Identity. Exploring personal identity is critical to leading for equity and developing a racial equity strategy. That is because strategy is developed and implemented by people and all people have biases and blind spots. Answering the question "Who am I?" is difficult because identity is multifaceted and evolving. Our identities are composed of multiple personal characteristics such as race, gender, religion, home language, citizenship status and sexual orientation. People lean on different parts of their identities at different times in their lives and in different contexts. Sometimes identity markers instill confidence and sometimes they may provoke hesitation. District leaders must make space to recognize how their racial identities, in particular, influence the way they see and interpret the world. Personal understanding of one's own identity, whether novice or developed, impacts one's understanding of inequality and therefore one's decision making.[24] This is lifelong work and as leaders become more attuned to their own identities, the more likely they are to successfully lead for racial equity.

Local History. Local history plays an important role in interrupting patterns of inequity as school districts are situated within communities. System leaders must know the history of oppression within their community because uncovering a community's history of oppression helps highlight the historic wounds that need healing, wounds that continue to hurt.[25] System leaders also must understand the history of both opportunity and racial justice leadership in their community. Learning the history of opportunity provides insight into where the greatest need for change exists. Gathering insight into the history of leadership for racial and social justice and resistance is essential as those who previously led for racial and social justice should serve as allies and guides. They can help provide direction, support the organization in meaning making of unplanned outcomes, and provide insight into past equity efforts.

Change. Finally, leading for equity means leading change through complexity. Leadership efforts will not always unfold as intended, and surprises will inevitably occur. It is not formulaic, and there

are no "experts" who can tell us the steps. The development and the implementation of a change strategy for racial equity calls for a probe-sense-respond approach which requires patience and reflection.[26] Just as district leaders must understand their own identities and their local history context, they must also understand where they are in the change process and what kind of change they are leading. For example, *Dismantling Racism* posits that there are six non-linear phases of predictable equity work which anticipates turbulence and setbacks: taking stock, establishing shared language and understanding, announcing symbolic change, building relational trust, setting explicit equity goals, and establishing ongoing equity practice.[27] Understanding which stage of change one's organization is experiencing positions district leaders to establish the necessary conditions to guide the organization's learning process of becoming an equitable organization.[28]

Critical Questions:

- To what extent are district leaders doing their own internal racial identity work in order to identify blind spots and stop the perpetuation of racist policies and practices?

- To what extent has the district analyzed the origins of systemic and institutional racism in their community and the ways these inequities are reproduced over time?

- To what extent has the district analyzed past efforts focused on racial justice-- who led them, what happened, and what was learned?

- To what extent does the district know where it is in the change process and how best to move forward as a result?

Theory of Change for Racial Equity

Incorporating an explicit theory of change, that lodges a commitment to racial equity into the goals and mission of the organization, is a pivotal first step for strategy development and a process that should be regularly revisited as a school district puts its theory into action. As described in the *Note on the PELP Coherence Framework*, a theory of change represents the organization's collective beliefs about the causal relationships between focus areas for action and desired outcomes. Some find it useful to think of a theory of change as an "*if…then…*" statement, or a linked series of such statements. A theory of change grounded in racial equity makes explicit the organization's stance as it relates to students of color, both its desired outcomes and the levers it believes it must employ to achieve them, and is developed with the community it serves.

School districts often define their goals, the "then" statement in an explicit theory of change, based solely or predominantly on disaggregated standardized test scores, thereby defining success based on a white dominant norm. School districts committed to racial equity, however, might instead identify a broader set of meaningful outcomes that better represent what matters most to its community and are inclusive of the social emotional, academic, and healthy identity development of every child. Some districts, for example, have engaged their communities in the development of a more robust "graduate vision," a description of the essential dispositions, skills and competencies that a diploma signifies aligned to a local consensus view on the purpose of schooling. While a process like this takes time, such a document could then translate into more meaningful and research-based goals and measures.

