

TAKING ACTION ON RACIAL EQUITY

How Grantmakers Are Becoming Change-makers

Over the years, grantmakers across the U.S. have played a valuable role in improving educational opportunities for learners of all ages. Their investments in early childhood education, in K-12 schools and in postsecondary access and success have generated an array of positive results in communities across the country.

Yet despite the many success stories, educational inequities based on race and ethnicity are still pervasive. Generally speaking, black, Latino and Native American learners continue to face a variety of barriers to opportunity that result in severe disparities in academic achievement and educational outcomes.

The persistence of these inequities has prompted some funders to step back, reflect and ask themselves what else they need to be doing to remove barriers to opportunity and assure that all learners have the chance to succeed.

Recognizing that more grantmakers are feeling a need to address racial equity directly but are unsure where to begin, Grantmakers for Education (GFE) held three summits on racial equity in different cities during the summer of 2018. These regional summits – held in Washington, D.C., San Francisco and Dallas – gave funders from a wide range of grantmaking organizations a rare opportunity to talk openly and at length about racism, bias, opportunity and achievement gaps, and their dire consequences both for individuals and for society.

About This Report

This paper reflects on learnings from three Grantmakers for Education summits on racial equity held the summer of 2018.

The purpose of the program report is to fuel ongoing conversations among grantmakers about racial equity and, more importantly, inspire transformation within education grantmaking organizations and beyond.

Grantmakers' success – and our nation's well-being – depend on it.

The fact that all three summits generated a lot of interest and participation is indicative of the level of interest in racial equity among grantmakers across the U.S. A total of 160 people from 130 different organizations participated, ranging from small to large organizations with a variety of focus areas.

The presence of people with diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds from diverse organizations created an opportunity for refreshingly open and honest discussions. Participants were assured that what people said in the room would be safeguarded, creating a space for candid sharing of thoughts and experiences. Some talked about how isolating it feels to be a person of color in a largely white organization. Some talked about why so many education leaders, staff and board members still do not look like the communities they serve, as long-standing relationships and practices tend to protect power and privilege. And some shared how difficult it is to move from stating the importance of racial equity to actually doing something about it.

After the summits, participants said they found the conversations illuminating and meaningful: 98 percent said the experience gave them access to a diversity of opinions and approaches, and a similar percentage said it was relevant to the issues they are currently facing at work. People's open-ended comments on the feedback surveys conveyed the impact of the experience:

"It was powerful to have my own viewpoints and experiences as a person of color validated by the speakers."

"Most valuable were the honest conversations about the realities of racial equity – not only in the work we do but also how we conduct ourselves and encourage our colleagues to engage in dialogue, be introspective and create plans for structural change."

Defining Racial Equity – and Why It Matters

In talking about racial equity, it is important to be clear up front about how the term is being defined. People use the term differently, which is confusing and can cause misunderstanding. Some talk about "equity" in terms of opportunities (for example, unequal access to Advanced Placement courses or quality teachers) whereas others define it in terms of outcomes (for example, achievement gaps in math or differing graduation rates).

People include different racial and ethnic groups in talking about racial equity, too; some focus only on black and Latino learners while others include other groups such as Native Americans and those with Asian and Pacific Islander heritage.

At the three summits, Grantmakers for Education's definition of racial equity was put forth at the outset to frame the subsequent discussions and make sure that everyone was on the same page:

Giving learners of every race and ethnicity what they need to succeed, regardless of where they start or the challenges they face along the way.

Participants also talked candidly about why the topic of racial equity matters to them. Many expressed the view that eradicating racial equity gaps is a matter of social justice; others emphasized that it is also an economic and societal imperative, particularly as people of color are becoming the majority in many parts of the country.¹

John King, Jr., CEO of The Education Trust, one of the panelists, summed it up concisely: “We have no future as a country unless we educate students of color and those from low-income families to a high standard. Those are the stakes.”

Then and Now: Inequities Past and Present

One of the most powerful parts of each summit was an on-stage conversation between Howard Fuller of Marquette University and John King, Jr. of The Education Trust where the two reflected on the historical roots of today’s racial inequities and reasons for pessimism or optimism about where things stand today.

Fuller emphasized the lasting impact of slavery and Reconstruction on the African American experience: “Racism is woven into the very fabric of this country,” he said, “and if we continue to deny this, we will never make progress.” He pointed to examples of how racism persists today and how it manifests itself in everyday life. “Our country is deeply divided right now. We are seeing a level of racist ideology that permeates everything.”

