
Did You Know | Why It Matters | For Equity Now

Ensuring Embedded Equity at the SEA Level



“You cannot change any society unless you take responsibility for it, unless you see yourself as belonging to it and responsible for changing it.”

-Grace Lee Boggs



Did You Know

Equity is a Multi-leveled Effort?

This edition of *Equity Dispatch* poses the question: what is the *responsibility* of state education agencies (SEAs) to support local education agencies (LEAs) in centering educational equity? Here, we focus on the impact of SEAs, aiming to illuminate the ethical necessity of concurrent, coordinated, equity-focused efforts within and across a state's educational authority and influence.

When we conceptualize equity-centered efforts in the PK-12 context, our minds may focus on how school environments are (re)shaped to reflect school reform efforts (e.g. culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies [Paris, 2012] and equity-centered/anti-bias professional learning for educators and building level administrators [Dagli, Jackson, Skelton, and Thorius, 2017]). While these initiatives are indeed critical to ensuring the disruption of oppressive schooling environments, it is unclear as to whether or not the overall implementation of these efforts have authentically served the interests of all stakeholders (e.g. students, families, residents, tax payers, etc.). Therefore, we will clarify the current roles of SEAs and focus on needed shifts in praxis at the SEA level.

State Education Agencies and their Role

SEA's federal-level directives are to provide overarching governance to LEAs. Specifically, SEAs have three major roles: overseeing funding, policy leadership, and effectively communicating statewide educational updates to stakeholders (The Aspen Institute, 2015). More nuanced examples include the regulation of mandated state standards; the responsibility and accountability to the federal government to ensure individuals who are impacted by the various laws and Titles (e.g. IDEA, Title I, Title VI, Title IX, etc.) are protected; professional learning for LEAs; and setting the educational mission and vision for the state (The Aspen Institute, 2015). In the midst of all of this, then, how can SEAs ensure and provide accountability structures that promote equity being at the forefront—and not as an afterthought?

Educational Equity and ESSA

One way SEAs have been given the opportunity to embed equity throughout their efforts is through federal mandates, facilitated by language in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), IDEA, and other legislation. Focusing on ESSA, SEAs are able to submit their state accountability plans to the federal government, threading throughout equity-based goals, practices, and benchmarks. In efforts to advance educational equity state-wide, these plans may intentionally address inequities by focusing on improving student performance, preparing all students for successful post-secondary experiences, working towards eliminating gaps in educational access for marginalized students (Coomer, Jackson, Kyser, Skelton, & Thorius, 2017), and ensuring the equitable distribution of effective educators (Great Lakes Equity Center, 2015).

ESSA, three times reauthorized since the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, including several amendments, is rooted in Civil Rights Movement legislation (Coomer, Pearce, Dagli, Skelton, Kyser, & Thorius, 2017). The current socio-historical and -political climate in public education is

reminiscent of the issues protested in the 50s and 60s; meaning schools and districts have yet to overcome segregation, systemic racism, ableism, and sexism, and oppression still manifests via disproportionality in suspensions and expulsions, as well as in the so-called “achievement gap¹” (Coomer, Jackson, Kyser, Skelton, & Thorius, 2017; Jackson, Thorius, & Kyser, 2016). Focused on low-income students (Title I), and language instruction for English learners and immigrant students (Title III), these reauthorizations sought to center and re-center equity in its policy and practices, placing onus on SEAs to ensure the implementation of equity-centered initiatives. ESSA, the most current reauthorization,

has new outlines for school accountability that may provide avenues to more holistic approaches to teaching students, and gives states the opportunity to expand these accountability markers to include indicators of learning that are not solely academic, including opportunities to learn. (Coomer, Pearce, Dagli, Skelton, Kyser, & Thorius, 2017, pp. 2-3)

The opportunity to expand equity efforts is present, although attention still often remains more focused on academics (Jackson, Coomer, Dagli, Skelton, Kyser, & Thorius 2017b), without attending to the deeply entrenched systemic oppression that marginalized students are left to navigate. These systems of oppression serve as barriers to learning opportunities; marginalized students are essentially expected to “catch up” to white, non-disabled, middle class children in spite of the structural barriers often present and operationalized through school policies, practices, structures, and everyday interactions between educators and students (Coomer, Jackson, Kyser, Skelton, & Thorius, 2017). What we hope to demonstrate in the next two sections is the urgency of facilitating an equitable, symbiotic relationship between SEAs and LEAs, and a real-time example of how one SEA leveraged ESSA to advance educational equity at the local level.

