



May 12

# Where do we start?

## The ABCs of Equity Audits

This blog is the third of three blogs on equity audits: [Part I: Why an equity audit?](#) [Part II: What is an equity audit?](#) [Part III: Where do we start?](#)

### Part III: Where do we start?

Equitable school districts commit to giving every student what they need to participate fully in all available student opportunities. The focus of equity work must be to remove the barriers that limit full participation in these opportunities. The purpose of the equity audit is to uncover these barriers and suggest practical ways to dismantle them. An equity audit also identifies a school district's equity successes and presents lessons learned and opportunities to bring these successes to scale.

Removing barriers implies change. Change not just for the system but also individuals – for individual administrators, teachers, counselors, paraprofessionals, staff, students, parents and caregivers, and community members. Even scaling successes can mean change for individuals. And, as we know, change can be challenging; it may involve loss and be emotional. And while the result is a system where all students receive an excellent education and a stronger, more resilient community, it is the individual loss that drives the resistance to change. Sometimes change means the loss of something tangible such as when equity requires shifting finite budget resources to close student opportunity gaps. For example, eliminating a favorite program at one school in favor of acceleration support for lower-performing students. Individuals also lose something

when there is a shift or loss in authority or autonomy. For example, when placement procedures tighten to ensure all students have access to the best teachers. Change can also mean the loss of something intangible. As administrators, educators, and staff begin to acknowledge the impact of unconscious bias and cultural incompetence on their practice, they may experience guilt and question their identity as an educator.

What are the implications for equity audits? How far along it is on its equity journey will determine the overall design of the district's equity audit, including where to begin.

### **For Districts Further Along on the Equity Journey**

Districts or schools that have spent time exploring the implications of unconscious bias, cultural competence, and systemic inequalities on their practices and devoting time to building community consensus around an equity vision have more flexibility in designing an audit. Shared understanding of the long-term benefits of an equity audit often results in greater receptivity to the adjustments and redistributions that may be recommended. An equity audit will ground their previous work and provide a roadmap for achieving their equity goals.

These districts should customize their audit both to fit within their budget constraints and their capacity for change. As educators, we are anxious to solve immediately any unfair treatment of a child in our care. A district needs to make sure that any system change is sustainable. Administrators, educators, staff, students, and caregivers only have so much capacity to absorb the loss and implement new practices and processes at one time. Can a district implement a new equitable budgeting process, introduce a new culturally relevant curriculum, revamp the student behavior process all at the same time? It can, but will it be sustainable? How much stress will push your system and people to the breaking point? Districts are complex systems, and a change in one primary process or practice can reverberate across many different functions. Districts must be thoughtful and deliberate in their approach. They can undertake a comprehensive audit with a thoughtful multi-year implementation plan or a multi-year audit approach that tackles student opportunity gaps over time, initially focusing on a few key equity levers.

### **For Districts At the Beginning of their Journey**

For districts at the beginning of their equity journey, a different approach is needed. These districts need to begin by building a solid foundation for their equity work including a shared understanding that an equitable district is a healthy and safe place that respects and acknowledges all cultures and social identities, provides an excellent education for all students, and fosters a stronger, more resilient broader community. Releasing equity audit findings to an unprepared school community poses risks ranging from a delay to outright crisis (in education, we know how just a few loud voices can foment a crisis). Taking the time to build community consensus and build understanding and ownership in concepts such as cultural competence, unconscious biases, and systemic racism will be worth the effort. This time is not time wasted; building a solid foundation is an effective strategy for sustainable reform.

Districts can build community consensus around an equity journey in many different ways. Districts can start small by assembling a cohort of individuals within the district and community to serve as caretakers and sponsors of the equity work. Building knowledge and understanding can begin through informal community conversations within the school district or broader community using a study circle or community book club approach. Building knowledge and skills in the school district can include voluntary research-based professional development (no, a two-hour training on unconscious bias is not sufficient!) with continuing job-embedded support, such as school-based equity fellows. Evidence shows that mandatory training on diversity and equity is often ineffective and can even backfire, eliciting defensiveness, so districts should be cautious with this strategy.

Regardless of where a district is on its equity journey, there will be pushback. It is inevitable. Change impacts individuals. It is this individual impact that makes moving to equity so difficult for school systems. And while the result is a system where all students receive an excellent education and a stronger, more resilient community, when change is personal – my child, my classroom, my position, my school – there will be resistance. Hopefully, the time spent building community consensus around an equity vision and understanding around equity concepts pays a dividend. If a solid foundation exists, the district can weather the storm and continue on its equity journey.

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