

# Systemic Equity Review Framework: A Practical Approach to Achieving High Educational Outcomes for All Students

by *Eliza Fabillar*

Education Development Center

---

EDC's systemic equity review framework helps education leaders take a deeper look at inequities in order to understand the complex systems that affect student performance. While equity audits have historically played a role in curriculum assessments and state accountability systems, achievement gaps by race and class persist in U.S. public schools.

## EDC's Three-Phase Model

In our efforts to re-conceptualize equity assessments, EDC has created a three-phase model to guide the work:

1. Review equity assets and challenges
2. Develop a theory of action
3. Develop and implement an equity improvement plan

EDC collects a range of data from various sources and through a mixed methods approach. Our equity review is distinctive in that we integrate traditional forms of data collection with educational ethnography, a human-centered method that allows for a holistic perspective on equity assets and challenges. EDC's framework helps school and district staff do the following:

- Consider the perspectives of multiple stakeholders
- Develop a common understanding about equity
- Create safe spaces for dialogue about data
- Build capacity and ownership to do ongoing and practical equity reviews
- Encourage transparent communication

EDC works with education leaders to use our research-based tools and processes to study and translate data into transformational actions that will promote educational equity systemwide. EDC provides capacity-building support and technical assistance based on district needs. We recognize that districts bring a wealth of expertise to the work and customize our services to build meaningful partnerships.

---

## Phase 1: Review Equity Assets and Challenges: Comprehensive Data Collection

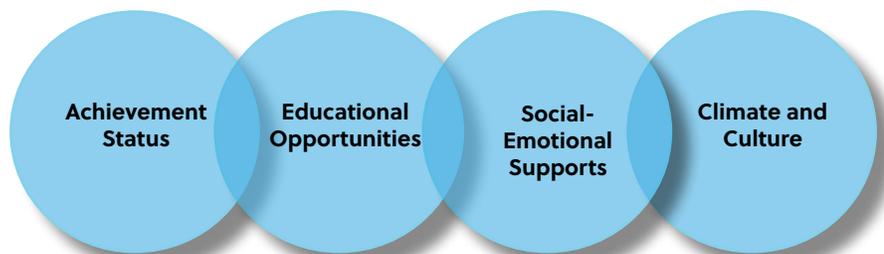
### Equity Indicators

EDC's approach supports districts in examining key interrelated elements or indicators of equity:

- Achievement status
- Educational opportunities
- Social-emotional supports
- Climate and culture

We recognize that districts are most likely working to address inequities and that their progress resides along a continuum of growth. Therefore, it is not only important to examine existing student data, but also to look closely at current policies, practices, norms, and structures. This approach also allows us to make connections across the equity indicators and take a systemic view of educational equity, which will lead to deeper analysis and understanding.

#### Key interrelated elements or indicators of equity



EDC implements a robust data collection plan that includes gathering data from multiple stakeholders. To examine equity, we collect data to answer specific questions on each of the four interrelated elements as detailed below.

1. Achievement status:
    - » How are students performing?
    - » How have achievement rates for subgroups changed over time?
    - » What teacher and staff qualities are related to student achievement across subgroups?
  2. Educational opportunities:
    - » What types of in-school and afterschool opportunities are offered, and which students participate in them?
    - » What are the teaching and learning conditions?
  3. Social-emotional supports:
    - » How is school discipline implemented?
    - » What social-emotional supports exist for students and who has access to them?
    - » What policies and practices are in place to address historical and social inequities?
-

#### 4. Climate and culture:

- » What is the culture of the school and district?
- » What practices are in place to support engagement among multiple stakeholders (students, teachers, administrators, families, community members)?

### Data Sources and Methods

EDC collects a range of quantitative and qualitative data through a mixed methods approach. We integrate traditional forms of data collection with educational ethnography, a human-centered method that allows for a holistic, comprehensive perspective on equity assets and challenges. EDC also builds on existing district data systems and facilitates a process that respects the time and commitment of educators, leaders, and other staff.

