

# The Role of Equity in School Improvement

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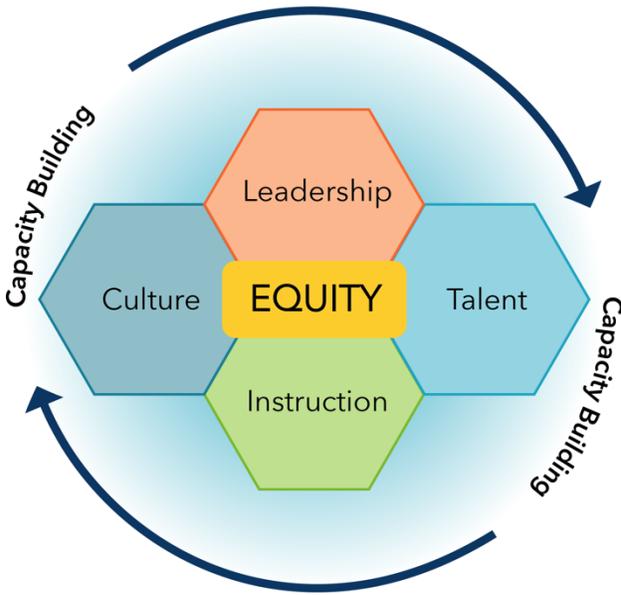
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## Introduction

The uptick in today's educational dialogue surrounding educational equity finds its roots in two federal legislative acts and a study of educational equality over a half-century ago: Civil Rights Act (1964), Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) (ESEA, P.L. 89-10. 79 Stat. 27, 1965), and Equality of Educational Opportunity (Coleman, et al., 1966). The Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited racial segregation in educational institutions; made it illegal to segregate on the basis of color, religion, and national origin or discriminate under any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance; and required a report to the President and Congress within two years of the enactment on the lack of availability of equal educational opportunities for individuals based on race, color, religion, or national origin in public educational institutions. ESEA (1965), Sec. 201, supported desegregation and equality in educational opportunity by providing "financial assistance to local educational agencies serving areas with concentrations of children from low-income families to expand and improve their educational programs by various means (including preschool programs) which contribute particularly to meeting the special educational needs of educationally deprived children." Commissioned by the United States Department of Health, Education, and Welfare in 1966, the *Equality of Educational Opportunity* (1966) study, more commonly referred to as The Coleman Report, examined data from over 600,000 students and 60,000 educators "concerning the lack of availability of equal educational opportunities for individuals by reason of race, color, religion, or national origin in public education at all levels" (Coleman, 1966, p. iii). The following findings were noted:

- Schools are largely segregated.
- Achievement of minority students is distinctly lower than whites in Grades 1-12, with minorities as much as one standard deviation below in Grade 1, and deficiencies are progressively greater for minority students at progressively higher grades.
- Differences in schools (libraries, labs, academic extracurriculars, etc.), school curriculum, and facilities account for only a small fraction of differences in student achievement when socioeconomics are controlled for, although they have a greater impact on disadvantaged students.
- Teacher quality has a strong relationship with student achievement and is progressively greater at higher grade levels, indicative of the cumulative effect of teacher quality.
- Achievement of students is strongly related to the educational backgrounds and aspirations of others in the school.

FIGURE 1: CONNECTING EQUITY TO SYSTEMS THINKING



Today educational equity stretches far beyond the idea of leveling the playing field (equality) to one that integrates the timely, needs-based support for all students to attain their maximum capacity (equity). Despite the implementation of multiple interventions, support systems, and federal legislation [e.g., Response to Intervention (RTI), Multi-Tiered Systems (MTSS), Positive Behavior Intervention Systems (PBIS), the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), and the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA)], significant achievement gaps persist (NAEP)<sup>1</sup>. This document

presents a practice-based view of inequality and explores strategies that support increased equity. First, we examine the terminology and the inequities represented in the 2017 NAEP data. Next, as demonstrated in Figure 1, systems thinking (systems, structures, and processes) and foundational elements (leadership, talent, instruction, and culture) are used to explore the inequities harbored by schools and districts today. Evidence-based strategies for addressing inequity are highlighted in each element section. Reflective questions provide an opportunity to reflect on current practices and identify future actions that position equity at the epicenter of school improvement.

