

# Using Data to Guide Difficult Conversations around Structural Racism

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*The superintendent and an education researcher in Rochester (NY) present a framework for grounding difficult conversations on race and implicit bias in system-level data, to avoid blaming and shaming and to break through defensiveness to arrive at solutions.*

Challenging and confronting educational systems and structures, the vast majority of which come from a place of privilege, is uncomfortable but necessary. Education, from early childhood to post-secondary, should challenge and address the racial inequities that inevitably characterize such systems and structures. Yet, we do not always do this explicitly, for a number of reasons.

First, this is hard work, and educators must deal with many pressing needs on a day-to-day basis, so difficult conversations about racial inequities are pushed to the sidelines. Second, many educators do not have the training or resources available to collect, access, or analyze their data with a critical lens around racial equity. Third, many educators are White, and therefore have not personally

experienced what it means to navigate interactions that are based upon racial biases or systems of structural racism. Without this firsthand knowledge, they may not be aware of the impact on youth outcomes – from disengagement to academic challenges – and the critical need to address these systemic issues. Even educators of color, within a system that privileges Whiteness, can struggle with internalized oppression or the same lack of tools and training as White teachers. If we are to authentically serve all of our students – particularly Black and Latino males – it is important that we are open to having tough conversations about race.

The authors of this article are an example of how educators can collaborate around diversity and racial equity. We are in some ways opposites, but the difference actually helps us to have a greater understanding of these

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issues. We are a Black woman and a White woman; a school district superintendent and a university professor; a practitioner and a researcher; a woman who does not have children and a mom; a counselor and a policy analyst. What enables us to work together so well is that we have deep respect for each other, are open to new ways of thinking that emerge from our joint work, and are committed to racial justice. We work in parallel on these issues, in practice and in research, and when the opportunity arises (like writing this article), we enthusiastically collaborate.

One ongoing collaboration is through the Urban-Suburban Interdistrict Transfer Program (USITP), in the Rochester, New York, area, that allows students to move across district boundaries for desegregation. We recently wrote about how educational leaders can help promote inclusivity in schools, based upon the results of a research partnership between the University of Rochester and the USITP governance board (Finnigan et al. 2015). We found that students who crossed boundaries from the city school district to the primarily White suburban districts experienced:

- racial stereotyping from individual students, teachers, security staff, and other school staff;
- negative portrayals of their neighborhoods as violent and unsafe; and
- institutional and structural racism nested in the policies and programs of the suburban districts.

Our analysis led us to three steps to disrupt these experiences of students of color in our educational systems – not just those who move across boundaries, but all students. The first step is “confronting race” through targeted conversations that use data relating to achievement, discipline, and climate, for instance, by focusing on differential

outcomes for Black and Latino males. These conversations can become uncomfortable when educators who accept these outcomes as normal are asked to reflect critically on systemic factors.

To ensure equity is embedded in our school systems, we must also move beyond these difficult conversations with two further steps that are beyond the scope of this article: targeting professional development and training around cultural competence, and aligning beliefs around equity, policies, and practices. In this short piece, we will focus on the first step – preparing the way for bringing about change by sparking meaningful conversations around racial prejudice and structural racism.

## USING DATA AS A STARTING POINT

Data-driven decision making (DDDM) is linked to broader research on organizational learning and continuous improvement and traces back to debates of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s (Marsh, Pane & Hamilton 2006). Several scholars have developed frameworks for DDDM,<sup>1</sup> based on a learning process that Argyris and Schön (1996) refer to as “double-loop learning,” which involves reflection and suspension of deeply held beliefs and consideration of alternative views and practices. DDDM has not explicitly focused on racial equity, but this area of work provides strong guidance as to a process to use to move forward.

Data can help school staff see that current problems occur at a systemic level and produce clearly visible inequitable results, making it harder for individuals to insist that there is no problem because they are “not racist”

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<sup>1</sup> For more detail and references about DDDM, see <http://vue.annenberginstitute.org/issues/48>.

or feel that they are being unfairly singled out and blamed. Teasing out the mechanisms by which these inequitable results happen can unearth assumptions and racial biases that improve understanding rather than blame and shame.