- **District data systems:** Districts use data management systems for accountable and other purposes. School and district level data include a range of information that can be analyzed by subgroups, including student achievement, demographics, and per pupil spending. District data also include teacher evaluation and curriculum management systems. The equity review will rely heavily on these information systems.
  - **District surveys:** Schools and districts conduct their own surveys, such as school culture and climate surveys, youth health and risk behavior surveys, and staff and parent surveys, which are typically implemented annually or biannually. The equity review will use results from district surveys, and if possible, we will request to add relevant questions based on the four equity indicators described earlier.
  - **Student focus groups:** EDC will conduct focus groups at schools with groups of students to gather data on each of the four equity indicators. Focus groups are a preferred method for gathering data about student beliefs and perceptions because they provide safe spaces among peers where students feel comfortable speaking freely, and they allow for deeper discussions on a topic and consensus on issues and root causes. To ensure a representative sample, selection criteria will be subjected to randomization methods within subgroups.
  - **Surveys:** To supplement district surveys, researchers will judiciously administer teacher, administrator, and student surveys to assess the four equity indicators. To reduce the load on participants, surveys will be administered in conjunction with or added onto other formative assessments, such as student classroom exit surveys, teacher professional learning community (PLC) exit surveys, and administrator meeting surveys.
  - **Key informant interviews:** Key informant interviews allow for the in-depth gathering of knowledge from those who know the most within the school community. Key informants are identified by reliable sources (e.g., principals, teacher leaders, parents) and are asked as part of the interview protocol to identify other key informants. These interviews will be a way to corroborate evidence gathered through other methods and to go into depth on the root causes of identified inequities.
  - **Classroom observations:** Classroom observations allow the systematic search for root causes of inequities identified through other methods. For example, if an analysis of achievement data by classroom indicate that a subset of teachers has students with greater achievement gaps than other teachers, systematic observations of classrooms where challenges exist compared with observations of classrooms where challenges are smaller may reveal instructional practices that help to reduce the achievement gap.
-

- **Educational ethnography:** This is a human-centered examination of education policies and practices. It is an emerging approach that sees policy as a form of sociocultural practice, a system of social relationships, beliefs, narratives, motivations, norms, and understandings. Traditional research assumes a linear relationship between policy and practice, but a human-centered lens can reveal the role and perceptions of staff, key decision-makers, and other actors in the system. Building on ethnographic techniques, researchers will conduct observations in various settings (e.g., department and PLC meetings, professional development activities, central office meetings) and examine the interaction of diverse individuals and groups in the educational system, thereby providing a holistic understanding of the intersection of equity policies and practices.

EDC emphasizes the value in making data accessible to multiple stakeholders. In order to be able to make decisions based on data, it is helpful to synthesize and organize data in ways that make the data easy to understand and interpret. One way is through visualizations, in which numerical data are represented through charts and graphs. Part of the coaching and support that we provide to districts includes capacity building on data collection and analysis that help to simplify and clarify data. We also provide a range of data analysis tools and resources.

## Phase 2: Develop a Theory of Action: Building Common Understanding through Data Study and Dialogue

After the data collection and synthesis phase of the work, EDC provides support to school and district leaders to examine and translate the data into a theory of action using four steps:

- **Step 1: Collaborative data analysis:** Collaboratively study the data with multiple stakeholders. Participants examine data through the lens of the four equity indicators using data and discussion protocols to promote deep reflection and create safe spaces for dialogue.
- **Step 2: Asset mapping:** Building on the data analysis, identify key equity assets. Participants engage in a mapping process to support alignment and cohesion of existing policies, structures, and practices. This process will help stakeholders see how they can influence change and what informs their work.
- **Step 3: Identifying problems:** Identify organizational problems that will inform the theory of change toward equitable outcomes. In this step, participants unpack the big problems and engage in a root cause analysis to define specific problem areas to address. This process will help districts gain a nuanced understanding of factors that perpetuate gaps.
- **Step 4: Developing a theory of action:** Identify key drivers of change with the aim of achieving educational equity. Participants determine innovations (i.e., practices, policies, and structures) to implement or improve across different levels of the system. Creating a theory of action is a collaborative process that requires multiple stakeholders with different perspectives to prioritize key levers for change.

## Phase 3: Develop and Implement an Equity Improvement Plan: Use Data for Transformational Change

We consult with districts to develop an equity improvement plan based on the outcomes from Phase 2. This process may involve the following:

- Creating a scaffolded plan and timeline for rolling out new policies, structures, and practices
-

- Prioritizing high-leverage practices to test in continuous improvement in various levels of the system (i.e., classroom, school, central office, and community)
- Defining a capacity-building and professional development vision for teacher leaders and administrators
- Developing a strategy for managing the change process and creating collaborative structures to support the work
- Creating an outline for a communication and community engagement plan

In order to make thoughtful decisions about next steps, we encourage districts to share the major components of the plan with key stakeholders, elicit feedback from key committees, and deliberate on the input provided.