**Equity and Quality**

It is essential that all stakeholders understand the nuances of the terminology used by leaders and teachers as schools and districts act to further equity and quality for all students. Figure 1 defines equality, equity, and educational equity. Per-student funding being the same at every school is an example of equality, whereas ensuring that struggling students receive more resources so they can catch up is an example of equity.

FIGURE 2. DEFINITIONS OF KEY TERMS

**Equality:** equal access and opportunity<sup>2</sup>

**Equity:** just and fair inclusion into a society in which all can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential<sup>3</sup>

**Educational Equity:** Giving students the appropriate opportunities, supports, and services they need to be successful (academic and social) and recognizing that not all students are the same as they learn in different ways and at different paces<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>For more information on NAEP, see <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/about/>.

<sup>2</sup>American Library Association. (2007). Retrieved from: <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/equalityequity>

<sup>3</sup>The National Equity Atlas. (2018). Retrieved from: <http://nationalequityatlas.org/about-the-atlas>

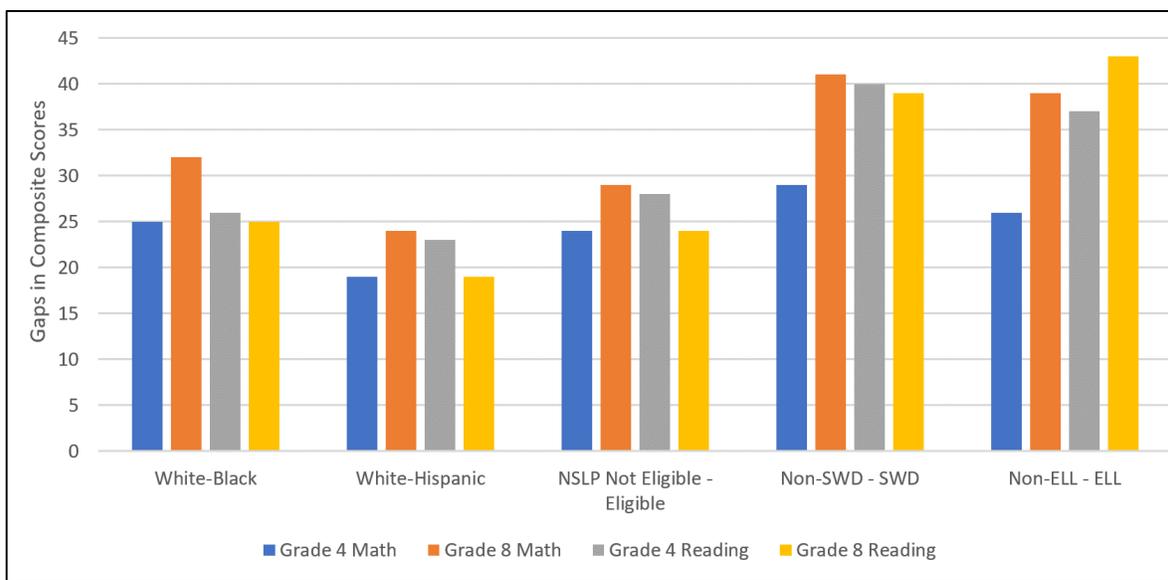
<sup>4</sup>Blankstein, A. M. & Noguera, P. (2015).

Society's inequalities disrupt equity, especially for marginalized students (e.g., those who are often living in public housing, lack access to high-quality preschool, are learning English as a second language) who have less access to resources needed for academic success (e.g., access to basic health services, early learning and extended learning opportunities). Since the 1970s, the incomes of workers at the bottom fell by 11.4% while those at the top increased 14.8%, with full-time, African-American workers earning 23% less than their Caucasian counterparts (National Equity Atlas, 2016). As the United States becomes even more diverse and the wealth gap widens, the number of marginalized students is increasing. By 2044, more than half of all Americans are projected to belong to a minority group (any group other than non-Hispanic white alone) (Colby & Ortman, 2014).