King reflected on history too, prompted by the U.S. Supreme Court’s recent voting rights decision:²

I’m thinking back to where Frederick Douglass was in the 1800s: the workshop denied him work, the inn denied him shelter, the ballot box denied him the vote. It’s sobering to think that many of the same things could be written today. It’s painful to think that this is a school year where kids are sitting in class worrying about being deported. That there’s a travel ban directed at people of Muslim faith. That hurricanes caused devastation in Puerto Rico, and the government ignored their needs. That black people have the police called on them for such things as moving into an apartment, taking a nap in their dorm, or having a picnic. These are things that are happening right now.

It is no accident that children who need the most continue to receive the least. King cited a litany of examples:

- Families of color face significant barriers to accessing quality child care and early childhood education (e.g., barriers related to affordability, access and supply).
- Non-black teachers have significantly lower educational expectations for black students.
- Learners of color are far less likely to have access to high-quality teachers.
- They are less likely to have access to advanced courses such as Algebra 2, chemistry and physics.
- They are far less likely than white students to graduate from high school.
- Their college enrollment rates are similar to those for white students, but they do not attend colleges of equal quality and are far more likely to be placed in remedial classes.
- They are far less likely than white students to complete college.³

From Fuller's point of view, the difficulty is that we are trying to bring equity into a society that is structured to be unequal.

There are examples of schools, districts and states that have made great progress in advancing educational opportunities for learners of color. But achieving racial equity at scale has been elusive.

Why? From Fuller's point of view, the difficulty is that we are trying to bring equity into a society that is structured to be unequal. "What we are trying to figure out today is how to make the system do what it was never intended to do."

Given how deeply racism is embedded in American society generally and the education system in particular, Fuller says he feels pessimistic about the chances of achieving significant change in removing equity barriers. Regardless, this does not keep him from continuing to try, finding Derrick Bell's *Faces at the Bottom of the Well* especially influential. "He says that you have to fight even when you don't think victory is possible, because not to fight is to co-sign on injustice. I see this as a moment in history where to be silent is to betray."

King offered a less pessimistic view than Fuller, citing three reasons why he is hopeful about the prospects for racial equity writ large:

One is that I was a kid who was rescued [by education]. Both of my parents died when I was young, and I'm sitting here today because a series of teachers in New York City schools literally saved my life. Two, I've seen some of my former students achieve incredible successes. One of them is now in the Massachusetts legislature. For her to have that opportunity makes me optimistic. Three, I do believe that systemic change is possible.

But he reminded the group that systemic change will only happen if many more people join forces. He shared a favorite scene from the movie *Stand and Deliver*. The school principal is talking to a group of teachers about the fact that their school is slated for closure due to chronic low performance, and asks, "Who among us could do more?" The actor who plays Jaime Escalante raises his hand and says, "I can."

King finds this scene compelling because the character is so committed to using the tools he has to do whatever he can. "That is our individual moral obligation. We have to ask ourselves, what can I do to make a difference, and am I doing all I can?"

Embarking on Equity Journeys

Panelists whose organizations had been working to infuse diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) into their work spoke openly about how this had come about. Several acknowledged that their "equity journey" had started not as a result of internal reflection but rather in response to external forces.

One philanthropy leader, for example, shared what happened when violence at a local Black Lives Matter march resulted in the deaths of several police officers. The next day, the foundation's leaders decided to create a fund to honor police officers killed in the line of duty – but several staff members of color reacted to this decision with bewilderment and anger. Where had the foundation's voice been during years of violence against people of color? they asked. Their reaction spurred open conversations about race within the organization and forced the leadership team to think more deeply about what they needed to be doing to address racial tensions in the community. Thus their racial equity journey began.

Similarly, another foundation leader described how her organization's equity work began with a staffer who was extremely upset by the death of Trayvon Martin, the unarmed black teen shot in Florida in 2012 – and by the recognition that almost every person on their staff was white. "Because racial equity is fundamentally about the redistribution of power, we knew we needed to be diverse," this grantmaker said. So the organization set a specific goal that at least 30 percent of their staff and board would be people of color. Step by step, they integrated racial equity work across all areas of the organization.⁴

What Funders Can Do: Real Impact Entails Risk

Summit speakers and participants discussed a variety of actions that funders can take, first internally and then externally, to make racial equity a core part of their work and achieve meaningful change.

