



REIMAGINING
INTEGRATION
Diverse and Equitable Schools



RIDES Improvement Cycle for Equity– Overview and Usage Guide

This document has three parts.

Part 1 makes the case for WHY having and using an explicit equity improvement cycle is a key step for continuous improvement in a school, district, or charter management organization that is seeking diversity, equity, and integration. It identifies four common challenges faced by schools and systems and suggests ways in which the RIDES Equity Improvement Cycle can help address them, by providing a structured improvement process that allows participants to plan and implement small, specific gains in areas that they choose as important. (p 1)

Part 2 outlines key ideas in HOW implementing the cycle so it is not just a series of mechanical steps, but rather a mindset shift in how participants – students, teachers, parents, administrators—work with each other. It suggests that “you learn the work by doing the work”—the actual process of having diverse groups of participants working together and succeeding in small specific gains can build understandings of equity and a sense of collective ownership and efficacy in the process. (p 3)

Part 3 focuses on the WHAT of the improvement cycle, identifying the stages participants go through with some brief examples and reference to supporting tools and approaches. (p 5)

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WHY do we need an Equity Improvement Cycle to get diverse, equitable, and truly integrated schools?

After centuries of exclusion and segregation, the major policy efforts in the last 60 years have focused on desegregating schools-- getting a diverse set of bodies in the school buildings. These efforts have had successes and setbacks (and in many ways the country is more segregated than it was in 1954) but even when successful, are not sufficient if we want equitable and truly integrated schools.

Many of these “desegregated” schools provide very different experiences and inequitable outcomes for students of different racial and economic backgrounds. Many are segregated inside by racialized placements into academic “tracks” or gifted and talented programs. Often disciplinary structures disproportionately affect students of color. Curriculum does not always represent the multiple cultures of the school; the list goes on.

There are schools, districts and charter management organizations (CMOs) that are trying to move beyond desegregation to become places that provide the ABCDs of integration:

Academics: All students have strong academic preparation, capitalizing on and connecting to students of all backgrounds, with high levels of knowledge and skills.

Belonging: All students have a strong sense and appreciation of their own culture and heritage, as well as of those of their diverse classmates.

Commitment to dismantling racism and oppression: All students understand the role that institutional racism and other forms of oppression play in our society and have the skills, vision, and courage to dismantle them.

Diversity: All students appreciate and value different perspectives, thoughts, and people and have friendships and collaborative working relationships with students and adults from different racial and economic backgrounds

Challenges in moving beyond desegregation

When educators try to move to true integration, they typically face four kinds of challenges in their work, often roughly in this order.

Challenge 1: We are diverse and we don’t see the inequity in our schools, districts, or charter management organizations (CMOs):

- We talk proudly of our diverse student body: “We have students who speak 27 different languages in their homes.”
- We all say we are committed to “equity” but don’t have a common definition or way of understanding how inequity impacts our school.
- We have not explored our own identities and the different perspectives that our faculty and staff have about race and equity. and how this affects our view of how programmatic and systemic aspects of racism and oppression play out in our setting,

Challenge 2: We see the inequities and there are so many of them, we don't know where to start:

- We have looked at our data and started the discussions about inequitable impacts in our setting-- disciplinary systems, tracking, or special education referral systems that disproportionately impact students of color and lead to inequitable outcomes, that are exacerbated by lack of hiring and retention of staff of color, and curriculum and teaching practices that marginalize people of color
- It all seems overwhelming, since the racial and economic disparities are complex within our school, and affected by things outside it—poverty, racism, housing and job discrimination and much more. What can we do to change anything?
- We want to do what is right, best, and has the most impact, but don't know what it is

Challenge 3: We are ready to work to move toward true integration, but don't know how to work together well, especially on racially charged topics

- We don't really have good improvement processes, that use data thoughtfully and deliberately and that help us diagnose patterns, generate solutions, and then implement, assess, and refine them.
- It is especially hard for us to work on equity improvement issues because we have so many different perspectives (and different understandings around our own identity and issues of race and equity), so we don't talk honestly and clearly with one another.
- We know it is important to work with students and parents on these issues, but are not sure how; we don't have the skills and beliefs to do this well.

Challenge 4: We are taking steps toward integration and have put some initiatives in place, but we are disappointed when we don't find the silver bullet that solves the problem

- We have adopted suggestions that seem to make sense-- more culturally relevant curriculum, or working on implicit bias of teachers, or strategies to engage parents differently-- but they operate in isolation
- We sometimes get some traction in one area, but don't seem to be moving the whole school or district or CMO
- We feel like we don't have a systemic plan for equity improvement. We know that what happens in classrooms, school, systems (districts or CMOs) and communities should be all linked, but we don't have good processes for this.

