Leadership

The role of Leadership in segregated, desegregated, and integrated schools.

Introduction and Background:
The manner in which school leaders engage in their work can have a large influence on a school’s academic outcomes, culture of belongingness, collective commitment to dismantling racism, and appreciation of diversity (the ABCDs of RIDES). School leadership is fundamental to reform efforts within schools. Without committed, capable, courageous leaders, no school or school system is able to improve instruction; become a strong community partner; or develop a vibrant, supportive student-centered culture. As schools work toward developing environments that are inclusive of a diverse student body, the role of the leader becomes ever more apparent as they enact the changes necessary to transform the school culture toward true integration.

Historical and Theoretical Overview:
Desegregation
The Supreme Court’s verdict in Brown V. Board of Education (1954) ushered in a period of drastic changes in American schools. Few, if any, communities responded to the initial court decision, given the social pressures to maintain the status quo of segregation within schools and communities. The subsequent decision, commonly known as Brown II (1955), forced state and local jurisdictions to integrate with “all relevant speed.” As a result, schools were compelled to integrate.

Resistance to integration was fierce, violent, and ubiquitous. The federal government adjudicated integration efforts by requiring schools to integrate prior to receiving Title I funding. Subsequently, school leaders were defined by how they effectively (depending on various constituencies) moved the needle toward or away from integration. Whites began to move out of urban school systems, into suburban settings, using housing regulations, discrimination, and illegal practices to maintain de facto community segregation. In addition, many black educators, teachers and administrators alike, lost their jobs within integrated school systems, creating a leadership void among adults. Advocates for the various equal rights student groups used Brown’s precedent to seek changes, either through judicial or legislative means, for their needs and those of allied groups. Among them were students with disabilities, female students, and students speaking languages other than English. Community expectations toward schools drastically would change within a short period of time following federal integration efforts.

Multicultural Education
As schools integrated, educators and experts began the work of ensuring equal educational opportunities were available to all students. Progressive educators called for and created opportunities to improve the educational experiences of students of color by incorporating more inclusive materials into curricula, creating programming that met the needs of these students, and addressing concerns in the outcome gaps between white students and students of color (A of the ABCDs).

Much of this work came to be viewed under the heading of multicultural education in the 1980s and 1990s, with the tenets of affirming diversity and viewing the multiple heritages of students as positive within the educational setting (B and D of the ABCDs). The publication of A Nation at Risk in 1983 shepherded in an age of reform that focused on the ability of schools to educate all students well. Much of
the popular narratives around student diversity in the last two decades of the twentieth century emphasized deficits that students brought with them to schools (i.e. differences in cultural or family background, limited proficiency in the English language, etc.). These narratives failed to consider how schools could best serve an increasingly diverse population in systems built for students from historically underrepresented and underserved backgrounds.

**Civil Rights Organizations Rally for No Child Left Behind**

As school reform became a more salient issue, civil rights organizations advocated to ensure all student groups be held to a similarly high standard. These organizations’ efforts would result in the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2003. NCLB places a high value on standards-based testing to measure student educational outcomes, placing oversight and accountability for educational outcomes in the hands of the state and federal governments. Civil rights organizations advocated for test data to be published publicly by all relevant subgroups, ushering in a heightened focus on the achievement gap as it related to race and class.

With these national reform movements coalescing, school leadership became a central focus and important lever in school reform efforts. While some continued to advocate for judicial avenues for equity through funding reform and urban-suburban integration plans, the Supreme Court began to shy away from its insistence on integration. In the early 2000’s, the Supreme Court relieved a number of Southern districts from court supervision of their mandated integration plans. The Court used Brown as a precedential justification to argue that race can no longer be used in the Parents Involved decision in 2007. Thus, schools have been moving towards greater segregation since 1988, when school integration reached its height, with 44% of African-American students attending majority white schools.