Examples of Internal and External Actions that Funders Can Take to Advance Racial Equity

Internal actions

- Diversify your board and staff to create a “critical mass” of people of color.
- Set equity goals.
- Invest in equity training for the board and staff.
- Create structured opportunities for ongoing discussions about race and equity at the board and staff level.
- Bring in speakers with expertise in racial equity.
- Recruit staff with experience in working with communities of color.
- Establish an internal equity team but do not confine the work to them. (As one participant said, “Everyone needs to learn how to ‘do equity.’”)

External actions

- Embed equity into all aspects of your work - e.g., making investments, choosing metrics, evaluating results.
- Push grantees to focus on diversity, equity and inclusion at both the board and staff levels.
- Invest in capacity building for organizations that are doing important equity work but lack bandwidth to scale up this work.
- Fund research on equity issues.
- Use convening power; bring people together to talk about diversity, equity and inclusion to uncover community needs and foster collaboration.
- Find allies with whom you can partner in equity work. (GFE’s Equity Impact Group is one way to connect with potential allies and partners.)
- Critically evaluate what you fund to ensure that it is removing, not exacerbating, equity barriers.
- Invest in building a pipeline of leaders of color.
- Invest in initiatives that mitigate racial isolation in schools – e.g., arts, STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) and/or dual language programs.
- Invest in programs that increase college access and completion and address affordability barriers.

Funders whose organizations have been pursuing equity work reminded those in the earlier stages that even small steps are important; they open up new possibilities and create an evidence base from which bigger and more influential actions can emerge.

Often, the process begins by creating structured opportunities for people to talk openly about race and power, and to listen so as to understand those whose life experiences differ from their own. Though many people find these topics uncomfortable, many of the summit participants felt that meaningful progress cannot happen without these “courageous conversations.”⁵

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As one writer recently observed:

We may prefer to avoid sensitive topics or gravitate toward conversations with those we assume share our background or perspectives. In not talking across differences, however, we deprive ourselves and our communities of opportunities to grow, be challenged and understand more fully the experiences of others. While dialogue alone does not solve structural problems, it is a good place to start.⁶

While many grantmakers at the summits were having internal conversations about race and equity in their organizations, few had made significant changes to what they fund. Part of the challenge, some acknowledged, is the difficulty of moving away from legacy giving, making funding decisions based on historical practices. Participants talked openly about legacy giving and its relationship to white power and privilege. One panelist challenged others in the room on this point: “You need to ask yourself if you are really advancing the people who you say we want to help or still funding those you know or who have the social network to get in the room.”

Another panelist pointed out that grantmakers’ aversity to risk is a limiting factor and challenged the group to dismantle systems and enabling conditions that perpetuate racial inequities. “Don’t just fund what others are funding or make safe bets,” he said. For example, many grantmakers fund “doers” (organizations providing direct services) but shy away from funding advocacy organizations. “Real impact entails risk.”

Working in Partnership with Communities of Color

Grantmakers wanting to realign their investments in light of their racial equity goals often find that many organizations doing important work in communities lack internal capacity – they are understaffed, lack up-to-date technology and more. The question is, what can and should funders do to help these kinds of organizations develop the capacity they need to expand their impact? One

panelist responded that funders have both the ability and the responsibility to create the infrastructure for this work.

Grantmakers also need to rethink some of their systems and processes that create barriers for small, community-focused organizations doing important racial equity work. Rather than use a prescriptive approach like a Request for Proposals which requires potential grantees to explain how they will do what the funder thinks is most important, why not co-create what matters together? “That doesn’t mean lowering your standards,” one panelist said. “It means honoring what others know.”

Most importantly, several panelists emphasized, grantmakers need to respect the right of communities of color to shape their own destiny. Howard Fuller shed historical light on this:

When slavery ended, missionaries and corporate people descended on us to define what black people needed. Each held the view that we had no concept of our own as to what we needed. What they didn’t understand was that we didn’t want to be controlled. Today, you see the same pattern: philanthropists and other kinds of “missionary” organizations descend on our communities. How can we have more control over our own future?

