CONDUCTING AN EQUITY AUDIT

Introduction

Districts across the country are focused on breaking down system-level inequities as recent events have placed societal disparities at the center of our national consciousness. In addition to causing public health and economic crises, the COVID-19 pandemic has closed many schools, disrupting teaching and learning. With the transition to remote instruction, districts have had to confront the inequities affecting their students, families, and staff, ranging from food and housing insecurity to lack of health insurance to unreliable Internet access. Districts also must be considered within the context of the communities they serve—many of which have recently experienced high-profile cases of police brutality and ongoing confrontations targeting Black individuals.

Conversations related to equity have increasingly extended beyond a dialogue about building cultural competencies to focus on how existing systems, policies, and practices reinforce white and other forms of privilege and disadvantage persons of color, persons experiencing poverty, and other groups historically marginalized based on their gender, sexual orientation, religion, nationality, or language. For example, tax-based revenue systems may leave some schools chronically underfunded. Some students may be disproportionately disciplined, placed in special education, or discouraged from enrolling in advanced courses.

Addressing these inequities presents districts not only with a challenge, but also an opportunity—to create a truly diverse and inclusive environment for teaching and learning. Yet, systemic problems require systemic solutions. Even where districts are committed to this vision, educators may not know which steps to take to achieve it. Equity audits can help educators understand the inequities that exist in their district and schools and inform development of the policies and practices needed to address them. In this document, Hanover provides an overview of the academic literature surrounding equity audits and describes the types of research studies and projects districts can commission as part of this process.

Equity Audit Frameworks

There is no set formula or standard for conducting equity audits. Rather, over time, educational researchers have proposed frameworks for conceptualizing and carrying out equity audits in school district settings. Historically, equity

(or representivity) audits have been used for three purposes in K-12 school districts: [1]

- Compliance with civil rights laws;
- Curriculum auditing; and
- State and federal school accountability.

However, several researchers have further refined the goals and purposes of an equity audit for current contexts. In 2004, Linda Skrla and colleagues published research that presents a progression in how to conceptualize equity audits. They argue that most historical examples of equity audits fail to provide school and district leaders with adequate information on the **degree of inequities** found in schools.[2]

> " An **equity audit**... *is intended to facilitate ease of use and to promote insight into, discussion of, and substantive response to systemic patterns of inequity in schools and school districts.*

Skrla's model for equity audits also incorporates the concept of systemic equity, which is commonly defined using Bradly Scott's 2001 description:[3]
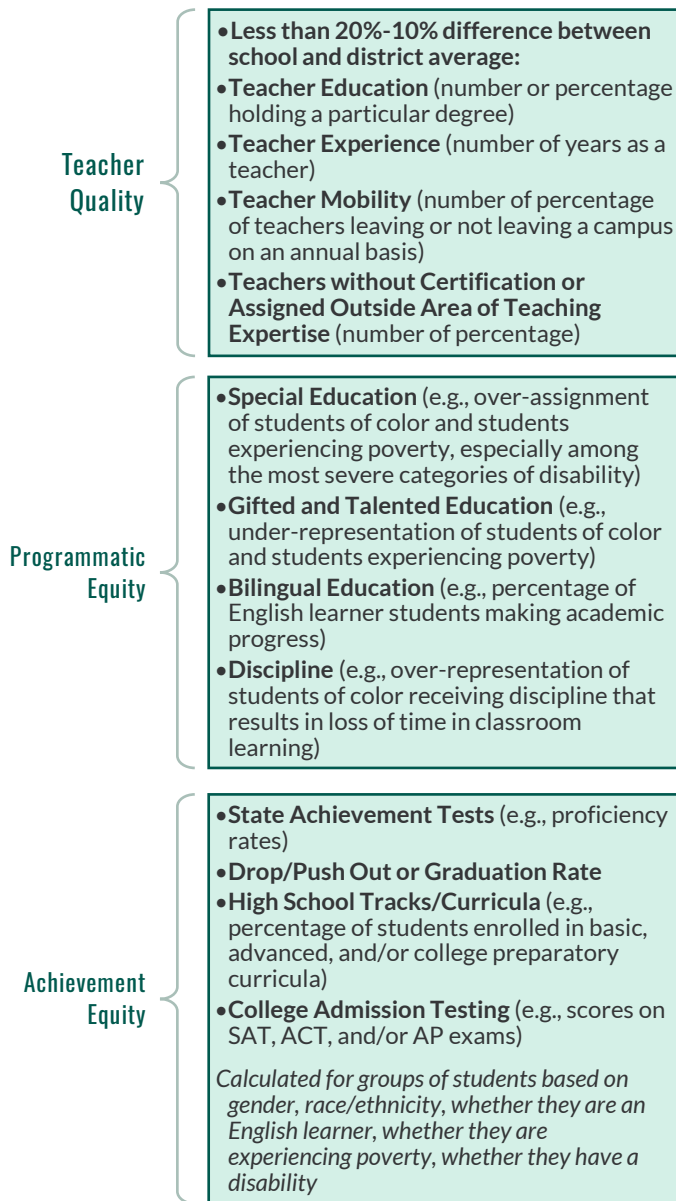
> " **Systemic equity** *is defined as the transformed ways in which systems and individuals habitually operate to ensure that every learner – in whatever learning environment that learner is found – has the greatest opportunity to learn enhanced by the resources and supports necessary to achieve competence, excellence, independence, responsibility, and self-sufficiency for school and for life.*