¹ “The notion of an achievement gap emphasizes that a student’s educational success is largely due to intrinsic motivations or characteristics attributable to a family’s perceived culture (Ladson--Billings, 2007; Louie, 2008), while ignoring the generational malpractices students of color, students from disinvested communities, and students with disabilities (Annamma, Conner, & Ferri, 2013) have experienced year after year (Ladson--Billings, 2006; Ladson--Billings, 2007).” (Coomer, Jackson, Kyser, Skelton, & Thorius, 2017, p. 2)



Why It Matters

Leveraging Legislation towards Embedding Equity

When SEAs are faced with new federal policies, it is incumbent upon state administrators to consider these policies in such a way that it centers equity, ensuring the SEA is the epicenter for transformative change toward equity in the state (Coomer, 2017). For example, Civil Rights legislation such as Title IX, Title IV of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, IDEA, Section 504, and the ADA have been applied to PK-12 public education in efforts to redress discriminatory practices.

Aware that LEAs are under pressure to perform, it is critical for SEAs to take full advantage of their position and power to leverage ESSA, and other federal legislation (e.g. Title IX, Title IV of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, IDEA, ADA etc.), to exemplify a shift in priorities centering the overall well-being of students from historically marginalized groups (e.g. non-white, non-Protestant, non-disabled, non-binary, LGBTQIA+). In this way, SEAs can begin to acknowledge that the supposed gaps are due to inopportunity and educators' biases² (Blair, 2002 and Rudman, 2004, as cited in Staats & Patton, 2013)—rather than perpetuating the deficit-oriented practice of blaming students and families and/or communities for their own oppression.

Transformational change toward educational equity includes direct attention to the ways in which legislation can be leveraged to both promote and support historically marginalized students (Warren, Kyser, Moore, Skelton, & Thorius, 2016). If we focus on ESSA as an example, there are many leverage points SEAs can use to advance equitable practices statewide. Although standardized tests are still a foundational part of state accountability systems, under ESSA, states must also include other indicators, thus providing an opening for the use of more equity-centered measures to both monitor and increase marginalized students' opportunities to learn (Cook-Harvey, Darling-Hammond, Lam, Mercer & Roc, 2016). Focusing on these students' access to quality (effective) educators is just one way SEAs can intentionality re-examine and redress structural barriers to student success.

² It is important to highlight the caveat here that implicit bias is particularly dangerous when couched in power and privilege; everyone has implicit biases, but only some people, usually those possessing dominant identity markers (e.g. white, male, heterosexual, and/or Protestant) can institutionalize their bias through policy and practice that create oppressive systems for non-dominant groups.



For Equity Now Beyond the Mandate

One way to leverage legislation towards ensuring educational equity is through critical interpretation. For example, ESSA's reauthorization included a mandate that all districts report how their discretionary funds would fulfill the Teacher Quality requirement. An approach to this requirement is to rethink Teacher Quality through a critical lens by asking simple questions such as:

- Who are our teachers?
- Do teachers in the state reflect our student populations? Why or why not?
- What is an effective teacher? Do we include the ability to teach and engage diverse learners in our definition of an effective teacher?

- How do we address barriers that may be contributing to the lack of diverse representation in the educator talent pool?