It is important to note that not everyone in a setting will experience these challenges in the same way. Some individuals or groups within a school community, or schools within a larger district or CMO may be stuck at different points, or be further in overcoming any of these challenges. Progress in addressing them will not necessarily be linear. The next sections outline some guiding principles for HOW participants can best address them.

How can an Equity Improvement Cycle help us to get diverse, equitable, and truly integrated schools?

These are deep challenges that, with some variations, affect a great number of desegregated schools trying to be more integrated. Schools and systems that are overcoming these challenges model continuous improvement, bring diverse groups of stakeholders to develop a clear equity vision, and use a variety of sources to gather data on how the reality in their setting differs from their vision. They use short recursive improvement cycles that enable them to keep their eyes on the big picture of where they are going, while they act specifically and decisively on a particular challenge. By building in short cycle improvements on which they can make relatively quick progress, they develop a sense of shared efficacy. By incorporating key reflective steps along the way, they actually get better as they work together-- they learn the work by doing it.

Ways to address these challenges

The following set of suggestions provide some guidelines for how you might do this. They also suggest a mindset shift in how stakeholders in schools and systems work together. As you read them, think about where you are at your site in developing and using each of these approaches, and what mindsets would need to shift and what systems would have to be in place for you to do them more effectively:

- Draw on multiple sources of data and multiple perspectives in analyzing and discussing the data (Challenges 1 and 3). This means looking closely at existing data (what you already collect) to see how disparities due to race or class or other show up in the data. It also means looking at data that might not yet be collected, like student or parent surveys or focus groups that shed light on experiences students from different backgrounds might be having in the school. It is important that these data are analyzed by a set of stakeholders that is diverse on many levels-- race, gender, class, roles -- to minimize and surface blind spots that might otherwise prevent seeing the inequities.
- Understand that the journey to an equitable school is personal as well as organizational and that people have to be willing to look at their own identities and blind spots as individuals, and create caring courageous communities to discuss them (Challenges 1 and 3). Also, it is important to acknowledge that some people have been damaged and left out of this work; while others have been oblivious to inequities and/or unwilling to take the work on. These lingering scars affect the way groups will work together and will need to be addressed in the early stages of group formation. They need to be learned and reinforced by not just talking together, but by acting together and reflecting honestly on that action.
- See the advantages of a structured process that leads to “small wins” and that builds capacity for deeper and further equity work (Challenges 2 and 3). By focusing on a specific improvement area, a team can gain a sense of collective efficacy and get practice on identifying what efforts are the most high-leverage.

- Work systemically -- using a [systemic improvement map](#) such as the one provided by RIDES to keep a coherent focus on improvement efforts (Challenges 2 and 4). Furthermore, using a framework that looks at individual, interpersonal, institutional and systemic racism helps keep an equity lens on the work(Challenges 1 and 3).
- Learn the work by doing the work. This work cannot be done only by talking about it in abstract ways, or bringing in outside consultants to offer solutions you can take off the shelf. Sometimes it's hard for schools and systems to have abstract discussions of equity and how different types of systemic and individual racism impact so many aspects of the way the school operates, or about how the equity working group itself works together. Working together in even relatively short Equity Improvement Cycles can give schools the opportunity to gain momentum and not get “stuck” at one step.
- Continuously learn and reflect on the process, using questions like these during and after each cycle -- questions that are designed to make sure there is continuous improvement in addressing the four challenges:
 - Are we getting closer to a common definition and specific vision of what equity should look like in our setting?
 - Are we gaining traction on our equity working group and in our setting around equity improvement? Do our efforts and improvement lead to measurable impacts and enthusiasm for continued efforts?
 - Are we working together honestly in ways that help us, as individuals and as a team, on our journeys to racial equity and understanding?
 - Are we thinking and working systemically (and have we defined this) so our work is reinforcing and powerful, not fragmented, and is guided by system thinking at the classroom, school, system, and societal levels,

This is hard, important work and how it is done matters as much as that it is being done. Even though the stages below are drawn sequentially, the work is not always linear and can be recursive, with steps back to consider and improve what might have happened in a prior step. The mindsets and philosophical approach, however, run throughout it.

External or internal coaching to help shift these mindsets can be very helpful.

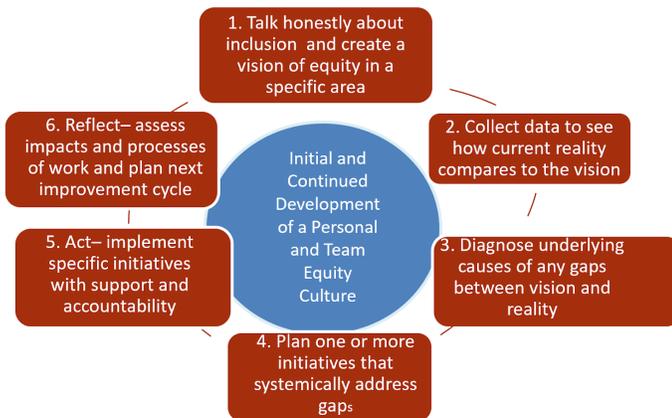
WHAT is the RIDES Equity Improvement Cycle?

