



Apr 7

What is an equity audit?

The ABCs of Equity Audits

This blog is the second 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 II: What is an equity audit?

The word “audit” brings to mind serious-minded, external professionals swooping in and inspecting every nook and cranny to produce a 10-pound final report that lays bare every minute error in the organization’s internal workings. It may also bring to mind a bit of fear and some trepidation. An equity audit is not a “gotcha” moment; it is a learning journey. The equity audit process is one of introspection, reflection, collaboration, and dialogue. The resultant report is not final but a living document that provides a framework for achieving your school or district’s equity vision.

An equity audit is an in-depth, comprehensive, and inclusive strategic planning or school improvement process with a laser focus on equity. Strategic or improvement planning is a familiar process for most data-driven schools and districts. The basic steps of an equity audit are very similar:

- Develop a shared equity vision;
- Collect and analyze data to identify student opportunity gaps;
- Conduct a root cause analysis to identify and validate potential equity drivers of the identified student opportunity gaps;

- Adopt strategies addressing the equity root causes and create an action plan for implementation and monitoring.

While an equity audit is similar to an improvement or planning process, school districts should pay careful attention to three (3) notable components that distinguish an equity audit:

1. Start with a shared equity vision.
2. Focus on the equity drivers.
3. Center the voices of the traditionally marginalized populations.

Start with a shared equity vision.

An equity audit starts with a shared equity vision. Nowadays, most mission or vision statements include a commitment to equity. Unfortunately, equity is rarely defined in any detail. A clear and detailed equity vision focuses an audit on critical student opportunities and guides qualitative and quantitative data collection. Without a clear and detailed vision of equity that encompasses most district functions, an equity audit is just a shot in the dark, unlikely to hit its target – the potential root causes of the student opportunity gaps.

It is not sufficient to have an equity vision. The entire school community – administrators, educators, staff, family and caregivers, students (high school at a minimum), and the district or school’s governing board – must share this vision. It is a heavy lift; creating an equitable school system is not an easy task. Shifting the balance between advantage and disadvantage requires trust and ownership. It also requires the voices of those students and caregivers from traditionally marginalized populations. A school district cannot presume to speak for these populations; the perspective of their lived experiences and their knowledge of their culture gives the equity vision its meaning.

Focus on the equity drivers.

An effective equity audit uncovers the equity drivers that contribute to the student opportunity gaps. As discussed in our previous blog (“Why an equity audit?”), the daily interaction of policies and procedures with (1) unconscious bias of school district staff, (2) the cultural competence of staff and district systems, and (3) inequitable

community capital 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.

Learned stereotypes that operate automatically drive much of our interpersonal behavior. This is known as unconscious or implicit bias. Unfortunately, these learned stereotypes concerning race, ethnicity, gender, income, sexuality, and religion are often negative and significantly impact how students experience school. We can see the results in suspensions and referral rates, admission to gifted programs, placement of high-quality teachers, and school and student funding, to name only a few. Because bias is unconscious, to understand its influence, an equity audit must triangulate data, using multiple sources and multiple methods of data collection. Focus groups, interviews, and surveys of all stakeholders, especially those from traditionally marginalized groups, are required.

The basic structure of schooling has not changed in over 100 years despite the changing needs and growing diversity of our student population. Pairing traditional systems with an administrative and teaching staff not reflective of student diversity often results in persistent student opportunity gaps. An equity audit examines cultural clashes in policies, practices, structures, and systems and recommends strategies that honor and respect the student population's cultural values, norms, and traditions.

Traditional planning processes rarely look outside the walls of the district in considering root causes. But, when inequities exist in the school's community, these inequities will permeate the walls and influence student opportunities. Equity audits look at how community economic capital (money and material resources), social capital (relationships and networks), knowledge capital (access to knowledge, skills, and resources), cultural capital (cultural style, ways to work, tone of voice, language expression, clothing, and hairstyles, etc.) and symbolic capital (symbols of competence, innocence, and legitimacy) influence inequities within the school district.

Center the voices of the traditionally marginalized populations.

When discussing the importance of a shared equity vision above, we emphasized the importance of including all voices, especially those of historically marginalized populations. Inclusion does not end at the outset of the audit. An equity audit centers

the voices of the traditionally marginalized populations during the data collection phase, the root cause analysis, and when shaping responsive recommendations. A school district cannot presume to speak for historically marginalized populations; there is no substitute for the perspective of lived experiences and the intimate knowledge of cultures and social identities. Without a diversity of participants, the equity audit explores root causes through a dominant culture lens. Without a diversity of participants, responding strategies are at risk of being off-the-shelf “best” practices that ignore the nuances, richness, and breadth of a school district’s diverse cultures and social identities.

Including a diversity of voices in equity audits raise the potential for challenging conversations. Preparation is essential. In creating safe and brave spaces for diverse opinions, districts may consider using external facilitators, setting the foundation for trust through training and community dialogue, adopting conversation norms, and utilizing conversation protocols, among various strategies.

An equity audit is a complex project not to be undertaken lightly or as a compliance project. It takes time, resources, and emotional energy. But, it is an essential step in your district’s equity journey. In our next blog, “Where do we start?” we discuss how to assess readiness and prepare for an equity audit.

[◀ Where do we start?](#)

[Why an equity audit? ▶](#)

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