In order to determine focus areas for action, the "if" statements in an explicit theory of change, it is critical that a school district grounds itself in a thick, albeit evolving, vision for excellent instruction

that is culturally responsive, a deeper understanding of the conditions necessary to achieve its desired outcomes, and an analysis of systemic problems or barriers that stand in the way. Depending on the context and the results of this analysis, district leaders will ultimately prioritize particular "levers" for improvement. The theory of change in one district might focus heavily at the outset on improving particular aspects of curriculum and instruction so as to ensure better representation of marginalized groups; another theory of change might focus on professional development and capacity building with attention to cultural competence; yet another theory of change might focus on diversity in the workforce or on the distribution of resources aligned to more supportive instructional designs; and another theory of change might focus on collaborative decision making and power sharing with families.

The ways that school districts influence the instructional core, and in turn student outcomes, can vary at the outset and will change as they learn. But district leaders' entry points can and should expand across every dimension of the school district over time so as to ensure that every district function is aligned to its vision of excellent teaching, supportive of the conditions necessary for student success, and dedicated to rooting out policies and practices that reproduce racialized outcomes. Additional thoughts on the process of creating a powerful theory of change for racial equity are shared below.

Articulating a Vision for Excellent Teaching

A district's theory of change, explicit or implicit, influences what happens in the "instructional core," which is why the articulation of a vision for excellent teaching is so important to anchor strategy development. This vision ought to describe essential teacher knowledge and skill, high quality student engagement in their own learning, and academically challenging content. It is especially important for racial equity work because students of color are often withheld such instructional experiences and rendered "school dependent".[29] It is critical that students of color experience a curriculum that is responsive, relevant, compatible, and affirming.[30] Researchers Mary Stone Hanley and George Noblit define culture as "a set of tools, perspectives, and capabilities, which students can deploy in the pursuit of learning".[31] Culture is a vital determinant in how students grasp and make sense of new knowledge because students come into classrooms with predisposed ways of acquiring new information and making sense of the world.[32] For the most part, American schools are shaped by the culture of students from white, middle-class backgrounds.[33] This cultural bias fails to tap into, and utilize, the cultural acumen that students of color bring with them to the classroom. As a result, their socio-emotional growth, identity development and academic achievement are stifled.[34] Many districts utilize already existing frameworks that describe excellent teaching, and it is critical that they adequately reflect best practices in culturally responsive pedagogy and social-emotional learning. It is also important to note that this vision can and should evolve as the district learns more about excellent teaching that is supportive and liberating for students of color. Ultimately, to develop a theory of change and strategy for racial equity, a district's vision for the instructional core could serve as a powerful touchstone that signals that culturally responsive teaching is the norm and not the exception.

Identifying Conditions Necessary for Excellent Teaching and Learning

In order to create a theory of action grounded in racial equity, district leaders must also be able to see the system in which they are functioning and determine how the system is reproducing racialized outcomes. Anthony Bryk and his colleagues assert that social systems are the product of "interactions among the people engaged with it, the tools and materials they have at their disposal, and the processes through which these people and resources come together to do work".[35] It is critical, then, that leaders understand how the organization works. According to Margaret Wheatley and Tim Dalmau, an organization is comprised of its technical ways of working-- its structures, processes, and work

patterns-- and its relational ways of working—its relationships, how information flows or doesn't, and how people within and related to the organization think about themselves and each other.[36] This examination should also include a look at power and how it is distributed. Some districts choose to examine their organization through regular "equity audits" and increasingly districts are adopting "equity policies" that lay out a process for regular policy and procedure review through an equity lens. Systems analysis, however it is implemented, will surface real problems that can inform the development and continual refinement of a theory of change for racial equity.