The educational system further perpetuates the marginalization of students through federal funding disparities between states, between districts and schools, and the disproportionate reliance on local funds. For example, the U. S. Department of Education (ED) found that 45% of high-poverty schools received less state and local funding than other schools in the same district (ED, 2011). Although the Coleman Report found that variation in funding had little correlation with achievement, Hanushek (2016) notes: the general consensus is "that how money is spent is much more important than how much is spent" (p. 26). Results from the \$3.5 billion in school

improvement grants (SIG) mirror this consensus, as “[o]verall, across all grades, we found that implementing any SIG-funded model had no significant impacts on math or reading test scores, high school graduation, or college enrollment” (Dragoset, et.al., 2017, p. ES3). Achievement gaps on the 2017 NAEP reflect the inequalities among white-black, white-Hispanic, National School Lunch (NSLP) Not Eligible-Eligible, Non-Students with Disabilities (SWD)-SWD, and Non-English Language Learner (ELL)-ELL. The NAEP Achievement Gaps Dashboard tool analyzes the composite score between each comparison group at Grade 4 and Grade 8 in math and reading. ESSA accountability ratings focus on the growth in closing the achievement gap, as opposed to meeting established benchmarks (NCLB). The substantial gaps in achievement nationwide implore educational leaders to look closely at equity in systems, structures, processes, and practices that support all children in maximizing their capacity (See Table 1).

TABLE 1. 2017 NAEP ACHIEVEMENT GAPS



NAEP Achievement Gaps Dashboard (2018)  
[https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/dashboards/achievement\\_gaps.aspx](https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/dashboards/achievement_gaps.aspx)

## Reflective Questions

1. Why are we dealing with the same inequalities today that were identified by the Coleman Report (1966) and ESEA (1965) over fifty years ago (e.g., quality teachers, early learning, segregation)?
2. Provide an example of how funding can be better spent to positively impact learning outcomes for subgroups demonstrating achievement gaps.

3. Which achievement gaps are largest in your school/district/state? How have they changed over time?

## Leadership

We would be hard-pressed to find a district or school mission statement that does not include the phrase “all students.” If goals are student-centered, they address “all students” as well. However, beyond the overarching stated commitment to do so, the strategies and actions in most school improvement plans address only the symptoms of inequities and few target the root cause of the inequity. Although an equity audit may identify red flags, the engagement and collaboration of all stakeholders in a deep dive to identify barriers to equity lead administrators and teachers to question their existing beliefs (Torff, 2008) and communicates to parents and the community that the school is working toward educational equity. District and school leaders build relationships and trust through the ongoing engagement of stakeholders in the shared belief of equity and excellence. As Hargreaves & Braun note, “change is driven by a commitment to passionately shared beliefs that then transform practice, more than by pushing people into new practices to change their beliefs”(2012, p. 24).

The status quo of systems, structures, processes, and practices embedded in districts and schools harbor the inequities. With careful inquiry and a lens of equity focused on comparability of subgroups, the district and school collaborate with stakeholder focus groups to uncover the institutionalized beliefs and culture that benefit some students, but present barriers to others (Johnson & La Salle, 2010). Establishing a focus group (superintendent, district leadership team, leadership coaches, with representatives from all racial groups, gender, etc.) provides a deeper understanding of the status quo and promotes the unveiling of inequities harbored by the system. Leading topics may include:

- The district’s process for hiring principals.
- Structures in place to support newly hired principals, or provide targeted assistance to current individual principals. What is the evidence of impact?
- Processes or systems for grooming future leaders (e.g. a leadership pipeline)? If so what is the evidence of success?

Principals play an influential role in facilitating such inquiry and advocating for equitable services for all students. Research indicates principals have significant impact

on student achievement (Leithwood, Louis-Seashore, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004), with the greatest impact occurring in the most challenging schools (high-poverty and high minority) (Beteille, Kalogrides, & Loeb, 2011); the significant impact of increased principal experience on student achievement (Beteille, et al., 2011); and the prevalence of inexperienced principals assigned to schools with greatest needs (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2013). Knowing this, in relation to the challenges faced, are the best-suited leaders in the schools that need them the most?

## Reflective Questions

1. Reframe the bulleted questions above to reflect the hiring of the lead teachers in the building. Consider the system (e.g., district policy or input, structures (e.g., ongoing differentiated support), and process.
2. Describe the makeup of a focus group and identify leading topics for choosing members of the school (or district) leadership team.

