



Mar 10

Why an equity audit?



The ABCs of Equity Audits

This blog is the first in a series of three blogs on equity audits to be released over the next three months: Part I: Why an equity audit? Part II: What is an equity audit? Part III: Where do we start?

Part I: Why an equity audit?

This past year, equity audits have been a go-to strategy to close the performance gap for students from historically marginalized groups. And rightly so. Despite being the target of education reform for decades, achievement gaps remain. Inattention to the inequitable access to student opportunities contributes to the persistence of these performance gaps. Traditional education strategies often adopt a “colorblind” approach, erasing fundamental cultural, social, and economic differences among students. A more student-centered approach is needed to close student performance gaps, one that explicitly addresses student diversity.

Inequitable systems do not require deliberate discrimination. At Equity Journey Partners, we believe that student performance gaps exist in school districts **despite** administrators', educators', and staff's very best intentions. Unfortunately, good intentions are not sufficient. Policies and procedures that are "neutral" on their face – i.e., treat everyone the same – can be inequitable in practice. The interaction of staff's unconscious biases and the influence of community capital with the daily activities associated with policies and procedures can easily subvert the commitment to high expectations and equity.

Let's look at an example of how community capital can influence a "neutral" policy. An achievement gap exists between the SAT scores of students from low-income households and students from middle-high income households. A student opportunity is a condition that a student experiences that is favorable to attaining a goal; in this instance the goal is SAT scores that compete with middle-high income students. The high school offers a free SAT prep program after school, a neutral policy on its face. Few students from low-income homes take advantage of this opportunity because they lack access; there is no after school school-provided bus transportation. Community economic capital influences the gap in student access to this after school opportunity. Students from middle-upper class families may have parents available for after school pickup, while students from low-income homes may need to rely on school-provided transportation. Equity audits also examine the influence of social capital (access to networks), educational capital (access to knowledge), and cultural capital (access to dominant culture) on "neutral" policies and practices.

Now, let's look at an example of how unconscious bias can influence a "neutral" policy. There is an achievement gap in the 6th grade math scores on the state exam between students who identify as Black and students who identify as White, with White students outperforming Black students by almost 30%. The elementary school offers a gifted math program to students starting in 3rd grade. Students are identified for the gifted program by grades or through their second-grade teacher, a neutral policy on its face. Fewer Black students are admitted to the gifted math program because they do not receive teacher recommendations at the same rate as White students with equal performance. The unconscious bias of second-grade teachers may influence student access to this opportunity and contribute to the 6th grade math achievement gap. Learned stereotypes operating automatically drive much of our social behavior when

we interact with others. This is our unconscious bias at play. Learned stereotypes concerning race are often hierarchical: ex. White is superior to Black in terms of intelligence.

The daily interaction of policies and procedures with these two powerful dynamics - community capital and unconscious bias - often cause the actual performance of the policies and procedures to differ significantly from the intended performance, with the actual performance exhibiting unintentional discrimination. This unintentional discrimination creates student opportunity gaps that eventually result in student achievement gaps. An equity audit implemented effectively can uncover the root causes underlying the difference between intended and unintended practices, allowing districts to address these inequities. In our next blog, "What is an equity audit?" EJP will address how to structure equity audits to achieve your district's equity goals.

Want to learn more? Register for a free Webinar "The ABCs of Equity Audits" on April 28th from 12:30 - 1:30 ET [here](#).

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