Identifying Problems and their Root Causes

Conducting a systems analysis will surface barriers to success and problems that might not otherwise have been seen. With a few big problems identified that may be reproducing racialized outcomes, district leaders can move toward conducting an analysis of the root causes of the problems by asking the following question: "Why do we get the results we currently observe?".[37] Tools such as Bryk's *Causal Systems Analysis*, the Fishbone, and the Five Why's Protocol can help to ensure thorough root cause analysis, but without insight from the people experiencing the problems, this root cause analysis may lead to faulty assumptions or surface-level understanding of problems. Ivory Toldson encourages discernment about data sources and what they really measure, thoughtfulness in analysis which includes both analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, and sense making with the real people who are behind the numbers so as to develop compassionate understanding.[38] By conducting a root cause analysis, with perspective from key stakeholders, district leaders will develop a deeper shared understanding of the problems they are trying to solve which will lead to better theories of action and strategies that promote racial equity developed with the communities they serve.

Targeted Universalism- An Approach to Developing an Equity-Focused Theory of Action

A concern that district leaders often share is the extent to which it is politically possible to enact an explicit theory of change focused on racial equity, one that centers the voices and experiences of students of color. john a. powell offers an inclusive approach to developing an equity-centered theory of change that might help. With powell's *Targeted Universalism Framework,* there is a particular focus on the "situatedness of marginal groups" in meeting universal goals, whether structural, cultural, or geographical.[39] Because this approach focuses on all students, while prioritizing the needs of the most marginal based on how they are situated, it has a greater chance of decreasing the perceived losses and racialized critique that often accompanies racially explicit equity initiatives.

Targeted Universalism also necessitates a level of granular analysis of the systems and structures that enable or hinder all groups from achieving universal goals. It acknowledges that different strategies are needed for everyone to be able to benefit from reaching the universal goal and that there needs to be prioritization of the different needs, different strategies, and an equitable—rather than equal—distribution of resources. When developing targeted strategies, it is also important that the target groups are not defined based on specific identity markers such as Black, White, Latinx, Male, Female, etc. Instead, groups should be identified based on their situatedness in relation to the universal goal.[40]

While there are countless ways to devise a strong theory of change for racial equity, it is imperative that leaders develop a single, equity-focused theory of change for the school district, rather than creating a separate equity-focused theory of change that is supplemental or distinct from the organization's primary mission. That is because a district's overarching theory of change provides focus during strategy development, narrowing the range of choices and funneling resources towards its priorities. Racial equity cannot be an afterthought.

Critical Questions:

- Does the district have an explicit theory of change grounded in racial equity?

- Does the theory of change articulate meaningful desired outcomes for students of color, including measures of social-emotional, academic and healthy identity development?

- Does the district have a clear vision for excellent teaching that is culturally responsive?

- To what extent does the district continually analyze its organizational ways of working so as to cultivate the conditions for success?

- To what extent has the district explored quantitative and qualitative data to inform its understanding and definition of the barriers and problems and their root causes?

Equity Across the Dimensions

The *Note on the PELP Coherence Framework* provides clear definitions for each element or dimension of a school district's operational environment that can be utilized to translate ideas into strategies for action. In this section, there is a brief overview of each element and guidance on leveraging this element of school district work with an equity lens and with an eye toward supporting culturally responsive teaching. It is important to note that as much as these interdependent dimensions can be used for positive change, mutually reinforcing systems are also part of the problem. Change in one dimension will ultimately require change across all.

Structures

Structures define how the work of the district gets done. It includes how people are organized, who has responsibility and accountability for results, and who makes or influences decisions. Applying an equity lens to a district's structures means analyzing formal and informal power structures in order to disrupt the dominant culture. Formal power structures exist within organizational charts, job descriptions and positionality. Informal power structures exist in who is involved in decision making, how information gets shared, and who has influence. Decision-making structures, in particular, can be re-designed with an equity lens. It is critical that school districts build intentional ways of working that center the voices of those who are marginalized, use data in ways that humanize, and ultimately make decisions in collaboration with the community it serves.[41] Some districts, for example, are redesigning their school improvement planning processes to ensure stronger data use and collaborative decision making with a focus on student and parent voice. Structural changes, like these, can serve as a powerful lever for racial equity in school districts.

Critical Questions:

- To what extent are roles and responsibilities defined in order to emphasize equity and accountability?

- To what extent are leadership teams diverse?

- To what extent are the perspectives of those most experiencing the problems informing decisions, especially about practices that must be brought to scale?