## Talent

Inequity in staffing exacerbates educational inequality. Title I, Part A provides supplemental funding to help low-income schools improve the academic achievement of educationally disadvantaged students. Districts receive subgrants from the state, retain some money to carry out certain activities, and allocate the rest to eligible schools. The additional funds are provided to schools to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments (ED, 2018). However, many Title 1 schools have fewer staff than non-Title 1 schools, and minority students are too often being taught by the least qualified teachers (ED, 2011; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2004). Skilled leaders (Leithwood et al., 2004; Waters et al., 2003) and effective teachers (Nye, Konstatopoulos, & Hedges, 2004; Rockoff, 2004) are critical in addressing staffing inequities. Whereas the proportion of teachers to students is part of the equity equation, quality teachers are the more significant part of the equation. A strategic deployment of talent (system) and pre-service and ongoing professional development (structure) yields results as demonstrated by the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public School District (Public Impact, 2015). Struggling schools in Charlotte-Mecklenburg employed school leaders developed through a principal pipeline and allowed the principals to select teacher teams with a 3-year commitment. Administrators had flexibility in staffing, scheduling, budgeting, training and selecting instructional strategies (e.g., the

process). Additional compensation was also provided to staff (10% of current salary) and principals (\$10,000 for the first year and \$5000 each year after, for five years).

In addition to quality staffing, there is an ongoing need for equitable deployment of resources (human, material, support) to effectively and efficiently address varying school needs (e.g., the system). While school leaders and teachers are held accountable for learning outcomes, as poverty and diversity increases, teachers report experiencing a decrease in shared instructional leadership (e.g., the structure) and they are less likely to share professional norms for teaching (e.g., the process) and student learning (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010). Maintaining, developing, and retaining strong leaders requires ongoing targeted training and support from the district. Likewise, teachers require ongoing targeted support from the district, building leaders, and instructional specialists to build their capacity to meet identified student needs. Providing professional development to create culturally competent leaders and teachers who readily recognize and address bias in instruction and assessments is one of several strategies to address inequities.

Developing and implementing strategies to support equitable learning environments for marginalized students requires building the capacity of teachers and leaders in the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and dispositions necessary to understand how ethnicity and culture impact learning. Gay (2002) notes that connecting curriculum to culture results in improved academic achievement; however, teachers often lack the knowledge and understanding of culture, pedagogy, and skills that support this connection. Milner (2013) provides six reasons for the unevenly harsh disciplinary practices of Black and Brown students, including: teacher and administrative fear, institutional and individual racism, under-preparation in teacher education, instructional practices and cultural conflicts, ineffective leadership, and inadequate counseling and psychological services. Understanding the interplay of environment, learning experiences, and genetics in laying the foundation for cognitive functioning; behavioral, social, and self-regulatory capacities; and physical health inform the need for early childhood education and interventions (Karoly, Kilburn, & Cannon, 2005), as well as school academic and behavioral interventions that address the problem and not the symptom.

Research purports the positive effects of race-congruent teachers on student achievement in reading and mathematics (Egalite, Kisida, & Winters, 2015; Dee, 2016) with a more significant impact on lower-performing students. Likewise, race-congruent teachers submit fewer discipline referrals (Lindsay & Hart, 2017). While the 96%

increase in minority teachers from 1988 (325,000) to 2008 (666,000) evidences successful recruitment efforts, the 28% increase in turnover for minority teachers from the 1980s to 2008-09 outpaced the turnover rate for Caucasian teachers and counters gains made in recruitment (Ingersoll & May, 2011; Ingersoll, Merrill & Stucky, 2014). Strategies for retaining minority teachers include: ensuring more positive organizational conditions (especially in hard-to-staff schools), involving teachers in collective faculty decision-making, providing more teacher classroom discretion and autonomy (Ingersoll & May, 2011), and mentoring by high-level administrators (Bednar & Gicheva, 2017).

## Reflective Questions

1. Disaggregate teacher turnover and exit interview data by school to align actions that support teacher retention, especially minority teacher retention. Consider the role of the system in hiring and retention, the structures needed to support retention and recruitment, and current organizational processes related to the high turnover with minority teachers (opportunity for collective faculty decision-making, instructional autonomy, etc.). What problems did you identify? What are the next steps?
2. How are teachers and leaders assigned to schools and classrooms? What structural or policy barriers exist to having the most effective teachers and leaders in front of the students with the greatest needs?

## Instruction

While the traditionally aligned, standards-based instructional program is sufficient for many students (Squires, 2012), marginalized students are best supported by instruction based on a culturally relevant curriculum. A coherent instructional program includes the standards-based written, taught, and assessed curriculum and the instructional supports and interventions that meet individual student needs. This includes the alignment of the early learning curriculum with the school curriculum. Access to the general curriculum, as well as advanced courses, is equally important for students with disabilities, English language learners, and other groups of marginalized students. Equitable practices ensure that these students receive the same high-quality prerequisite instruction as all other students, along with individualized supports needed for success.