The cycle brings together a key group of stakeholders (students, teachers, parents, and administrators) to focus on a particular issue around equity at their school. Sometimes they focus on the classroom dynamics – what equity looks like in the relationships teachers have with students, how culturally connected the curriculum is, etc.. The cycle can also focus on other equity issues, like disproportionate referrals of students of color for discipline, or difficulties a school or system has in hiring and retaining faculty of color. The cycle is usually done over weeks or months (although it can be jump-started using the [RIDES Three-Day Intensive](#)), and should always be part of ongoing systemic improvement work. Regardless of the length of the cycle or the topic, there is some preliminary work as part of the set-up and then six key steps that a well-executed equity improvement cycle should provide:

The RIDES Equity Improvement Cycle helps sites

1- develop a Personal and Team Equity Culture
and

2- then guides them through six recursive steps:



Building a Personal and Team Equity Culture

Before launching an improvement cycle, the school or system needs to identify a specific topic and set up an equity working group to work on the topic-- to do the work of visioning, collecting, diagnosis, planning, etc. Sometimes the focus area is clear or has come out of some other analysis or improvement work (e.g. a strategic plan, analysis of schoolwide or student data, school improvement plan), in which case, a specific working group can be formed to address that topic and begin a cycle. Other times a broader

equity planning or oversight group might be convened to look at data strategic plans, etc. to help identify the first topic for the improvement cycle.

Setting up an equity working group is considerably more than assembling the individuals but means working together to develop a Personal and Team Equity Culture. This intentional focus on supporting an individual and team helps them unpack and understand:

- The four forms of racism: individual, interpersonal, institutional and ideological
- Personal triggers that may prevent you from engaging in Race, Equity, and Integration-based work.
- Individual and team unconscious biases.
- How to develop a personal leadership story which will communicate why dismantling inequity is so important to you.
- How to use intentional developmental skills to support leaders others through race, equity, and integration based work.

Suggestions:

To learn more about the four forms of racism, use this [2-page overview](#) to spark discussion, and ask participants to share their own experiences of each form.

Explore unconscious biases with the Implicit Association Test from Harvard's [Project Implicit](#) and discuss implications.

For ideas on how to identify a topic, the [RIDES Progress Indicators](#) can be used either with a small planning team or with a broader cross section of stakeholders. The [Coherence protocol: Mapping your current equity initiatives](#) can also be done by a small or larger group to look at what initiatives have already been put into place, and to identify what is missing. Finally, you can use suggestions in [Finding a Focus: Thinking Globally and Acting Locally](#) to identify high leverage, impactful areas on which to focus an equity improvement cycle,

Once a topic is chosen, think strategically about the composition of the specific working group to steward a RIDES Equity Improvement Cycle. It should be driven by the focus of the chosen topic and by taking advantage of the opportunities to get multiple and different perspectives, based on role (e.g if the focus is in classrooms, including students), as well as race, class, gender, and ethnicity.

Starting the Cycle

Regardless of the topic, the process is the same. The cycle is shown using two examples, with links to tools that can be useful in this process.

Step 1: A diverse group of stakeholders forms, develops norms for working together and creates a vision of equity in the chosen area. For example, a group of teachers, students and administrators might spend a few hours developing, at a specific and granular level,

what they think diverse and equitable classrooms should look like in their school, or what a non-disproportionate discipline system might look like.

Suggestions:

- Using protocols to make the hopes and fears of the group discussable as a way of norm setting
- Common readings about equity and diversity with interactive protocols like “Save the Last Word” to foster discussion
- Bringing and sharing experiences around diversity and equity in your setting (especially powerful when bringing students in to work with teachers and administrators.)

Step 2 : The group then collects appropriate data to see how current reality matches the vision they have created. For the first example above, members of the group might observe in classrooms, to look closely at what students and teachers are doing, or at the cultural relevance of the curriculum. For the second example, they might look at various aspects of the discipline referral pipeline, perhaps examining referral data and then talking to students, teachers and administrators about what actually happens in the various stages of the pipeline.