- To what extent is power shared so that the people most experiencing the problems are making decisions?

Systems

Systems are the processes and procedures through which work gets done. District systems are both formal and informal, and those systems serve the purpose of increasing the district's efficiency and effectiveness in implementing strategy. Examples of systems within a school district include procedures for recruitment, hiring and onboarding teachers, mechanisms for resource allocation, and the processes of measuring school or teacher performance. Human capital systems, for example, can be a powerful lever for racial equity. Every step of the employee life cycle from recruitment, hiring, onboarding, and induction to professional learning, promotion, and evaluation could be re-aligned to a set of competencies that place value on the cultural competence of district educators. Some districts, for example, have begun to build stronger and more diverse pipelines of future teachers in collaboration with university partners, as well as strategies to retain them, like new leadership positions, clear career paths, and affinity group structures. This more diverse pipeline is critical as research shows that diversity matters and that Black students are more likely to graduate high school and go to college when they have at least one Black teacher.[42] Systems changes, like these, improve the conditions that make excellent teaching that is culturally responsive possible.

Critical Questions:

- Are systems for functions such as career development and promotion, compensation, student assignment, resource allocation, organizational learning, and measurement and accountability performed with an eye toward racial equity and culturally responsive teaching?

- To what extent does the organization invest in people and teams' cultural competence and their ability to use a racial equity lens in the design or redesign of their systems?

- Are the people and teams who perform these functions diverse?

Stakeholder Engagement

Stakeholders are people and groups inside and outside the organization who have a legitimate interest in the system and can influence the effectiveness of the strategy. Leading for equity in this element of district work requires centering the voices of marginalized communities and becoming accountable to them. This requires the district to interrogate in what ways they have silenced the voices of marginalized communities and audit existing community partnerships to determine to what extent they are an active representation of equity concerns. A school system might redesign its approach to stakeholder engagement on issues like school boundaries, closures, and capital investments with an eye towards how they enhance or diminish access to excellent teaching aimed at improving student outcomes. Some districts, for example, have been working hard at devising strategies to share power with parents and community through promising approaches like "community" or "full service" schools.[43] The idea here is that school-level stakeholders participate in the development, implementation, documentation, and assessment of a school's strategy for improvement aimed at a vision of excellent teaching that they helped design.

Critical Questions:

- Does the strategy include plans to ensure that stakeholders from marginalized groups have a voice in decision-making and are key participants, and collaborators in, shaping the organizational strategy?

- To what extent were the voices and perspectives of the people experiencing the problem and situated farthest from opportunity involved in the problem-solving process?

- Does the strategy account for community engagement and partnerships that are an active representation of equity concerns and the valuing of diversity within the community?

Resources

It is critical that district leaders use their limited resources, often defined as time, people, and money, to enact a strategy for racial equity. According to Education Resource Strategies, "to meet students' distinct needs with the right combination of supports, school systems need money. But money is not all they need—students also need strong school leadership, engaging instruction, a positive school climate, and more….when schools, systems, and communities work together to mobilize the right combination of resources that create high-quality learning experiences for all students, that is what we call education resource equity."[44] Some districts have not only redesigned their formulas for distribution of school funding based on student characteristics, like poverty, language, and previous performance, but districts have also reconsidered allocation of resources in all of its forms based on instructional designs that are more responsive to student needs. Districts that are committed to racial equity are intentionally allocating their resources more flexibly based on the changing needs of individual students, aligned to a larger strategy and goals, and tethered to a vision for culturally responsive teaching.

Critical Questions:

- Does the strategy include intentional planning regarding the equitable distribution of resources in all of its forms?

- Are resources allocated to bring to life instructional designs that are supportive of a holistic set of student outcomes through culturally responsive teaching?

- How are partnerships formed and external funding raised to support the racial equity strategy?