Culturally responsive instruction is a pedagogy that recognizes the importance of including students' cultural references in all aspects of learning (Ladson-Billings, 1994) and is found to be a powerful means to address inequities and increase learning success for marginalized students (Keyes, Burns, & Kusimo, 2005). Explicit knowledge about cultural diversity, encompassing groups' cultural values, traditions, communication, learning styles, contributions, and relational patterns informs changes to curriculum design and instructional materials to improve overall quality (Gay, 2002). Preparing teachers for challenged schools requires an "intensive study of learning, child development, curriculum, assessment, cultural contexts, and subject-specific teaching methods while undergoing at least a year of student teaching in carefully selected placements with expert teachers who could model excellent teaching in diverse urban settings (Darling-Hammond, 2011, p. 14)." Gunn, Peterson & Welsh (2015) recommend "cultivating experiences that allow preservice teachers and teacher educators to learn about other cultures and embrace cultural differences" to support the development of a culturally responsive pedagogy.

A critical component of culturally relevant pedagogy is that the teachers genuinely care about their students, their academic and social development, and understand that they can learn at high levels (Blankstein, 2007). Teachers that know their students as individuals can effectively differentiate instruction in ways for students to incorporate and share their culture (Dack & Tomlinson, 2013; Gorski & Swalwell, 2015). In addition, knowledge of individual students and cultures supports differentiation in feedback, classroom climate, and celebration or praise (Gregory & Kuzmich, 2004). Collective teacher efficacy has a significant influence on student achievement (Hattie, 2012) and it takes committed teams of teachers (e.g., structure) working in a high-trust culture of collaboration with shared professional responsibility for all students' learning to plan, deliver, and assess culturally relevant instruction, and recognize the need for and provide individualized support to struggling students (e.g., process).

Blankstein & Noguera (2015) promote the use of a three-pillar equity paradigm (child development, challenging learning environment with appropriate supports, and understanding of how the community and family environment influence students) to form a coherent system for responding to and addressing the needs of children. Blankstein and Noguera (2015) speak to equitable practices within each of the three pillars:

1. Educators need to understand that although the typical patterns corresponding to age in child development theory influenced the development of school

curricula, there are significant variations in how and when children acquire skills during the different stages, and this requires academic programs that address the developmental needs of individual students.

2. The growing body of neuroscience suggests the brain continues to be shaped by experience well into adulthood (Pascual-Leone, Amedi, Fregni, & Merabet, 2005 as referenced in Blankstein & Noguera, 2015), making a strong case for the elimination of student testing for grouping or tracking. Students who understand the brain's malleability and view academic success as a product of hard work, rather than intelligence, experience improved student performance.
3. The contextual environmental influences (e.g., plant closures, gangs, the absence of healthy food) must be understood by educators to create strategies to counter or mitigate these conditions.

### Reflective Questions

1. Use the questions that follow to determine the root cause of the disparity among racial groups successfully completing an advanced placement course in mathematics. Begin with a review of disaggregated data for completers and non-completers. Use information from focus groups that include completer and non-completer students from the racial groups, parents, counselors, general classroom and remedial course teachers, and district administrators to conduct a qualitative exploration of the underlying cause for the disparity in outcomes. Questions to explore in the focus groups might include: What are the demographics of AP courses? How are students identified for AP enrollment? Does the AP student population mirror the demographics of the broader population? What type of support and services would better support struggling students in the completion of the AP course? Are students entering the AP course with similar skill sets? Why or why not? Describe your findings.
2. Identify the environmental influences that impact students in the building. Consider air and water quality, interpersonal and institutional violence, media, music, housing foreclosures, access to health, and social-emotional supports. Propose strategies that counter or mitigate the harmful effects on students.