EDC provides capacity-building support and technical assistance based on district needs. As districts roll out their equity improvement plan, EDC can continue to support districts in building capacity for and a culture of continuous quality improvement.

## Curricular and Instructional Reform for School Improvement Toward Equity

EDC's approach to curriculum and pedagogical reform as a strategy to address equity takes place in the context of school improvement or redesign. Changes in curriculum and instruction have historically happened in academic silos or pockets of success. EDC's approach has helped districts make schoolwide reforms that not only improve individual classrooms but also transform the school culture with the goals of reducing barriers, providing rigorous and engaging experiences for all students, and achieving educational equity. We engage educators and leaders in a process that combines bottom-up and top-down lenses. This process helps educators understand the goal of policies and helps leaders see classroom needs required for effective adoption of policies and quality implementation of innovative practices.

EDC collaborates with school districts through interrelated activities based on local needs:

- 1. Review of curriculum:** Uses a curriculum assessment tool that examines rigor, inclusive materials, pedagogy, and other qualities
- 2. Curriculum development or improvement:** Integrates core academic content, deeper learning skills, community/real-world connections, and social-emotional learning with equitable academic outcomes
- 3. Differentiated and sustained professional development:** Focuses on effective, equitable, research-based pedagogical strategies, such as student-centered, project-based learning and techniques for bridging research and practice
- 4. System alignment mapping process:** Maps policies and practices to facilitate instructional shifts, where participants consider education components such as teacher support and evaluation systems
- 5. Facilitation of professional learning communities of practice:** Engages educators and instructional leaders in continuous improvement to scale and sustain effective practices.

EDC brings an intentional focus to integrating equity efforts that involve multiple stakeholders in the education system and community. We promote a systems-thinking approach that empowers educators,

---

leaders, and other staff in all levels of the organization to engage in deep reflection and ongoing improvement toward educational equity. In an effort to sustain effective practices and processes, EDC's approach to supporting educational equity builds on the following criteria:

- The degree to which skill sets are needed among key staff
- The degree of behavior change that is required of key personnel to achieve system outcomes
- The degree to which organizational supports, structures, and policies are aligned
- The degree to which the reform interacts with or "disturbs" existing systems paradigms, mindsets, and culture

Our approach requires that we help districts develop capacity and address organizational culture to achieve transformational change.

## Equity-Focused Services

### EDC as a Recognized Leader and Expert

EDC has been selected by the Nellie Mae Education Foundation as a recommended partner and preferred provider of equity-focused services for public school districts throughout New England. EDC was selected based on its extensive experience and successful approach to working with communities, districts, and schools in integrating equity efforts, its understanding of student-centered learning approaches, its sustained professional support for diverse groups, and its tools and resources for promoting equity in the classroom. The Foundation also recognized EDC for its extensive experience working in school districts with high concentrations of poverty, students of color, and English language learners (ELs).

### Capacity Statement: Integrated Approach to Supporting Educational Equity

Equity has been a driving force for EDC since its founding in 1958. Early on, EDC focused on broadening access to high-quality science learning for underserved students. This focus rapidly grew to include improving equitable access to health, mental health, and all lifelong learning.

EDC has helped school districts around the country better understand the needs of underserved students and make research-informed changes to serve them more successfully. A hallmark of EDC's approach to education reform and equity is that it is integrated and holistic. For example, we work with leaders to build their capacity to engage in continuous improvement and strategic planning, which goes hand in hand with developing a collaborative culture. We support districts in conducting equity reviews and creating equity improvement plans, and we do so with tools and processes that facilitate systems thinking and change management. EDC partners with school districts and community organizations to address inequities in several areas:

- 1. Equity assessments:** EDC has experience conducting equity reviews of achievement and opportunity gaps for school districts through a collaborative framework. Our experience has enabled us to create a systemic equity review that is robust, holistic, comprehensive, and human-centered as we gather input from multiple stakeholders in the community.
  - 2. Equity policy reform:** EDC has worked with school districts to analyze school disciplinary policies and to promote a positive school strategy that includes social-emotional supports to address the
-

underlying issues that contribute to school failure, dropout, suspension, and expulsion. EDC has also provided strategic guidance to states on district policy issues related to the education of ELLs and students receiving special education services.