Culture

Culture is powerful because it is so present and at the same time so very difficult to identify and name.[45] Culture consists of the norms and behaviors in the organization, or put differently, everyone's shared understanding of "how things work around here." Influencing culture, however, is a powerful tool for change. When considering the culture of one's organization through an equity lens, it is critical to understand who benefits from the norms and standards of the organization and who the culture pushes out. When the culture centers whiteness and white ways of working like paternalism, individualism and fear of conflict, white supremacy culture is at play.[46] Some districts are focusing on new initiatives for specific groups of students, like Oakland Unified School District's initiative on

African American Male Achievement and now the African American Female Excellence Initiative in order to foster a culture that lifts up, celebrates, and "inoculates" students of color from messages that might otherwise harm their identity development.[47][48] Organizations must diagnose to what extent they unconsciously use the characteristics of white supremacy as their norms and standards and then actively work to open the door towards new inclusive cultural norms and standards.

Critical Questions:

- In what ways does the strategy support an organizational culture that decenters whiteness and cultivates inclusiveness that celebrates the diversity among staff, students, and families?

- Does the strategy allow for discrimination of all kinds to be confronted systematically in a manner that does not uphold the comfort of the most privileged as a priority?

- To what extent does the strategy address intentional work on relational trust building?

Working Across the Elements

While many school districts are rightfully establishing offices and positions that focus on equity, the idea presented here is that leading and teaching for racial equity is everyone's work and should touch every dimension of the district. The racial equity work cannot be compartmentalized. And while there may be a clear entry point into a district's initial equity work-- through professional development, decision making routines, stakeholder engagement strategies, resource allocation methods, or the building of new cultural norms-- what is critical is that all of these elements work together to enact a theory of change that is aligned to a clear vision of excellent teaching that is culturally responsive. A district that is committed to racial equity is working across all of these dimensions. They are also using the insight gleaned from this work, informed by and in partnership with the people most experiencing the problems, to influence the larger environment in which a school district is situated.
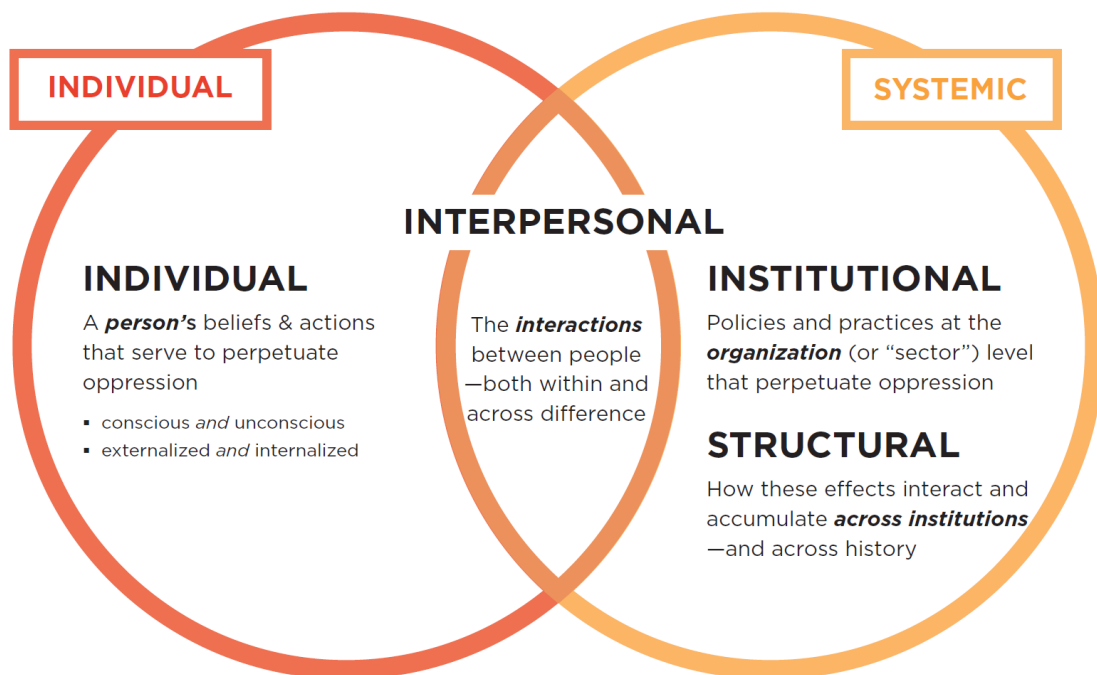
Conclusion