Research has demonstrated that increasing teacher diversity has a positive effect on student performance, in addition to the overall quality of the teacher workforce; students of Color become more motivated to pursue teaching professions when they see teachers who look like them, and diversity in the teacher workforce increases investment and drive within equity work that addresses bias (Bireda & Chait, 2011; Partee, 2014; Warner & Duncan, 2019). State leaders considering how they might improve Teacher Quality—increasing the number of under-represented racial identities in the teacher workforce—are also thinking about ways to dismantle structural barriers contributing to inequities between students at the local level.

An Example

As we know, diversity is more than optics; it requires an examination of individuals' disposition, critical consciousness, and equity-orientations to ensure that we are both “surfacing voices in the school community that have been historically silenced and promot[ing] equitable practices” (Jackson, Coomer, Dagli, Skelton, Kyser, & Thorius, 2017a, p. 3; Weiss, 1993). As such, taking steps like ensuring a pathway for increasing the availability of equity-oriented educators, as well as redressing barriers to achieving a diverse educator work force reflective of student demographics, is a proactive step to rethinking teacher quality.

In efforts to leverage ESSA to 1) address the lack of racial diversity among educators in their state and 2) increase the capacity of current educators to teach all students, one Midwestern SEA in the [MAP Center region](#) was intentional about considering equity in their plans to increase the number of educators in the state, towards having the capacity to provide culturally responsive instruction to all students, as well as increase the percentage of educators of Color. As such, the SEA thought through ways in which they could ensure both the equitable distribution of effective educators, while assuring the educators were racially diverse. Their interpretation of the Teacher Quality mandate extended to reflect the inequities within the teacher workforce, as well as in student outcomes, activating their critical-consciousness—moving beyond the generalized language in the legislation.

The SEA's strategies towards fulfilling their goals included creating an application process that invited LEAs to demonstrate how they would use awarded Teacher Quality funds to increase the number of educators of Color in their district through a grant application process. The SEA did this by embedding within the process an application review rubric, specifically designed to assess the extent to which educational equity was considered in district plans, and to vet which LEAs were willing to invest resources and supports in not only the recruiting of educators of Color, but also in the retention of these educators. Additionally, applicants had to address ways in which current educators would be able to increase their capacity to engage in [culturally responsive instructional practices](#).

Through guidelines from ESSA and a critical approach to interpreting ESSA, districts in this state were able to visualize and articulate their equity-oriented goals, objectives, and outcomes in such a way that attends to federal mandates, as well as meet their own local context.

ESSA, as well as other federal legislation, can be an effective vehicle to rethink our approach to leveraging federal educational requirements in very intentional ways. The linchpin is to consider each requirement critically, accounting for the support and elevation of all students—particularly the historically marginalized. Respect for ESSA’s roots, and its charge for a “longstanding commitment to equal opportunity for all students” (U.S. Department of Education, n.d., A New Education section, para. 1) suggests that the responsibility for supporting LEAs with equity-intentioned efforts, falls at the SEA level.

Meet the Authors

This August 2019 issue of *Equity Dispatch* was written and edited by:
**Robin G. Jackson, Erin K. Sanborn, Seena M. Skelton, and
Kathleen King Thorius**