### Culture

Building a dynamic and coherent system that responds to the needs of individual adults and students in support of an equal, accessible and inclusive education requires a shift in culture. Effective, caring, and culturally competent school leaders and

teachers with a vision of equity ensure that the school's mission and student-centered goals are driven by actions that disrupt the inequities responsible for marginalizing students. In support of this paradigm shift in education, effective leaders with the capacity to instill the constancy of purpose and build the sustainable relationships necessary to address inequities through innovative solutions that move the culture from one of reactive intervention to prevention are critical. Dismantling the systems, structures, and processes that limit access and lack targeted support is more about "reculturing the beliefs and collaborative working practices of a profession, than restructuring the formal roles and responsibilities within the system" (Hargreaves and Braun, 2012, p. 4). As the deeply held assumptions, beliefs, expectations, and habits of the organization that helps people make sense of the world are challenged, it is essential to systematically cultivate a sense of systemness, or shared coherence (DuFour & Fullan, 2013). Systemness is supported by 1) a focus on a limited number of goals, 2) making instruction and student achievement the daily agenda, 3) organizing continuous capacity building around that agenda, and 4) cultivating a sense of shared coherence that allows all members of the group to articulate the same story in terms of goals, strategies, and progress (DuFour & Fullan, 2013) toward the realization of equity and excellence for all students.

A prevailing culture that focuses on building relationships with individuals (including among adults) and "academic optimism" (Hoy, 2012) supports students' self-efficacy and resiliency (Williams & Bryan, 2013; Henderson, N., 2013). School culture plays an integral role in the adoption of evidence-informed practices (Hargreaves & Braun, 2012) that lead to a culture of academic optimism. With regard to achievement, implementation of the following actions that support equitable practices have resulted in a cultural change and proven results in challenged schools:

1. Teachers teach students, not standards, and high expectations are held for all students.
2. Data are routinely used to understand individual student needs.
3. Teachers continuously reflect on their practice and accountability is embraced.
4. Decisions are made in the interest of what is good for students, not adults.
5. As many community resources as possible are leveraged to enhance the instructional program.
6. Less time is spent on disciplining students by creating an atmosphere of respect.
7. Struggling students receive the best instruction by the most effective teachers.
8. Principals are visible and attend to the quality of teaching.

9. Time for collaboration, including peer observation, is routinely built into the schedule.
10. An investment is made in acculturating new hires and maintaining a high-quality, dedicated, and competent support staff who feel they are part of the educational mission (Chenoweth, 2007).

The importance of increasing support as demand rises counters the rise of stress and increases self-efficacy (Evans, 1996), compelling committed district and school leaders to provide the adult and student support needed as the structures, processes, and practices align for equity and excellence for all students each day.

### Reflective Questions

1. Reflect on the sense of equity embedded in the school's mission. Next, examine the school improvement plan to determine the alignment of strategies and actions in the plan that address the inequities that serve as a barrier to achieving the student-focused goals and meeting the vision. What barriers were identified? What strategies and actions will be added to address inequities?
2. Examine the bulleted list of successful practices employed by challenged schools studied by Chenoweth (2007). Are these practices part of the culture of your school?. If yes, provide one example of evidence. If no, use a theory of action statement to develop the next steps.

### In Conclusion

Using a systems thinking approach with an understanding of the contextual uniqueness supports district and school leaders to build an organization (system, structures, processes, and practices) that supports the mission for equity. Capacity (human, social, program coherence, and resources) needs to be built to successfully implement actions to disrupt the inequities and address deficiencies in the core foundational elements (leadership, talent, instruction, and culture). A formidable vision and purpose provide a layer of coherency for stakeholders as their deeply held assumptions, beliefs, and routines are recultured. Implementation fidelity is essential in sustaining the change over time, leading to a culture of equity that permeates the school, classroom, and greater community. Monitoring the intended impact of actions to disrupt inequities is crucial in determining progress in addressing inequities. While measures of cultural change are not all quantitative, thoughtful identification of measures is essential. The dynamics of society, districts, and schools (e.g., systems) require the

ongoing engagement of district and school leaders in adapting or developing new structures, processes, and practices in pursuit of educational equity and excellence for all students. ESSA provides states, districts, and schools the opportunity to pursue such a vision through four major areas:

1. Access to learning opportunities focused on higher-order thinking skills (standards and assessments);
2. Multiple measures of equity (opportunities to learn, school climate and inclusion, and equitable access to effective teaching);
3. Resource equity (reporting school expenditures and tracking inequities, incentives for equitable funding approaches, equity policy leveraging to support immigrant students, and school improvement funding); and
4. Evidence-based interventions (early childhood education, community schools, and integration and school diversity) (Cook-Harvey, Darling-Hammond, Lam, Mercher & Roc, 2016).

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