It is impossible for 21st century educational organizations to effectively lead change without addressing the need for equity. However, attempting to address inequities without first addressing the imbalance of power resulting from racial injustice, perpetuates systemic inequities. This is because racism is indeed the single most critical barrier to building effective coalitions for change. Therefore, in order to do this work effectively, leaders must develop a racial equity lens that allows them to accurately see the system(s) that produce(s) their current results. By providing a common language and ideas to address the challenges related to creating and sustaining an equity-focused change effort, this racial equity note can help leaders build high-performing school districts that improve educational outcomes for every student, in every school. An equity-focused mission, grounded in racial justice, is no longer lofty or an optional add-on given today's environment; it is simply at the core of the job public school districts must be expected to perform.

Exhibit 1   The Lens of Systemic Oppression (6 pages)

THE LENS OF SYSTEMIC OPPRESSION

NATIONAL EQUITY PROJECT

INDIVIDUAL

SYSTEMIC

INTERPERSONAL

INDIVIDUAL

A **person's** beliefs & actions that serve to perpetuate oppression

- conscious *and* unconscious
- externalized *and* internalized

The **interactions** between people —both within and across difference

INSTITUTIONAL

Policies and practices at the **organization** (or "sector") level that perpetuate oppression

STRUCTURAL

How these effects interact and accumulate **across institutions** —and across history

Some phenomena playing out at each level

INDIVIDUAL

- Identity and difference
- Individual advantage and disadvantage
- Explicit bias
- Implicit bias
- Stereotype threat
- Internalized oppression

INTERPERSONAL

- Reproductive discourse ("Discourse 1")
- Microaggressions
- Racist interactions
- Transferred oppression

INSTITUTIONAL

- Biased policies and practices (e.g. in hiring, teaching, discipline, parent-family engagement)
- Disproportional (e.g. racialized) outcomes and experiences

STRUCTURAL

- Systems of advantage and disadvantage
- Opportunity structures
- Societal history of oppressive practices and policies

Source: https://www.nationalequityproject.org/frameworks/lens-of-systemic-oppression.

Four Levels of Oppression

Systemic oppression manifests on the individual, the interpersonal, the institutional, and the structural level, and we offer an example of each.

INDIVIDUAL

A teacher holds an unconscious mental model that her students of color are not "college material." This belief, left unchecked, leads to lower expectations of work quality, which allows for less rigorous teaching methods, and finally produces a gap in the actual skills and preparation of these very students. Similarly, a college counselor might push lower-income students toward community colleges or job training programs while counseling more privileged students to apply to four-year universities. These scenarios are all too real and, we would argue, a result of unexamined belief systems nurtured by an oppressive system.

INTERPERSONAL

By interpersonal, we mean the interactions between individuals that play out, both within and across difference. These are where the individual and the systemic levels of oppression intersect. These interactions are playing out constantly, within institutions and in the private spheres of life. Much of the interpersonal level manifests through discourse—how issues and situations are framed, talked about, not talked about.

INSTITUTIONAL

By institution, we mean a single school or organization with its own internal set of norms, policies, and practices. On this level, we might witness a discipline policy that correlates to a disproportionate number of African American boys being sent out of class or a master schedule that de facto tracks English Language Learners into lower-level coursework. It may be that an organization creates a culture centered on dominant culture that makes it inhospitable to people of color. Though one might argue that these policies stem from individual belief systems, the institutional lens reveals how an organization's patterns are self-sustaining and thus more than the sum of its individual actors.