For partnerships between funders and communities to be strong and productive, the following things matter:

- **Understanding.** Funders need to be knowledgeable about the communities they are trying to serve. This means investing in research and data gathering. It also means finding the right people to be involved rather than simply choosing token members from particular racial or ethnic groups.
- **Respect.** Grantmakers need to respect and value the assets that exist in communities of color rather than seeing everything, as often occurs, from a deficit perspective. Funders also need to learn from those who are already actively at work in communities.
- **Trust.** Effective partnerships depend on trust, which takes time to establish and effort to sustain. “It’s hard for communities to feel trust if they feel like they are just being used to check off a box,” one panelist said.
- **Collaboration.** Grantmakers need to be “high touch” in order to be effective partners; meaningful partnerships are fundamentally collaborative.
- **Patience.** Grantmakers tend to want to see outcomes quickly, within a few years, but it takes longer than that to fix problems that have been around for hundreds of years. Funders need to be patient and work with grantees to determine what it is reasonable to expect in a given time

frame. They also need to understand the larger context in communities that can have an impact on the work.

Last but not least, grantmakers embarking on racial equity work need to think more expansively about how to measure success, since the types of metrics they use are typically not calibrated for organizations and communities that have not been invested in historically.

Several summit participants emphasized how important it is for funders to work in partnership with grantees to define what metrics will be used to measure success. The initial metrics may be interim steps toward larger goals – in other words, stepping stones on the way to greater impact over time.

From Reflection to Action

Throughout the three summits, people talked about the importance of allies. People of color who are working in mostly-white grantmaking organizations shared how hard it is to bring racial equity forward as an issue without internal allies. “If you are going to succeed in this work,” one person said, “you can’t be a lone voice.”

“We want to be able to look back to say we really moved the needle on racial equity in education.”

External allies are vital, too. The question is how to find them. One panelist said she sometimes “cold calls” people in other organizations to ask what they are doing to advance racial equity and also raises the topic with speakers she meets at conferences and meetings around the country. Some grantmakers have sought support from Grantmakers for Education’s Equity Impact Group, whose members share best practices and provide mutual support.

Wanting to create more opportunities for grantmakers pursuing racial equity work, Grantmakers for Education organized a luncheon meeting at the end of its annual conference in October 2018, inviting those who had attended the summits to join members of the Equity Impact Group to discuss their work. The goal was to keep the conversations about racial equity going and provide another opportunity to build a community of practice. In the future, Grantmakers for Education plans to survey summit attendees to what actions grow out of these conversations – in other words, what individual grantmakers are doing in the racial equity realm and what kinds of supports they may need to accelerate the work.

As former Grantmakers for Education president Ana Tilton expressed to those attending the luncheon meeting, “Grantmakers need to disrupt the status quo. By working together, our power can be magnified. We want to be able to look back to say we really moved the needle on racial equity in education.”

Grantmakers for Education Regional Summits on Racial Equity

Dates and Locations

June 12, 2018 – Washington, D.C.

August 21, 2018 – San Francisco, California

August 23, 2018 – Dallas, Texas

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Grantmakers for Education Equity Impact Group

2018 Steering Committee Members

Deborah McGriff, Co-Chairperson (NewSchools Venture Fund)

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For more information, please see:

<http://bit.ly/EIGHandout>

and

<https://edfunders.org/engage/impact-groups/equity-impact-group>

Agenda for the Regional Summits on Racial Equity

Welcome and Introductions – Opening remarks from Grantmakers for Education executive director Ana Tilton, leaders from the sponsor organizations and summit facilitators.⁷

Philanthropy as a Force for Racial Equity – A dialogue between John King, Jr. (former U.S. education secretary and current president and chief executive officer of The Education Trust) and Howard Fuller (Professor and Director of the Institute for Transformational Learning at Marquette University). Each shared perspectives on the history of racism and educational inequality in the U.S., the current status, progress, challenges and advice for grantmakers on what they can do to achieve greater racial equity.

Bright Spots and Challenges on the Road to Racial Equity – A panel on trends in racial equity, conditions that perpetuate inequity and practices that have been successful in advancing change.⁸

Networking Lunch.

Embracing Racial Equity: On the Path to Authentic Change – A panel of funders talking about their individual and organizational experiences with racial equity.⁹

Charting the Course: Next Steps for Racial Equity in Education – Small group discussions on next steps in addressing racial equity in education.