**The Every Student Succeeds Act and Equity**

Instead of looking to students as the issue, school leaders have begun to consider how to transform their school structure to ensure all students have the opportunities and supports needed to achieve academic excellence (A of the ABCDs). In December of 2015, President Barack Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), a renewal of NCLB. A compromise between Republicans and Democrats, ESSA continues to enforce standards-based accountability, while allowing states greater flexibility in their approach to measuring and implementing reforms for schools failing to educate all of their students well.

Proponents of ESSA praise it for its inclusion of additional measures of student wellbeing and outcomes beyond test scores to quantify equity. Some constituents advocated for addressing funding gaps facing America’s poorest schools by assessing the funding formula through which ESSA allocates funds, which is based on Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. While the formula remains, new requirements were put in place that should provide advocates of the equitable allocation of funds additional information about how funds are spent within and across districts.

NCLB and ESSA highlighted the key role school and district leaders play in ensuring educational outcomes for all students. Educational leaders who were not able to move the needle for certain student groups could be fired for failing to do so. These laws created a strong impetus for leaders to better understand issues of equity within their schools. Taking into consideration the shifting demographics in recent decades (i.e. America’s schools now having more students of color than white students, with the Latino student population growing at the fastest rate), the issue of equity is especially salient. Suburban school districts previously insulated through racist housing policies are now serving increasingly diverse
student populations while urban schools encounter higher levels of concentrated poverty in addition to racial segregation. Within this framework, school leaders are being called upon to set and define a vision for what equity can and should mean for their students within their respective schools.

**Approaches and Strategies:**

**Models of Leadership**

Courageous leadership is required for schools to move toward equity. School leaders at all levels must commit themselves to goals and processes that will enhance equity in their schools and school systems. Current scholarship on leadership and educational equity presents several theories and models of leadership. Various theorists have asked the question “what does it mean to lead for equity?” These theorists have considered this question from a variety of angles. For example, a sociologist who has examined the conditions needed for black male students to be successful in schools, offers one perspective while a team of educational leadership scholars whose work is grounded in the daily realities of principals and district leaders will offer another perspective. For some, equity undergirds all a leader’s entire vision; for others it is among a list of competencies that leaders must develop.

Leading for equity includes theories on constructivist leadership, adaptive leadership and transformational leadership. In his doctoral dissertation, Robert T. Larson, combines these three approaches into a new model he calls the Leadership for Equity Praxis Model [Leadership for Equity | Inflexion, Equity in Schools: What Administrators Need to Know | TeachHUB](https://www.inflexion.com/leadership-equity), which offers a compelling case for a critical theory of leading for equity.

**Leadership for Equity in Application**

While there is yet to surface a singular theory or framework for leading for equity, an assortment of resources are accessible in contemporary educational scholarship that offer overviews of leadership for equity and practical examples. These resources consider a number of starting points through which educators can begin the process of working for educational equity for all students. These entry points are informed and motivated by existing performance gaps in student academic achievement which lead schools and districts to question how they can ensure educational excellence for all students ([A of the ABCDs](https://www.acrs.org/)). Federal policies requiring schools to share student outcome data disaggregated by subgroup highlighted student achievement gaps.

Many of the resources on leading for equity analyze and offer approaches in the multiple domains that leaders must operate: instructional leadership, student culture, adult culture and professional learning, and organizational policies and practices. They are typically organized according to the set of beliefs or assumptions that the leaders are using to guide their practice. A review of these texts offers a common course of action that effective leaders for equity have taken.

**Define equity and your vision**

To begin their efforts in leading for equity, school leaders and system leaders often begin with the work of defining equity. Defining equity allows organizations to determine and state their values and regarding academic excellence for all. It can also provide an opportunity for leadership to develop an understanding of the history of inequities locally and nationally. Defining equity also consists of translating equity into ambitious and achievable goals for individual students within schools.

**Develop a theory of action and assumptions**
Similar to defining equity, leaders also can begin the journey towards equity by considering what assumptions that undergird their work. Considering these assumptions requires examining long-held beliefs about diverse students and their learning. To give an example, one commonly held belief is that all students can learn. In honest discussions, people may reveal that they have doubts about this assumption. Doubt about the all-students-can-learn belief may lead an educator to defend tracking or to advocate for the exclusion of some students in certain programs.