STRUCTURAL

Structural oppression involves the macro-relationship between institutions that perpetuates or even exacerbates unequal outcomes for children. Despite its title, we would posit the "No Child Left Behind" Act as a prime example of structural oppression. In her recent piece "A Nation's Education Left Behind", former Assistant Secretary of Education Diane Ravitch wrote in 2011:

We have now had ten years of No Child Left Behind, and we now know that there has been very little change in the gaps between the children of the rich and the children of the poor, between black children and white children. Just this week, the federal government released the urban district test results and we could see that the gap remained as large as ever. After ten years of NCLB, the children at the bottom were still at the bottom.

By critically analyzing this policy, we can see how politicians colluded with financial interests to create a hollow discourse of opportunity while in fact sowing the seeds of oppression.

"I've wanted to see beyond the Western, mechanical view of the world and see what else might appear when the lens was changed."

–Margaret J. Wheatley

"Whenever I arrive on a real location, I have to move around and work out what the best angles are going to be. When I was moving around with the lens, I discovered things that the naked eye would not have."

–filmmaker Pedro Almodova

The Metaphor of A Lens

We make dozens of decisions each day that impact those we serve. We grapple with how to respectfully reach out to new communities and serve them in culturally responsive ways that don't perpetuate inequities they face. At a foundational level, we must analyze the culture and conditions that impact the people and places we interact with in order to aid our decision-making.

Even as an organization operating in multiple settings that manifest a wide range of organizational patterns, policies, and practices, we know that each site requires learning and unpacking a new set of "rules" of operation.

As leaders for equity, our primary concern is to interrupt those rules that serve, either implicitly or explicitly, to perpetuate opportunity gaps for vulnerable students. To become agents of change who make strategic and courageous decisions, we must learn to run a set of filters, or lenses, that shift our vantage point and uncover what the "naked eye" can - not see.

The metaphor of a lens describes the possibility of seeing our contexts in new and revealing ways. If seeing leads to believing, and believing ultimately shapes our actions, then we must expand our ways of seeing to transform troubling outcomes for young people.

Three levels of analysis inform each lens: the individual, the interpersonal, the institutional, and the structural. By applying our lens at each level, we can begin to identify opportunities for equitable change.

No single lens can tell the whole story, but using a strong filter allows us to stand "on the balcony" and observe the "dance floor" below (in this case the school or organization) with its complex set of relationships, rules, and moves. From this aerial viewpoint, we can think critically about our decisions and increase the predictability that our actions will lead to more equitable outcomes.

The Importance of Critical Judgment

When using a racial equity lens, we must exercise critical judgment before taking action. Critical judgment is the process of separating the essential from the non-essential, distilling any number of decisions into those best matched to our desired outcome or vision. Critical

judgment implies a cycle of questioning, action and reflection premised on the belief that there is no "right answer" lying in wait. Finally, critical judgment implies a leap of faith – faith that if we take a calculated risk to disrupt the status quo, we do indeed possess the will, skill, knowledge, capacity and emotional intelligence to adjust our actions as necessary.

Here are some key principles of critical judgment that we seek to embody:

- I will take responsibility for what I don't directly control—structural racism, systemic oppression, and all forms of bias—and attempt to influence transformative change within seemingly entrenched systems.

- I will act within my "zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1978), or stretch zone, to model the types of discourse and decisions that I want adults to enact with young people. I understand that positive behavior and modeling have a reproductive effect and thus hold every moment with a client as sacred and teachable.

- I will rigorously and flexibly apply my racial equity lens to assess the current culture, conditions, and competencies needed to best serve our clients.

- I will engage in a cycle of action and reflection, what Paulo Freire called praxis, that allows me to learn from both successes and failures.

- I will set personal learning goals that bring into high relief my growth areas while committing to continuous professional development that cultivates my will, skill, knowledge, capacity, and emotional intelligence.

The Frame of a Racial Equity Lens

The racial equity lens allows us to uncover the structures, policies, and behaviors that sustain unequal outcomes for children. The "Western, mechanical" worldview cited by organizational consultant and community activist Margaret Wheatley elevates the individual over the system, which can lead to distorted perspectives on inequity. We hear frequent refrains premised on this notion of individualism: If only that student would work harder; she just doesn't care! Why don't those families invest enough in their children's education to come to Back-to-School Night? Such comments decontextualize the behavior of individuals from the larger system of oppression and feed a "blame- the-victim" mentality.