- 3. Continuous quality improvement, problem identification, and systemic solutions:** EDC has substantial experience working with school districts and states to engage in a process of identifying problems through an equity lens, developing innovative solutions, and creating theories of change and action to inform continuous improvement. EDC provides technical assistance to help districts build technical capacity and a collaborative culture that supports and sustains this work.
- 4. Rigorous documentation and data-inquiry methods:** EDC experts have the capacity to compile quantitative and qualitative data, make data and findings accessible to multiple stakeholders, provide analytic support that helps educators and policymakers incorporate data-based inquiry into regular decision making, and support partners in translating findings into actionable steps toward educational equity.
- 5. Cultural competency:** EDC has expertise facilitating collaborative and courageous dialogue in educational settings to help educators, leaders, and community members explore key systemic and societal issues such as implicit bias, institutional racism, or disproportionality in education.
- 6. Curricular and instructional reforms for school improvement:** For several decades, EDC has developed quality K–16 curricula in numerous content areas to provide opportunities for underserved communities. Our curricula has prepared students for success in college and careers, particularly in fields such as STEM, biotechnology, law and justice, and business, and to contribute to civil society. EDC has partnered with school districts nationwide to implement and scale student-centered approaches and improve instructional practice in order to achieve educational equity in all classrooms.

## Examples of Equity Partnerships

EDC has a strong reputation and extensive expertise working with districts with high concentrations of poverty, students of color, and ELs. Collaboration is also key to our work. For example, we partner with Ron Walker of the Coalition of Schools Educating Boys of Color (COSEBOC), who serves as a key advisor on EDC equity efforts.

### Conducting Equity Audits/Assessments and Developing Equity Plans

EDC partners with school districts nationwide to identify the strengths and weaknesses of systems; analyze data to pinpoint the roots of achievement gaps and disparities in the quality of education and learning climates; and engage stakeholders (e.g., school leaders, educators, parents, the community) in crafting solutions and pursuing a shared vision of excellence for all students.

**Example 1: Reducing Achievement and Opportunity Gaps: A Collaborative Framework.** EDC worked with district partners to conduct equity assessments. Districts engaged in five key tasks: (1) gap analysis, (2) stakeholder meetings and interviews, (3) school site visits, (4) data analysis, and (5) report development. They also conducted interviews with community members, families, businesses, students, and district staff.

After exploring opportunity gaps, EDC guided teams in identifying areas for improvement and intervention that would address systemic inequities affecting the quality of students' educational

---

experiences, particularly minority and culturally diverse populations. Our work in Minnesota resulted in recommendations that informed an equity improvement plan, which included improvements to classroom instruction, family and community engagement, and system support structures. Our experiences have led us to improve our method into a robust systemic equity review framework.

**Example 2: The Urban Special Education Leadership Collaborative (the Collaborative).** The Collaborative is committed to improving the educational outcomes and life opportunities of children and youth with disabilities and other diverse learners. This initiative addresses significant issues of disproportionality in both identification and educational placement of racial minority and culturally and linguistically diverse students. EDC works with school districts and state agencies to assess needs, evaluate special education programs, promote culturally responsive educational systems, and help leaders design policies that promote improved student achievement for all. This work includes consultation to districts across the country to support schools in implementing multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), including facilitating systemic organizational and programmatic changes as well as engaging families and the community.

**Example 3: Positive School Discipline.** This initiative grew out of a response to the report on the school-to-prison pipeline that showed how boys of color were disproportionately disciplined in schools, leading to higher school failure and higher incidences of incarceration. EDC worked with school districts to assess needs, identify problems, and develop interventions to reduce disproportionate minority contact in juvenile justice systems. The initiative includes an online course on positive school discipline to help education leaders implement policies, processes, and programs to create positive school environments. The course provides tools and resources to help districts engage in ongoing improvement efforts guided by data-informed decision making. Course modules and technical assistance include content sessions on data collection; gap analysis; data study; and strategies for designing, implementing, and monitoring a multi-pronged improvement plan.

### **Strategic Planning for Continuous Improvement and Systems Change**

EDC has extensive experience providing consulting services on school and district strategic planning. We have served as thought partners and continue to provide support to leaders in the development and implementation of plans. Our approach focuses on integrating strategic planning with systems change and continuous improvement and includes the use of EDC-developed tools and resources to guide the work.

**Example 1: District Level Systems Change and Preparing All Learners.** Through these two initiatives, EDC serves as a technical assistance provider for several New England districts. District teams comprising teacher leaders and administrators play a key role in building technical capacity for and a collaborative culture of continuous improvement as they implement the four tenets of student-centered learning. EDC works with school and central office leaders to promote systems thinking in their strategic planning and achieve system alignment of policies, practices, and structures between central office and schools. We guide the work of teams to explore problems of practice, develop theories of change, and implement action plans with the aim of addressing educational equity.