More recent research from Terrance Green and Muhammad Khalifa on approaches to equity audits propose an additional focus on using an **asset-based perspective** and on **identifying marginalized communities**.[4] The following section summarizes and compares the core components of equity audits as proposed by Skrla, Green, and Khalifa.

Skrla's research on educational equity and equity audits culminated in the description of a three-part approach to evaluate the degree of equity within a school or district. Broadly, this approach proposes that **teacher quality** and **programmatic equity** lead to **achievement equity**. Twelve specific indicators (listed below) are organized within these three categories and reflect research on schools and districts that have successfully narrowed opportunity gaps and achieved greater levels of equity.[5]

Equity Audit Framework and Indicators

Teacher Quality
- Less than 20%-10% difference between school and district average:
- **Teacher Education** (number or percentage holding a particular degree)
- **Teacher Experience** (number of years as a teacher)
- **Teacher Mobility** (number of percentage of teachers leaving or not leaving a campus on an annual basis)
- **Teachers without Certification or Assigned Outside Area of Teaching Expertise** (number of percentage)

Programmatic Equity
- **Special Education** (e.g., over-assignment of students of color and students experiencing poverty, especially among the most severe categories of disability)
- **Gifted and Talented Education** (e.g., under-representation of students of color and students experiencing poverty)
- **Bilingual Education** (e.g., percentage of English learner students making academic progress)
- **Discipline** (e.g., over-representation of students of color receiving discipline that results in loss of time in classroom learning)

Achievement Equity
- **State Achievement Tests** (e.g., proficiency rates)
- **Drop/Push Out or Graduation Rate**
- **High School Tracks/Curricula** (e.g., percentage of students enrolled in basic, advanced, and/or college preparatory curricula)
- **College Admission Testing** (e.g., scores on SAT, ACT, and/or AP exams)

Calculated for groups of students based on gender, race/ethnicity, whether they are an English learner, whether they are experiencing poverty, whether they have a disability

Source: *Educational Administration Quarterly*[6]

In their 2018 book *Culturally Responsive School Leadership*, Khalifa proposes a "more comprehensive way of finding oppressive practices and structures in schools...looking at ways students, parents, and communities are marginalized."[7] Khalifa proposes an approach to equity audits that relies on four main methodologies, summarized below:

Four Areas of Equity Audits

Equity Trends *Data Review*

**Survey Data** *Surveys to stakeholders about climate, culture, engagement, etc.*

Policy Analysis *Examination of policies that may contribute to disproportionalities*

