

## Systems and Structures

The role of **Systems and Structures** in segregated, desegregated, and integrated schools

### Introduction and Background:

The manner in which school systems and structures operate ultimately influences their *academic* outcomes, culture of *belongingness*, collective *commitment* to dismantling racism, and appreciation of *diversity* ([the ABCDs of RIDES](#)). For schools, school districts, or Charter Management Organizations (CMOs) to move toward more effective integration and equitable outcomes for all of their stakeholders, schools, systems and structures must create an environment that facilitates student outcomes that align with the [ABCDs](#). Teachers, leaders, and stakeholders interested in driving change must consider the wide range of elements that interact within the systems and structures that persist in public education. These broader systems and structures can range from those at a micro level (i.e. within schools), like no-excuses school discipline or ability group tracking, to a macro level (i.e. district or CMO wide systems), like the structures of student assignment and teacher diversity.

### Historical and Theoretical Overview:

Systemic and structural analysis of schools has developed over time as an offshoot of the broader movement to understand how all systems can be improved through analysis and continuous improvement. Among those facets of schools studied in the scholarship are social and educational systems. At its most basic level, a system is “a set of elements that function as a whole to achieve a common purpose” (Betts, 1992, p.38). As school and district improvement efforts often fall flat in the face of public education’s propensity for pattern maintenance, leaders in the field must be cognizant of the ever changing interaction of elements within the broader system, and the structures in place which can facilitate or interrupt such interaction.

Much of today’s systemic thinking in education developed as an offshoot from the Total Quality Management movement, a concept often originally credited to W. Edwards Deming (British Library, 2016). Management using the Total Quality approach began in the automotive industry as questions were raised on how to produce outcomes closer to the designed intention. The initial insight was that systems are uniquely designed to create exactly what is produced, and that to create different outcomes requires redesigning the system. Systems are designed to create the exact results they are designed for. In education, this insight led to the understanding that the performance issues in education resulted from how its systems were designed. Similar to the organizational development field, the field of education has learned to map its systems and to practice improving them by changing inputs and structures to create better outcomes. Increasing the capacity to view issues, challenges and problems in school from a systemic lense has become the norm. This practice is informed by the thought that structures in school systems are responsible for supporting current practice.

To change outcomes requires changing the underlying structures in which the systems reside. As Betts (1992) describes, “The improvement of quality involves the design of an educational system that not only optimizes the relationship among the elements but also between the educational system and its

environment. In general, this means designing a system that is more open, organic, pluralistic, and complex.” (Betts, 1992, p. 40)

For example, issues of student misbehavior have in the past tended to be discussed on a micro level as an issue related to the individual student, teacher, or classroom. A shift to systems thinking allows leaders to consider the broad range of structures within a school (for example, inequitable discipline policies) that lead to the observed results. Structures that determine the manner in which students are assigned to classes can directly influence the outcomes of such students, perpetuating inequities that have historically had a negative impact on students of color. When subjective teacher recommendations, or arbitrary grade or test score cutoffs are used exclusively to determine a students’ access to advanced course work like AP classes, students of color or economically disadvantaged are often systematically denied access to such courses and set on a track of lower academic achievement. Similarly, hiring practices that fail to recruit and retain diverse teacher workforces have broad reaching impacts on several elements of the system as a whole, including students, teachers, curriculum and leadership.

Research has shown that students of color are less likely to be removed from the classroom and more likely to be subject to higher standards if they are taught by a teacher of color (Partelow et al., 2017). District level student assignment policies that continue to segregate students on lines of race and socioeconomic status have downstream damaging effects of students of all backgrounds. Discipline systems that are based on an over-reliance on suspensions and other harsh penalties tend to disproportionately affect students of color and perpetuate inequitable access to educational opportunities. To have the broadest impact, leaders in public education must also be able to integrate systemic thinking from other disciplines outside of education, for example, housing and the causes and effects of intergenerational poverty, in order to design student assignment policies that enable equitable distribution of opportunity to students of all backgrounds.

### **Approaches and Strategies:**

- *Teacher Diversity*
  - [Opportunity Culture \(Public Impact\) – Recruitment Toolkit](#)  
This resource is targeted at HR managers and principals to support recruitment of teachers and particularly emphasizes teacher diversity.
  - [Teacher and Staff Selection Toolkit: Step 1](#)  
This resource is targeted at principals and staff selection. It addresses teacher diversity and includes a “Cultural Engagement” competency for selection screening.
  - [To Close the Teacher Diversity Gap, Start with Education Schools](#)  
This article makes the case that education schools need to take more responsibility for addressing the teacher diversity gap.
  - [Recruiting and Retaining Teachers of Color – IDRA](#)  
This resource includes an infographic map, a literature review, and a detailed article listing strategies at both the state and district level for recruiting and retaining a diverse, high-quality teacher workforce.
  