Summit Panelists and Moderators

Delia Arellano-Weddleton – Senior Program Officer, Nellie Mae Education Foundation

Estela Mara Bensimon – Professor of Higher Education, the University of Southern California Rossier School of Education; Director, Center for Urban Education

LaShawn Routé Chatmon – Founding Executive Director, National Equity Project

Michelle Asha Cooper – President, Institute for Higher Education Policy

Cheryl Crazy Bull – President and CEO, American Indian College Fund

Howard Fuller – Professor of Education, Marquette University, and Founder and Director, Institute for the Transformation of Learning

Tina Gridiron – Senior Strategic Engagement Consultant, Grantmakers for Education

Tomeka Hart – Senior Program Officer, US Policy, Advocacy and Communications, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

William Johnson – Director of Educational Strategy, William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund

John B. King Jr. – President and CEO, The Education Trust

Jim Larimore – Chief Officer, ACT Center for Equity in Learning

James Liou – Program Officer, William Penn Foundation

Deborah M. McGriff – Managing Partner, NewSchools Venture Fund

Michelle Molitor – Founder and CEO, The Equity Lab

Wynn Rosser – President and CEO, T.L.L. Temple Foundation

Deborah Santiago – Co-founder and Vice President for Policy, *Excelencia* in Education

Sarah Sneed – Director of Education Investments, Hartford Foundation for Public Giving

George Tang – Managing Director, Educate Texas

Doua Thor – Senior Program Officer, Sobrato Family Foundation

Tarajeon Yazzie-Mintz – Vice President, Program Initiatives, American Indian College Fund

Pre-Readings and Resources

[IHEP Investment Analysis](#)
[Putting Equity First](#)
[Leveraging SEL to Promote Equity](#)
[COF Diversity Report](#)
[Guidestar DEI Factsheet](#)
[Flattening Speed Bumps: The Path to Postsecondary Success](#)
[How to Level the College Playing Field](#)
[Embracing and Measuring an Expanded Definition of Student Success](#)
[The Equity Journey: NewSchools Venture Fund and Lumina Foundation](#)
[Pursue Diversity on the Road to Equity](#)
[English Language Learners & Southeast Asian American Communities](#)

Other Recommended Readings

Derrick Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (1993)
Brown v Board of Education ruling (accessible at <https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=87>)
Lisbeth Schorr, *Within Our Reach: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage* (1989)

ENDNOTES

¹U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "State Nonfiscal Survey of Public Elementary and Secondary Education," 1998-99 through 2015-16; and National Elementary and Secondary Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity Projection Model, 1972 through 2027. (This table was prepared February 2018.)

²By a 5-4 vote, the Supreme Court upheld Ohio's practice of purging its voter rolls after two years of inactivity. Civil rights groups opposed the law, arguing that it suppresses minority voter turnout.

³In 2017, only 24 percent of black adults and 16 percent of Latino adults in the U.S had a bachelor's degree or higher. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2018). Digest of Education Statistics, 2016 (NCES 2017-094), Chapter 3.

⁴NewSchools Venture Fund's equity journey is described at length in a GFE case study: Christina A. Russell with Lynn Jenkins, *The Equity Journey: NewSchools Venture Fund and Lumina Foundation Pursue Diversity on the Road to Equity*, September 2017.

⁵Glen Singleton, *Courageous Conversations About Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools*, 2014.

⁶University of Washington, *Talking About Race and Equity*; accessed at <https://Washington.edu/trends/talking-about-race-equity/>

⁷The facilitators were LaShawn Chatmon (National Equity Project), Michelle Molitor (The Equity Lab), and Ana Tilton (Grantmakers for Education).

⁸The panelists were Cheryl Crazy Bull and Tarajeau Yazzie-Mintz (American Indian College Fund), Estela Bensimon (Center for Urban Education, University of Southern California), Deborah Santiago (Excelencia in Education), and Michelle Asha Cooper (Institute for Higher Education Policy).

⁹The panelists were Delia Arellano-Weddleton (Nellie Mae Education Foundation), Tomeka Hart (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation), William Johnson (William Casper Graustein Memorial Fund), Jim Larimore (ACT Center for Equity in Learning), James Liou (William Penn Foundation), Deborah McGriff (NewSchools Venture Fund), Wynn Rosser (T.L.L. Temple Foundation), Sarah Sneed (Hartford Foundation for Public Giving), George Tang (Communities Foundation of Texas) and Doua Thor (Sobrato Family Foundation).