Culturally Responsive Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Leadership *Examination of instructional and leadership practices*

Source: Culturally Responsive School Leadership[8]

Green's 2017 framework for a Community-Based Equity Audit builds on the work of Skrla and others "**by placing an emphasis on achieving equity in the communities where schools are located instead of only inside the schools**...[recognizing] how people organize and act collectively to address social inequities."[9] The resulting process for conducting a community-based equity audit draws on literature and practices from audits in both education and larger-community settings. It emphasizes community engagement, participation, and dialogue as critical tenants of equity audits. The figure below outlines Green's Community-Based Equity Audit Process.[10]

Community-Based Equity Audit Process
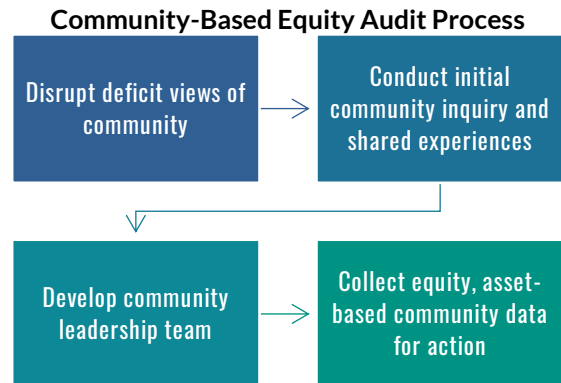
Source: *Educational Administration Quarterly*[11]

The initial three phases in a community-based equity audit represent the internal work of school and district leaders as they prepare to gather specific data and indicators to evaluate and understand equity.

- **Phase One:** those leading and planning the audit should gather and begin to shift their views of students and their communities from deficit to asset-based.

- **Phase Two**: seek to develop an understanding of the school or district community and its assets (e.g., through an asset-mapping exercise).

- **Phase Three:** gather community leaders and stakeholders to lead and advice on the audit process.

The final phase of the process turns to data collection. Green proposes three progressive phases of data collection, beginning with gathering information on school-community history, then community opportunity indicators, and culminating in critical community dialogues.[12] This phase relies on a mixed-methodology approach, including the following types of data collection or activities:

In-Depth Interviews	Focus Groups	Document Review	Analysis of Community Statistics

Based on a review of literature and best practices shared within the frameworks, Hanover has designed a multi-year audit methodology to help district leaders build a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive system.

Conducting an Equity Audit

Hanover recommends a multi-year, mixed-methodology approach to support districts undertaking an equity audit. A commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion requires district-wide reform efforts, and therefore, must be completed deliberately and at a pace that will adequately build consensus among stakeholder groups. While the methodology framework outlined below is the ideal, **district leaders must determine the availability of data, their internal timelines for reform efforts, and the extent to which their community is bought-in to systemic reform**.

Recommended Research Questions to Guide Your Audit

1. To what extent is the district offering a diverse and inclusive environment?
2. To what extent do the district's administrative and fiscal policies and practices ensure an equitable work and learning environment?
3. To what extent do the district's resource practices and policies establish an equitable and inclusive work and learning environment?
4. To what extent do the district's curriculum and instruction policies and practices cultivate an equitable work and learning environment?
5. In what ways can the district support changes to school and classroom curricula and practices?

Methodology

Year 1: Diagnose and Build a Framework

Districts should form a taskforce or working groups to ensure all relevant stakeholders are engaged in the diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) effort. Priority areas should include all components of your school system (fiscal, human resources, facilities management, policy, and curriculum and instruction). Year 1 is focused on diagnosing the magnitude of issues relate to diversity, equity, and inclusion. The figure below outlines the type of data collection and questions districts should focus on in their first year of the audit.