Suggestions:

- Use the specific equity focus area to determine the data to examine.
- Look at existing data with an equity lens (how are students of color responding differently than white students to an existing survey on bullying at the school?);
- Work as a team (possibly with a data expert at the site) to develop customized data analysis tools for specific purposes
- Considering using a mix of numbers (quantitative data) and narrative (stories from focus groups, classroom observation, etc)

Step 3: The group then diagnoses-- looking for patterns in the data that might explain the vision/reality gap. The group focusing on classrooms might identify patterns like: students of color appear marginalized in many classrooms; or teacher talk dominates most classrooms, squeezing out student voice, especially voices of students of color. The discipline referral group might notice a pattern of differential responses to the same classroom behaviors-- where something a student of color does triggers a different disciplinary response than if it were done by a white student. Or the pattern might be the punishments meted out by the administrators for the same offense are different for students of different backgrounds. For each of the patterns that emerge (and the groups think are worth following up) the group conducts a root cause analysis like the [5 Whys](#) to understand what is underneath the pattern, so they could more thoughtfully address it.

Suggestions:

- A number of patterns may emerge from the data and the group will need to do some sorting and prioritizing, selecting those that seem high-leverage-- meaning if we could change this pattern, important equity issues would be addressed), and systemically connected--meaning improvements in this area will have ripple

- effects on other areas we care about (e.g. if we figure out how to get and retain more teachers of color, that will have other positive ripples in our classrooms, on our working committees, etc.)
- Groups often tend to want to skip past the underlying causes of the pattern, to jump to solutions, but the work is much more powerful if you go below the surface

Step 4: With those patterns and diagnoses in mind -- and with a strong focus on the implications of these patterns on equity, the group moves to generate plans-- thinking creatively and systemically about what short and long-term approaches might help close the gap and help the school get closer to the vision of equity they had outlined in the chosen area. One of the short term suggestions for improving the visibility of students of color (in the example mentioned above) included weekly videos and stories in the school newspaper created by an ongoing working group of diverse students and teachers, providing them an opportunity to work more deeply with one another, as well as to begin to change the culture and visibility in the school.

Suggestions:

- Here are some questions that can help guide this. In what ways is the planned focused next step for equity:
 - **High leverage?** (if successful, it would not only move the work forward in an important way, but also help ripple out to improve other areas of your systemic map; and would provide high impact for relatively small effort)
 - **Operationalizable?** (you have or can organize the capacity to implement it)
 - **Connected to the bigger diagnostic picture?** (and this is seen and understood by all key stakeholders; it helps to use a [systemic improvement map](#).)
 - **Something on which measurable progress can be made in a relatively short time frame?** (and you are clear about how and by whom that measurement will be done)
 - **Presented clearly and in ways that connect to a variety of stakeholders?** (so a range of stakeholders see all of the above-- leverage, implementation, connection, progress measurement, so that the next step is widely owned and understood)
 - **Broadly owned?** (so the idea and plan is not just held by coaches or a handful of people)
- Groups will benefit from reaching out to the [knowledge base](#) to find ideas and examples from others who have taken on a similar challenge.

Step 5: Act. The equity improvement cycle does not mean much if there is no clear and consistent follow-up. The group works to ensure others in the school or system community know, understand, and own the work, which often means sharing some of the visioning, data collection, diagnoses, and planning thinking that led to it at a meeting with other stakeholders.

Suggestions:

- Implementation is best done when it is supported, measured, and clearly tied to existing structures and approaches to improvement. In some high schools, this means that the follow up work will be done in departments.
- Follow up is more likely to take place if it is tied to existing vertical accountability structures (e.g. expectations for reporting out in a hierarchy, or tied to evaluations), as well as lateral accountability (peer to peer or team structures).
- At the same time, it is critical to ensure the ongoing involvement of diverse stakeholders in the follow-up work. The school that engaged students in focusing on classroom equity in the example above had the students help design and present the suggestions to the rest of the faculty and to other students. They had to set up new structures for implementation, since historically students had not played roles in improvement at the school.

Step 6: A key part of “learning the work by doing the work” is to build in reflection questions at each point on the journey and then more formally when reaching the milestones for action. In the example where students worked side by side with teachers and administrators looking at equitable classroom practices, at each step of the way, the group discussed what it meant to include students as agents (not just subjects) of equity improvement. During the first stage, they set up norms that included “no rank”-- anyone could say anything without fear of repercussions. During and after each subsequent stage, the group revisited this, checking to see whether all voices were being heard and listened to, and ultimately celebrating the engagement of students and the mutual learning that each group saw could not have happened without the others.

Suggestions:

- Groups benefit along the way by using specific RIDES Equity Improvement Cycle questions (above, in the HOW section, P. 4)
- At the end of the improvement cycle, groups use “after action reviews” (what did we try to do, what we actually do, what did we learn)?)

The cycle is recursive to support continued improvement in the chosen area, as well as continued learning by the school or system participants.