**Example 2: National Center on Scaling Up Effective Schools.** EDC worked with school districts in Broward, Florida, and Fort Worth, Texas, by providing professional development and technical assistance to teams of high school teachers, administrators, and central office instructional leaders.

---

District teams identified problems, explored best practices in research and local contexts, developed solutions, and engaged in continuous improvement with the aim of improving outcomes for all students. Districts focused on personalizing academic and social-emotional learning for all students and building students' problem-solving and growth mindset skills. This work informed school strategic plans. EDC also supported a teacher-leader model to help build a collaborative culture of reflection, disciplined inquiry, and improvement in order to scale effective practices districtwide.

**Example 3: Tribal Youth Programs.** Through the Tribal Youth Training and Technical Assistance Center, EDC served as the technical assistance provider for 245 American Indian and Alaska Native tribes across the United States, the majority of which were in rural communities. These tribes received funding to offer programming for tribal youth to decrease rates of involvement with the juvenile justice system, as native youth are disproportionately more likely to be involved in the system. EDC provided training and technical assistance in all aspects of strategic planning, including the following:

- Setting the mission and vision to drive their work
- Assessing program needs, strengths, and resources within the community
- Developing logic models, evaluation plans, and action plans to focus their work on high-leverage practices and to monitor and improve program activities and outcomes
- Identifying and developing key partnerships to support their work and sustain it
- Developing communications plans to support all of their efforts

### **Developing Culturally Inclusive Educational Materials and Curriculum Design to Support Instructional Reforms**

EDC's approach to curriculum design goes hand in hand with instructional reforms and school improvement efforts. For 60 years, EDC has developed inclusive educational materials for a range of subject areas and helped educators design curriculum that reflects a student-centered, inquiry approach to teaching and learning. Curricula are typically designed through an R&D process, during which we develop and pilot materials in school settings with input from key stakeholders. Curricula are always accompanied by differentiated and sustained professional development activities and resources as well as technical assistance to support quality implementation and scaling.

**Example 1: Law and Justice (L&J).** L&J is a two-year high school curriculum for social studies, humanities, and government courses accompanied by professional development resources and activities. This curriculum educates students about the U.S. legal and criminal justice systems and how laws and policies are created, enforced, and changed. It highlights the role of civic engagement to challenge racial, economic, social, and systemic inequalities and injustices, and aims to empower all students to contribute to a democratic society—as youth now and as professionals in the future.

The L&J curriculum is student-centered and project-based, with multiple assessments to support student mastery of knowledge and skills that reflect deeper learning. Professional development focuses on pedagogical strategies that support teaching of deeper learning skills, such as critical thinking, and includes techniques for linking content with other academic subjects (math, English language arts, and science); strategies for community engagement and real-world learning; and tools to support dialogue about issues such as institutional racism. EDC works with schools to create policies and structures that support effective curricular and instructional reform.

---

**Example 2: Visual Access to Mathematics (VAM).** This research and development project helps teachers of ELs build skills in mathematical problem solving and communication. The project supports teachers of ELs in providing access to mathematical learning while advancing academic language development. This work is grounded in the use of visual representations, such as diagrams and geometric drawings, for mathematical problem solving with integrated language support strategies. Relying heavily on technology-supported artifacts of student thinking, VAM helps mathematics teachers of ELs become better at making, using, and analyzing visual representations, with the goal of improving teacher knowledge and practice to advance mathematics achievement of ELs.

**Example 3: Designing for Equity by Thinking in and about Mathematics (DEbt-M).** DEbt-M is a replicable professional learning model that addresses racially based inequities in secondary mathematics education in the United States. DEbt-M participants spend two years as a cohort building an understanding of the opportunity gaps, exploring equity in curriculum, and examining inequitable teaching practices. Educators are empowered to become change agents to disrupt inequitable practices in curriculum and instruction. EDC also works with educators to challenge other elements of the current educational system that work to impede access to learning opportunities for students of color. Teachers serve as change agents to improve mathematics teaching and learning at all district levels in ways that provide students of color with more equitable opportunities in mathematics.



Education Development Center (EDC) is a global nonprofit that advances lasting solutions to improve education, promote health, and expand economic opportunity. Since 1958, we have been a leader in designing, implementing, and evaluating powerful and innovative programs in more than 80 countries around the world.

EDC 43 Foundry Avenue Waltham, Massachusetts 02453

Boston | Chicago | New York | Washington, D.C.

[contact@edc.org](mailto:contact@edc.org) 617-969-7100