Figure 1: Diagnose Issues

RESEARCH QUESTIONS	METHODOLOGY	KEY INDICATORS
• *What are stakeholders' perceptions of equity, inclusion, and diversity within the district?* • *What are differences in perceptions within the district across and within groups (e.g., between students and staff, among students from different racial/ethnic groups, etc.)?* • *What are stakeholders' priorities for equity, inclusion, and diversity?*	***Equity and Inclusion Diagnostic***	▪ Programmatic Equity

RESEARCH QUESTIONS	METHODOLOGY	KEY INDICATORS
• Where do disparities in student academic and behavioral outcomes exist in the district? • Where do disparities in student participation in state assessments and enrollment in programs exist in the district? • Have these disparities diminished or increased over time? At which schools, in which grades, and among which groups of students (e.g., students of color) is there more or less disparity in recent years?	*Representation Index*	▪ Programmatic Equity ▪ Achievement Equity
• In what ways does teaching quality vary across classrooms? • To what extent, if any, do students experience variations in quality based on gender? Race? Ethnicity?	*Teacher Quality Equity Data Analysis*	▪ Teacher Quality
• To what extent does the current teaching staff throughout the district represent the student body? To what extent does the teaching staff at each school represent the student body? • What are trends in the district's teacher recruitment? (e.g., which teachers does the district typically recruit when examining race/ethnicity, gender, credentials, tenure in the field, etc.) • Which teachers are most likely to stay at the district? • Which teachers leave the district? When do these teachers leave?	*Staff, Recruitment, Retention, and Attrition Analysis*	▪ Teacher Quality
• What are key metrics that we should track related to equity, inclusion, and diversity? • How can we track these metrics against our district's stated goals? • How can we clearly communicate progress to our stakeholders and community?	*Equity Dashboard*	▪ Programmatic Equity ▪ Achievement Equity
• How does the likelihood of completing an advanced sequence of courses vary across different groups of students (e.g., are students of color less likely to take AP courses)? • What gatekeeper courses tend to separate students who take AP courses from those who do not?	*Course Sequencing Analysis*	▪ Achievement Equity
• To what extent do staff feel they work in an inclusive, diverse, and equitable environment? • What, if any, are the differences in perceptions and feelings across departments, roles, different demographic populations among staff?	*Staff Equity and Inclusion Survey*	▪ Teacher Quality

As districts conduct the analyses outlined in the figure above, they should convene task force members to review findings and discuss questions they have about the findings from each analysis. These discussions will lay the groundwork for the root cause analysis in Year 2. The first year of the Equity Audit should culminate in a roadmap for the root cause analysis as well as questions for investigation based on the diagnostic analyses in Year 1.

Year 2: Root Cause Analysis

In the second year of the Equity Audit, districts should focus on a comprehensive root cause analysis to understand the parts of the school system that are influencing the outcomes observed in the Year 1 analyses. Year 2 should focus on collecting additional stakeholder feedback through focus groups and interviews and analyzing the policies that frame the districts' practices. As a district conducts the root cause analysis, it should engage their DEI working groups/task force in reflecting on the analyses and building a roadmap for changing the components of the system that are causing inequities. Figure 2 outlines Hanover's recommended data collection methods.

Figure 2: Conduct a Root Cause Analysis

RESEARCH QUESTIONS	METHODOLOGY	KEY INDICATORS
• *What are strengths and challenges related to equity, inclusion, and diversity within the district?* • *What unique strategies or policies are advancing or preventing equity at their school or district?*	*Student and Parent Equity Focus Groups and In-Depth Interviews*	▪ Programmatic Equity
• *How do staff define and understand equity within their school or district?* • *What specific departments are implementing equity initiatives well? In which departments do inequities still exist and why?* • *How can the district better support efforts to create a more equitable and inclusive operational environment?*	*Staff Focus Groups*	▪ Teacher Quality
• *To what extent is the school/classroom curricula diverse, equitable and inclusive?*	*Equity Audit Curriculum Tool*	▪ Achievement Equity
• *To what extent do the district's current policies (human resources, curriculum and instruction, fiscal, and operations) reflect a diverse, equitable, and inclusive environment?*	*Benchmarking Study of District Policies*	▪ Teacher Quality ▪ Programmatic Equity ▪ Achievement Equity

In addition to the data collection methods outlined above, districts should initiate an annual administration of the Equity and Inclusion Diagnostic and the Staff Equity and Inclusion Survey.[1] As annual student outcome data is available, districts should also update their Equity Dashboard.