**Personal Commitment and Self-work**
Developing a shared set of beliefs or assumptions also requires educators commit themselves to self-reflection, investigation, and personal learning. Some label this as self-work. In the work of equity, leaders must commit themselves to working to dismantle racism (C of the ABCDs). In order to do so, they must be aware of their own positionality and the ways in which they have internalized racism, as either superiority or inferiority. This personal commitment will need to be strong enough to withstand criticisms and conflict that arises from conversations with various stakeholders.

**Taking Action: Building Collaborative teams**
In order to affect change, it’s important to build a collaborative team(s) that will work together to implement the changes. Teacher teams will need to support each other as they ask and answer new questions. The leadership team needs opportunities to explore new strategies together. It is important that teams are diverse and representative. In addition to building these opportunities within the school framework, school leaders must move this conversation beyond the school setting to collaborate with families and community stakeholders. Developing a shared vision is an important part of building a strong foundation.

**Taking Action: Improvement Processes and Decision-making**
Effective teams can build upon existing systems to create improvement cycles. Schools bring a wealth of strengths, capacities and skills to any challenge or opportunity. A strong leader will recognize how these strengths and capacities coalesce to aid in the achievement of intended goals and outcomes using an equity lens.

**Taking Action: Allocating Resources**
Resources are vital to the enhancement of equity in schools. A myth related to equity is that it is a zero-sum game. When school leaders allocate resources to students who need the most resources in schools, research has shown that the entire school community benefits. School leaders must be willing to examine how they are aligning their resources to this priority. The fight for equity must be backed by financial action, not just verbal promises.

**Tools and Resources for Leaders for Equity**
A wealth of resources are available to leaders pertaining to leading for equity. More challenging is finding tools aligned with the beliefs, systems, and working style of your school district. What might work for one school leader might not work for the next due to contextual differences. Below are general tools that leaders have used in an effort to enhance equity in their schools and school systems.

- Equity Assessments: These assessments exist for the school, classroom, and regional level. They offer different frames and understandings of equity and vary greatly in quality.
- Organizations committed to Equity

Equity Consortiums: As part of ESSA, there now exists various equity centers throughout the country. Each one serves a geographical area.

**Systemic Focus:**

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<tr>
<th>Stakeholder Groups</th>
<th>Leadership materials with a lens for diversity and equity</th>
<th>A* B* C* D</th>
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| Teachers                    | **Racial Equity Tools**  
  **Anti-Bias Curriculum Engages Preschoolers in Discussions**                                                            | A                               |
| Students                    | **An Equity Toolkit For Inclusive Schools: Centering on Youth Voice In School Change**                                   | A; B; C; D                      |
| Family and Community Partnerships | **Reaching Out to Diverse Populations: What Can Schools Do to Foster Family-School Connections**                     | A; B; C; D                      |
| Curriculum                  | Curriculum for leadership development (e.g. **Racial Equity Tools**)                                                     | A; B; C; D                      |
| Culture                     | Curriculum for creating school culture and climate (e.g. **Anti-Bias Curriculum Engages Preschoolers in Discussions**) | A; B; C; D                      |
| Systems & Structures        | Curriculum for organizational development to support equitable policies and practices for diverse schools (e.g. **Communities of Practice**) | A; C                            |

**Implications:**

For different stakeholder groups, this information can be used to: *define equity and your vision; develop a theory of action and assumptions; set personal commitment; and, do necessary self-work.* It can also be used to set a plan of action including: *Building Collaborative teams; Improvement Processes and Decision-making; and, Allocating Resources.*

**Conclusion:**

Committed, capable, courageous leaders can lead a school or school system to improve instruction; become a strong community partner; or, develop a vibrant, supportive student-centered culture.
Developing environments that are inclusive of a diverse student body is the role of the leader, helping schools become more effective in transforming the school culture toward true integration.
References: