Did You Know | Why It Matters | For Equity Now

Considerations for Cultivating Equity-Centered School Boards

Excellent school boards can make a difference. But creating excellence requires a vision that makes improved student learning a priority and the will to stay focused on that goal. If too many school boards continue to muck about in issues that distract rather than support that effort, our system of local control may become an antique shoved to the back of the shelf.

- J. Richardson

The role of locally elected school boards is to provide districtwide leadership and governance, however, the ways in which they lead and govern can determine the quality of education, access to opportunities, experiences and outcomes for minoritized students (i.e. individuals who identify as LGBTQ+, women, disabled, non-Christian, people of Color, and/or emergent multilingual individuals) within their districts (Smoley, 1999). Locally-elected school boards are supposed to work collaboratively with the community to improve the academic outcomes of all students (Mountford, 2004). Although collaboration with community members is a goal, many local school boards fail to make it a priority (Lorentzen, 2013). As a result, these school boards often perform the function of legitimizing the inequitable policies and practices that exist in many school systems (Lorentzen, 2013), and leave many minoritized students out of benefiting from a quality education. School boards do this because most assume that schools are culturally neutral spaces, therefore, they fail to critically examine the ways in which dominant cultural norms, values, and ideologies can influence educators' interactions with and expectations of minoritized students (McKown & Weistein, 2008); systematically privileging some students, families, and educators while simultaneously marginalizing others (Radd & Kramer, 2013). These assumptions of neutrality frequently result in school boards delegitimizing the concerns, perspectives, and experiences of minoritized individuals (Lorentzen, 2013). In this issue of the *Equity Dispatch* we focus on the collective power of minoritized communities to positively impact the quality of education students receive within their districts, through the selection of equity-focused, locally-elected school board members.

Part of the United States democratic system includes the right to provide input to publicly elected officials at any time (Underwood, 2017). Therefore, minoritized community members are entitled to bring matters of inequity such as the lack of authentic representation of people with non-dominant identities (e.g. people of Color, people with disabilities, people from LGBTQ+ communities, women etc.) in the curriculum and among faculty and administrators; the use of exclusionary discipline policies; discriminatory dress code policies; and inequitable access to advanced placement courses that disproportionately negatively affect students of Color and other minoritized groups (Moore, Jackson, Kyser, Skelton, & Thorius, 2016) before their school boards—with an expectation that those concerns and perspectives will be afforded the thoughtful consideration they deserve (Underwood, 2017). However, locally-elected school board members who are dismissive of the issues surfaced by minoritized community members, and minimize their alarm in ways that alienate them, diminish the district's capacity to authentically engage the *entire* school community in decision making and problem solving (Sell, 2006).

As local school boards are designed to provide leadership for district superintendents, building level administrators, and staff it is incumbent upon them to set the standards for and the priorities of all district employees (Reed, 1982). When locally-elected school board members behave in ways, even unintentionally, that suggest that matters of equitable treatment and inclusion of minoritized groups

are unimportant or inconsequential, those attitudes become pervasive throughout the district (Chavkin & Williams, 1993).

The Power to Write (Right) the Future
Each time local school board elections are held, community members have an opportunity to determine which group of individuals will have the collective power to make districtwide decisions pertaining to educational policies and personnel (Mizell,2010). Unlike many of the more highly publicized political races in which it is nearly impossible to be unaware of the candidates seeking election, it is not uncommon for community members to have very little familiarity with their local school board candidates (Superfine, 2005). Because locally elected school board candidates' names are frequently situated on the backside of the ballot, many people may believe the position of school board member to be of lesser importance than other publicly-elected positions. In reality, the power and control with which local school board candidates hope to be entrusted has the potential to positively or negatively affect learning experiences, opportunities, and outcomes for generations of students (Mizell, 2010).

Why It Matters
Centering Equity in Local School Boards Can Shift Organizational Cultures

Moving Toward Authentic Engagement & Partnership
Each day, local school board members make decisions concerning almost every facet of the pk-12 educational experience. As a collective body, locally-elected board members determine how districts will meet federal and state mandated standards and program requirements, as well as enact policies that affect the daily operations of schools including students access to diverse and effective educators; the availability of technology and resources for educators and students; quality and nutritious food options for students to eat; safe and efficient transportation options for students to and from school, including school activities; and even the availability and kinds of extracurricular activities in which student are able to engage (Superfine, 2005). Therefore a school board whose members are focused on advancing educational equity, must consistently demonstrate a commitment to enacting policies and supporting practices that ensure each and every student has access to quality instruction, learning resources, supports, and opportunities (Fraser, 2008; Great Lakes Equity Center 2012). This includes achieving high academic and social outcomes from quality learning experiences, regardless of students' individual characteristics and group memberships (Fraser, 2008; Great Lakes Equity Center 2012).

Equity-Centered Decision Making
When locally elected school boards center equity, they are aware of the marginalization endured by minoritized individuals and thus, strive to ensure that all minoritized students' histories are accurately and authentically represented and centered in the classroom (Paris, 2012). Further, they ensure that

minoritized community members have an equal share of power in the decision-making process. Equity-centered local school boards ensure that both minoritized students and community members feel welcome, safe, and included in the schools, in the district, and in the classroom (McLaren, 1997).

When locally-elected school boards focus on equity, they become aware of the need for continuous improvement individually, collectively, and districtwide. Understanding that equity is an ongoing commitment that requires hard work and introspection, school boards can engage in equity-centered professional development (Moore et al., 2016). This kind of professional development assists school board members in developing foundational understandings of educational equity (Moore et al., 2016), and in cultivating critical consciousness—the willingness and ability to see how power and privilege are at work to systematically advantage some while simultaneously disadvantaging others (Radd & Kramer, 2013). Moreover, it challenges board members to critically examine self, board policies and practices, and to interrogate the ways in which school boards have historically engaged with minoritized communities and their current relationship to and with them (Skelton, personal communication, August 14, 2019).

Through critical conversations, school board members can unpack their own biases and normative assumptions that have implications for the ways in which they govern, craft, and implement policies. Further, these conversations affect how they view their responsibilities to create structures and a districtwide culture that is reflective of all community members–and not just those who voted for them (Kyser, personal communication, August 14, 2019). As local school board members embrace equity, they begin to move away from the kinds of operations that produce disparate outcomes for minoritized students, moving towards an operational structure in which educational equity is of the highest importance (Superfine, 2005). In so doing, they signal a new expectation to the community, to the students, and to all district employees that they will pursue the kinds of transformative changes toward equity that produce indelible shifts in districts' educational philosophies, organizational praxis, and educator dispositions (Kyser, personal communication, August 14, 2019).

For Equity Now
Equity-Focused Questions to Consider

Just as in other areas of government, school board members are publicly elected politicians in education (Sell, 2006), and as such, they must be held to the same level of scrutiny and accountability as any other politician seeking election (Kerr, 1964). When community members are aware of the kinds of questions to ask of those individuals seeking election to local public school boards, they are better positioned to discern the type of leadership each candidate will provide (Mizell, 2010). The following is a brief list of questions and considerations for equity-focused community members to begin to consider as they prepare to engage school board candidates

concerning their equity stance (adapted from CABE, 2019).

Considerations for Representation

1. What kind of relationship should a district/the board have with its community? With its parents and families (minoritized community members such as parents/caregivers of Color, parents of children with disabilities, etc.)?
2. How can a board know if its goals are being accomplished and its policies carried out? How can a board know if board goals are positively impacting minoritized community members?
3. How does/should the board decide what issues are most important? How do you plan to ensure that you receive input and the perspectives of minoritized communities in our district?
4. How can the board be accessible to the community? Various communities (communities of Color, religious communities, disability communities etc.)?
5. How can you contribute to creating a culture of equity and inclusion on the board and in the district?
6. What responsibilities do board members have regarding advocacy?
7. What are the community-based leadership responsibilities of local school board members?
8. What are the current challenges facing education/school boards?
9. What are the most pressing responsibilities of a local school board?
10. What motivates you to want to become a board member?