The culmination of Year 2 should result in an Equity Framework that includes recommendations for changes to policy and practices. In many cases, superintendents revise strategic plans and mission and value statements to reflect their DEI commitments.

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[1] In lieu of a full survey administration, districts can also use pulse administrations in which a subset of survey questions are asked each year to reduce survey fatigue, while the full survey is administered at a longer cadence (e.g., every three years).

Year 3: Reform and Monitor

As district and school leaders initiate the changes outlined in their Equity Framework, they must implement research-based practices to address the inequities identified in Years 1 and 2. Furthermore, district leaders must monitor the extent to which changes in policy and practices are making their stakeholders feel the district is a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive environment.

Figure 3: Reform and Monitor Systemic Changes

RESEARCH QUESTIONS	METHODOLOGY	KEY INDICATORS
• What are best practices for developing a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive curriculum? • What types of implicit bias training are peer districts using? • What is the impact of implicit bias training? • What are best practices for building instructional staff members' competencies? • What is an asset-based mindset? How can the district support staff members' in their shift toward an asset-based mindset?	*Literature Review*	▪ Teacher Quality ▪ Programmatic Equity ▪ Achievement Equity
• To their what extent are our staff prepared to enact curriculum changes? • To what extent do our staff understand implicit bias? • What types of professional development do our staff need to enact new practices? new curricula?	*Professional Development Needs Assessment*	▪ Teacher Quality ▪ Programmatic Equity ▪ Achievement Equity
• What are guiding questions to consider when reviewing and evaluating equity-related outcomes data?	*Discussion Guides*	▪ Teacher Quality ▪ Programmatic Equity ▪ Achievement Equity
• What steps should teachers take to create an equitable learning environment in the classroom?	*Toolkits*	▪ Teacher Quality ▪ Programmatic Equity ▪ Achievement Equity

As district and school leaders enact changes to policy and practice, it is important to monitor the impact of these changes within a continuous improvement framework. Therefore, districts should ensure they are conducting annual data collection and analysis using the methodologies outlined in the first year of the Equity Audit.

Caveat

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Endnotes

[1] [1] Skrla, L., et. al. "Equity Audits: A Practical Leadership Tool for Developing Equitable and Excellent Schools." *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 40:1, 2004, pp. 138-140. Accessed via SAGE. [2] "Equity Audits." University of Virginia, Curry School of Education and Human Development. https://curry.virginia.edu/sites/default/files/uploads/resourceLibrary/6.%20The%20Equity%20Audit-rev.%20%28Mitchell%20%26%20Eddy%20Spicer%29.pdf

[2] Skrla, et. al., "Equity Audits: A Practical Leadership Tool for Developing Equitable and Excellent Schools," p. 140., Op. cit.

[3] Scott, Bradley. "Coming of Age." IRDA Newsletter, March 2001. https://www.idra.org/resource-center/coming-of-age/#goals

[4] Equity Audits," Op. cit.

[5] Skrla, et. al., "Equity Audits: A Practical Leadership Tool for Developing Equitable and Excellent Schools," Op. cit.

[6] Figure adapted with minor edits from: Ibid., pp. 142-150.

[7] "Equity Audits," Op. cit. [Quoting: Khalifa, M. Culturally Responsive School Leadership. Harvard Education Press, 2018.]

[8] Figure text quoted from: Ibid.

[9] Green, T.L. "Community-Based Equity Audits: A Practical Approach for Educational Leaders to Support Equitable Community-School Improvements." *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 53:1, 2017, p. 5. Access via SAGE.

[10] Ibid., pp. 6-17.

[11] Figure text quoted from: Ibid., p. 17.

[12] Ibid., p. 26-28