References

- Annamma, S. A., Connor, D., & Ferri, B. (2013). Dis/ability critical race studies (DisCrit): Theorizing at the intersections of race and dis/ability. *Race Ethnicity and Education, 16*(1), 1-31.
- Aspen Institute, The. (2015). Roles and responsibilities of the state education agency. Retrieved from <http://www.aspendri.org/portal/browse/DocumentDetail?documentId=2846&download>
- Bireda, S., & Chait, R. (2011). Increasing teacher diversity: Strategies to improve the teacher workforce. *Center for American Progress*. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED535654.pdf>
- Blair, I. V. (2002). The malleability of automatic stereotypes and prejudice. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 6*(3), 242-261.
- Cook-Harvey, C. M., Darling-Hammond, L., Lam, L., Mercer, C., & Roc, M. (2016). Equity and ESSA: Leveraging educational opportunity through the every student succeeds act. *Learning Policy Institute*. Retrieved from https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/sites/default/files/product-files/Equity_ESSA_REPORT.pdf
- Coomer, M. N. (2017). Keynote speech. *Equity Leaders Summit*. Unpublished.
- Coomer, M. N., Jackson, R. G., Kyser, T. S., Skelton, S. M., & Thorius, K. A. K. (2017). Reframing the achievement gap: Ensuring all students benefit from equitable access to learning. *Equity Dispatch*. Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center (MAP EAC).
- Coomer, M. N., Pearce, N., Dagli, C., Skelton, S. M., Kyser, T. S., & Thorius, K. A. K. (2017). The legacy of civil rights in the every student succeeds act. *Equity Dispatch*. Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center (MAP EAC).
- Dagli, C., Jackson, R. G., Skelton, S. M., & Thorius, K. A. K. (2017). Centering equity in educator professional learning. *Equity Dispatch*. Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center (MAP EAC).
- Great Lakes Equity Center. (2015). Equitable distribution of effective educators: Systems analysis tool. *Equity Tool*. Retrieved from <https://greatlakesequity.org/resource/equitable-distribution-effective-educators-systems-analysis-tool>

- Jackson, R. G., Coomer, M. N., Dagli, C., Skelton, S. M., Kyser, T. S., & Thorius, K. A. K. (2017a). State equity leaders summit: Leveraging ESSA to support equity-focused school transformation. *Equity Dispatch*. Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center (MAP EAC).
- Jackson, R. G., Coomer, M. N., Dagli, C., Skelton, S. M., Kyser, T. S., & Thorius, K. A. K. (2017b). Reexamining Workforce Diversity: Authentic Representations of Difference. *Equity Dispatch*. Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center (MAP EAC).
- Jackson, R. G., Thorius, K. A. K., & Kyser, T. S. (2016). Systemic approaches to eliminating disproportionality in special education. *Equity by Design*. The Great Lakes Equity Center (GLEC).
- Ladson--Billings, G. (2006). From the achievement gap to the education debt: Understanding achievement in U.S. schools. *Educational Researcher*, 35(7), 3-12.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2007). Pushing past the achievement gap: An essay on the language of deficit. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 76(3), 316-323.
- Louie, V. (2008). Moving beyond quick "cultural expectations." In M. Pollock (Ed.), *Everyday anti-racism: Getting real about race in school* (pp. 257-261). New York, NY: The New Press.
- Paris, D. (2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology, and practice. *Educational Researcher*, 41(3), 93-97.
- Partee, G. L. (2014). Retaining teachers of color in our public schools: A critical need for action. *Center for American Progress*. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED561078.pdf>
- Rudman, L. A. (2004). Social justice in our minds, homes, and society: The nature, causes, and consequences of implicit bias. *Social Justice Research*, 17, 129-142.
- Staats, C., & Patton, C. (2013). *State of the science: Implicit bias review 2013*. Columbus, OH: Kirwan Institute.
- U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.). Every student succeeds act (ESSA). Retrieved from <https://www.ed.gov/essa?src=rn>
- Warner, S. R., Duncan, E. (2019). A vision and guidance for a diverse and learner-ready teacher workforce. *Council of Chief State School Officers*. Retrieved from https://ccsso.org/sites/default/files/2019-01/Vision%20and%20Guidance%20for%20a%20Diverse%20and%20Learner-Ready%20Teacher%20Workforce_FINAL010919.pdf
- Warren, C. L., Kyser, T. S., Moore, T., Skelton, S. M., and Thorius, K. A. K. (2016). Leadership practices for transformative change towards equity. *Equity by Design*. The Great Lakes Equity Center (GLEC).

Weis, L. (1993). *Beyond silenced voices: Class, race, and gender in United States schools*. New York: SUNY Press.



Copyright © 2019 by Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center

Recommended citation: Jackson, R. G., Sanborn, E. K., Skelton, S. M., & Thorius, K. A. K. (2019). Ensuring embedded equity at the SEA level. *Equity Dispatch*. Midwest & 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.