In naming systemic oppression, we seek to challenge individualistic thinking and interrogate the complex interaction of people, practices, institutions, and ideology that perpetuate inequity. Oppression in the United States maps all too predictably to socio-economic, cultural, and racial factors. The U.S. Census Bureau recently reported that the income gap between rich and poor Americans grew to its largest margin ever. The top-earning 20% of the country garnered nearly 50% of the income while the bottom 20%, those below the poverty line, went home with 3.4 %. (www.census.gov)

At the same time, the United States is home to 5% of the world's population but 25% of its prisoners, and those incarcerated are disproportionately African American and Latino. These statistics reveal historical patterns of inequality that, despite the gains of the civil rights era, have persisted and even deepened over the last three decades.

As leaders for equity, we must understand our schools and organizations as part of the systemic fabric of inequality. Failing to acknowledge this reality, we will unwittingly reproduce oppressive dynamics that blame children for the deep-rooted opportunity gaps that hinder their growth.

Assumptions and Questions

A racial equity lens is grounded in several assumptions that cut across the three levels above. These assumptions help us grapple with how and why oppression continues to play out in schools staffed with good, well-intentioned people. What we know is that inequitable racialized outcomes do not require racist actors. A person can be committed to the care, well-being, and educational progress of a child and still, unconsciously, participate in systemic oppression.

"Inequitable racialized outcomes do not require racist actors."

–John A. Powell

Here are the core assumptions we offer for understanding oppression:

- Oppression and injustice are human creations and phenomena, built into our current economic system, and therefore can be undone.

- Oppression (e.g. racism, colonialism, class oppression, patriarchy, and homophobia) is more than just the sum of individual prejudices. Its patterns are systemic and therefore self-sustaining without dramatic interruption.

- Systemic oppression exists at the level of institutions (harmful policies and practices) and across structures (education, health, transportation, economy, etc) that are interconnected and reinforcing over time.

- Systemic oppression has historical antecedents. We must face our national legacy and current manifestations of racism and economic inequality in order to transform them.

- Without rigorous examination, behavior is reproductive. By default, current practices, cultural norms and institutional arrangements foster and maintain inequitable outcomes.

- To undo systemic oppression, we must forge multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-lingual alliances and create democratic processes that give voice to new organizing systems for humanity.

- Addressing oppression and bias (conscious and unconscious) inevitably raises strong emotions in clients, and we must be prepared and trained to address these feelings.

We also offer a set of analytical questions to ask while applying this lens:

1. How do we understand the economic and racial forces behind the inequities we see?

2. How might we name the "system" in which we are all sitting?

3. What level of consciousness do colleagues, partners and affiliates possess about the forces underlying inequity?

4. How are we talking about the problem we are trying to solve? Is the conversation digging down to root causes in a way that could lead to productive action?

5. Who are the people affected by the current structure of oppression? Are they at the table?

6. Who shapes the dominant narrative about those being served at any given moment?

7. How are different constituents described? How would they tell their story? Is there a counter-narrative coming from those being served?

8. What are the specific disparities/inequities we seek to eliminate through this collective focus and action? What barriers stand in the way of achieving more equitable outcomes?

9. What are the population and geographic targets for our effort? Specifically, for whom and where are we trying to make a difference?

10. What will an equitable OUTCOME look like? How will we KNOW we have made progress?

11. When do we expect to see results? What is our timeframe?

12. Who does and does not have power in this institution, in the community? What is power based on here?

13. How safe is it here for different people to share their truths here, and how can I foster a culture of safety and relational trust to move forward?

14. How can I build my practice as a leader for equity, starting with who I am and how I understand my own experiences around oppression?

15. How can I build the alliances to move forward in making decisions that interrupt reproductive practices?

Source: https://www.nationalequityproject.org/frameworks/lens-of-systemic-oppression.

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