Meet the Authors

This October 2019 issue of Equity Dispatch was written and edited by:

Tammera S. Moore, Robin G. Jackson, Seena M. Skelton,

& Kathleen King Thorius

Chavkin, N. F., & Williams, D. L. (1993). Minority parents and the elementary school: Attitudes and practices. In N. F. Chavkin (Ed.), *Families and schools in a pluralistic society* (pp. 73-83). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Connecticut Association of the Board of Education-CABE. (2019). *Questions for School Board Candidates*. Retrieved from https://www.cabe.org/page.cfm?p=1221

Finn, J. D. (1982). Patterns in special education placement as revealed by the OCR surveys. In K. A. Heller, W. H. Holtzman, & S. Messick (Eds.), *Placing children in special education: A strategy for equity* (pp. 322-381). Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Kerr, N. D. (1964). The school board as an agency of legitimation. *Sociology of Education*, 34-59.

Kyser, T. S. (2019). Personal communication. *Equity Leaders Institute*. Indianapolis, IN. Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center (MAP EAC).

Lorentzen, I. J. (2013). *The relationship between school board governance behavior and student achievement* (Doctoral dissertation). University of Montana. Retrieved from https://search.proquest.com/openview/849b509315b27d124ae8aaa3eb2ca776/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y

McKown, C., & Weinstein, R. S. (2008). Teacher expectations, classroom context and the achievement gap. *Journal of School Psychology, 46*, 235-261.

McLaren, P. (1997). Decentering whiteness. *Multicultural Education, 5*(1), 4-11.

Mizell, H. (2010). School boards should focus on learning for all. *Phi Delta Kappan, 91*(6), 20-23.

Moore, T. S., Jackson, R. G., Kyser, T. S., Skelton, S. M., & Thorius. K. A. K. (2016). Considerations for professional development in equity-oriented instructional practices. *Equity by Dispatch*. The Great Lakes Equity Center (GLEC).

Mountford, M. (2004). Motives and power of school board members: Implications for school board-superintendent relationships. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 40*(5), 704-741.

Paris, D. (2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology, and practice. *Educational Researcher, 41*(3), 93-97. http://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X12441244

Reed, R. (1982). School boards, the community, and school desegregation. *Journal of Black Studies, 13*(2), 189-206.

Sell, S. (2006). Running an effective school district: School boards in the 21st century. *The Journal of Education, 186*(3), 71-97.

Skelton, S. M. (2019) Personal communication. *Equity Leaders Institute*. Indianapolis, IN. Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center (MAP EAC).

Smoley, E. R. (1999). *Effective school boards: Strategies for improving board performance*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Superfine, B. M. (2005). The politics of accountability: The rise and fall of goals 2000. *American Journal of Education, 112*(1), 10-43.

Underwood, J. (2017/2018). School districts control teachers' classroom speech. *Phi Delta Kappan, 99*(4), 76-77.

Zeldin, A. L., Britner, S. L., & Pajares, F. (2008). A comparative study of the self-efficacy beliefs of successful men and women in mathematics, science, and technology careers. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching, 45*(9), 1036-1058.

Recommended citation: Moore, T. S., Jackson, R. G., Skelton, S. M., & Thorius, K. A. K. (2019). Considerations for cultivating equity-centered school boards . *Equity Dispatch*. Indianapolis, IN. Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center (MAP EAC).

Disclaimer: Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center is committed to the sharing of information regarding issues of equity in education. Reference in this newsletter to any specific publication, person, or idea is for the information and convenience of the public and does not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center. The contents of this document were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education (Grant S004D110021). However, the content does not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and endorsement by the Federal Government should not be assumed.

A PROJECT OF GREAT LAKES EQUITY CENTER

IU SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
INDIANA UNIVERSITY
IUPUI