- *Detracking*

- [Do We Still Segregate Our Students? - Pacific Standard](#)  
This article describes the history and context around current systems of tracking.
  - [Restructuring and Reculturing Schools to Provide Students with Multiple Pathways to College and Career](#)  
This paper focuses on one attempt to redefine and restructure the academic curriculum, pedagogy, and course structures of California schools into “multiple pathways” to college and career.
  - [The74: Why Boston’s Most Racially Diverse School Could Also Be the Country’s Most Interesting School Integration Story](#)  
This article focuses on the Boston Collegiate Charter School and details how it has managed to become so diverse. It also discusses the systemic commitment it has recently made to de-tracking students, which has led to more equitable outcomes.
- *Student Assignment*
    - [Creating Equitable Student Outcomes: How Housing and Education Policy are Intertwined \(Enterprise\)](#)  
This article describes patterns of residential segregation, both historically and today, the policies that contribute to residential segregation, and how such patterns and policies perpetuate segregation or present opportunities for desegregation of schools and districts.
    - [Using Socioeconomic Indicators as a Tool for School Diversity and Integration – IDRA](#)  
This toolkit includes a literature review, an article, and a podcast, all of which describe various strategies for using socioeconomic status as a tool (as allowed by the Supreme Court) for desegregation of schools at the district and state level, respectively.
    - [The Education Exchange Podcast: Racial Diversity in a Boston Charter School](#)  
This podcast focuses on the Boston Collegiate Charter School and details how it has managed to become so diverse. It also discusses the systemic commitment it has recently made to de-tracking students, which has led to more equitable outcomes.
    - [School Integration in Practice: Lessons from Nine Districts](#)  
This report documents the context around nine districts that have achieved integration (explicitly socioeconomic integration, but, indirectly, racial) through a wide range of system-wide policies, and describes the positive outcomes that schools and students in each of these districts achieve as a result.
- *School Discipline*
    - [A New Report Shows School Discipline Is Meted Out Unequally According to Race, Gender, and Ability](#)  
This article provides a detailed background on the disparities that exist in how school discipline is applied across lines of race, gender, and academic ability.
    - [The School-to-Prison Pipeline](#)  
Describes in detail what has been referred to as the "School-to-Prison Pipeline", where discipline practices, policies, and procedures tend to push students, especially students of color, out of the k-12 educational system and into the juvenile justice system.

- [Tutorial: Introduction to Restorative Justice](#)  
This online tutorial introduces practitioners to the concept of restorative justice, including both the theory and the values of the program as well as recommendations for implementation at a school and district level.

**Systemic Focus:**

Stakeholder Groups	Systems and Structures materials with a lens for diversity and equity	A* B* C* D *A-academics *B-belongingness *C-commitment to dismantling racism *D-diversity
Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <a href="#">Tutorial: Introduction to Restorative Justice</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">To Close the Teacher Diversity Gap, Start with Education Schools</a></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <u>B</u>elongingness, <u>C</u>ommitment to Dismantling Racism</li> <li>● <u>B</u>elongingness, <u>C</u>ommitment to Dismantling Racism, <u>D</u>iversity</li> </ul>
Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <a href="#">Do We Still Segregate Our Students? - Pacific Standard</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">The Education Exchange Podcast: Racial Diversity in a Boston Charter School</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">School Integration in Practice: Lessons from Nine Districts</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">A New Report Shows School Discipline Is Meted Out Unequally According to Race, Gender, and Ability</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">The School-to-Prison Pipeline</a></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <u>A</u>cademics, <u>B</u>elongingness, <u>C</u>ommitment to Dismantling Racism</li> <li>● <u>B</u>elongingness, <u>C</u>ommitment to Dismantling Racism, <u>D</u>iversity</li> <li>● <u>A</u>cademics, <u>D</u>iversity</li> <li>● <u>B</u>elongingness, <u>C</u>ommitment to Dismantling Racism, <u>D</u>iversity</li> <li>● <u>B</u>elongingness, <u>C</u>ommitment to Dismantling Racism, <u>D</u>iversity</li> </ul>
Family and Community Partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <a href="#">The74: Why Boston’s Most Racially Diverse School Could Also Be the Country’s Most Interesting School Integration Story</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Creating Equitable Student Outcomes: How Housing</a></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <u>A</u>cademics, <u>B</u>elongingness, <u>C</u>ommitment to Dismantling Racism, <u>D</u>iversity</li> <li>● <u>A</u>cademics, <u>D</u>iversity</li> </ul>

	<a href="#">and Education Policy are Intertwined (Enterprise)</a>	
Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <a href="#">Opportunity Culture (Public Impact) – Recruitment Toolkit</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Teacher and Staff Selection Toolkit: Step 1</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Recruiting and Retaining Teachers of Color – IDRA</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Using Socioeconomic Indicators as a Tool for School Diversity and Integration – IDRA</a></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>B</b>elongingness, <b>C</b>ommitment to Dismantling Racism, <b>D</b>iversity</li> <li>● <b>B</b>elongingness, <b>C</b>ommitment to Dismantling Racism, <b>D</b>iversity</li> <li>● <b>B</b>elongingness, <b>C</b>ommitment to Dismantling Racism, <b>D</b>iversity</li> <li>● <b>A</b>cademics, <b>D</b>iversity</li> </ul>
Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <a href="#">Restructuring and Reculturing Schools to Provide Students with Multiple Pathways to College and Career</a></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>A</b>cademics, <b>B</b>elongingness, <b>C</b>ommitment to Dismantling Racism</li> </ul>
Curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <a href="#">Tutorial: Introduction to Restorative Justice</a></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>A</b>cademics, <b>B</b>elongingness, <b>C</b>ommitment to Dismantling Racism</li> </ul>

**Implications:**

As school and district improvement efforts often fall flat in the face of public education’s propensity for pattern maintenance, leaders in the field must be cognizant of the ever changing interaction of elements within the broader system, and the structures in place which can facilitate or interrupt such interaction. Teachers, leaders, and stakeholders interested in driving change must consider the wide range of elements that interact within the systems and structures that persist in public education.

**Conclusion:**

For schools, school districts, or Charter Management Organizations (CMOs) to move toward more effective integration and equitable outcomes for all of their stakeholders, schools, systems and structures must create an environment that facilitates student outcomes that align with the [ABCDs](#). To change outcomes requires changing the underlying structures in which the systems reside.

**References:**

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