Data can include local and state assessment data, attendance, suspension rates, classification rates, enrollment numbers, AP scores, graduation rates, course taking, surveys of parents or students, and a variety of other data available in school systems. Sometimes an initial analysis reveals that additional data are needed (e.g., surveys or interviews of teachers or counselors, observations, or interviews with students). Essential questions to ask are:

- What data sources are already available to us, and how do we obtain these data?
- What types of data do we need to collect?
- Are any of these rates (attendance, graduation, etc.) disproportionate by race?
- What analysis will we need to do and does our staff have the skills and knowledge to do this or will we need to contract with an outside group?
- Who will be involved in the discussions?
- What problem or issue are we looking to solve?
- How will we use the results?

Using data as a starting point can help in a number of ways. It can sound the alarm on specific areas of concern. It can encourage dialogue that challenges existing practices and points toward solutions. A reflective and critical conversation around race might lead educators to uproot sacred cows – things that have always been a certain way, despite the unequal outcomes they

produce. For example, discussions around data that indicate unequal access to gifted and talented programs can often result in reflection and policy change around eligibility requirements, recommendation procedures, and other related areas. Statements like, “But we have always had teachers recommend students for gifted and talented” can be questioned by looking at data that may suggest how teacher recommendations are one component of the process that causes unequal access, which may lead to a consideration of alternative eligibility requirements or mechanisms. Using data as a starting point can also call attention to areas of improvement in the data systems and ways to ensure that more useful data are available for future analyses.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF TRUST

A critical component of these discussions is trusting relationships:

At the heart of forming trusting relationships is the ability to be vulnerable and share, to show respect for others’ ideas, and to learn from the knowledge that others bring to an organization. Both innovation and improvement require risk taking and idea sharing, but underlying emotional connections are critical in helping the technical aspects of work to take hold. (Finnigan & Daly 2017, p. 29).

In difficult conversations like the ones described in this article, a key component was establishing a base of trust and grounding problem solving around inequitable opportunities or outcomes rather than assigning blame. This is consistent with prior work around the importance of trust for school improvement (see, for example, Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Tschannen-Moran, 2004). The current climate of high-stakes accountability can work

against the types of trusting relationships that are necessary to move forward. But superintendents and school administrators must find ways to model and foster collaborative and trusting relationships among staff by assuring staff that these conversations will be used for inquiry, not evaluation; establishing a norm of respect for different views and perspectives; and working with staff to carefully pull back the layers of a problem and determine a plan for meaningful change.

**THE ERASE FRAMEWORK:  
USING DATA TO GUIDE  
CONVERSATIONS AROUND  
STRUCTURAL RACISM**

To address racism and bias in a meaningful and authentic way requires educators to have candid conversations about and with the students they are responsible for serving, which may create discomfort and resistance among school staff. How can we move from a place of tension and defensiveness and ensure that all school stakeholders are involved?

District leaders must first demonstrate that addressing racial prejudice and systemic racism is a district-wide priority that must be carried out in practice. The superintendent must work with the board of education to create policies that clearly outline the expectation. Central office and school administrators then develop regulations to outline how the policy will operate in each school. Teachers and parents must be included in this process to ensure buy-in and to bring in their knowledge and perspectives. Students are also critical to these discussions – both students of color and White students, as both groups notice that they are treated differently by educators, with students of color more likely to be punished for similar behaviors (Lewis & Diamond 2015). This district-wide priority must be clearly delineated in

the mission, vision, and strategic plan of the district.

Our experiences from practice and research suggest that having a framework may help school or district leaders as they undergo this learning process. Here we offer a framework to start conversations that **ERASE** racial prejudices and structural racism, building upon the DDDM and organizational learning processes mentioned earlier:<sup>2</sup>

1. **Examine data.** Start with available data around student opportunities and outcomes and disaggregate these along racial lines. Produce data sets and visual representations (e.g., infographics) of data that can generate rich discussions.
2. **Raise questions.** Begin with open questions of participants around what they notice and why they think differential outcomes exist, to fully understand the ways that racial prejudices and structural racism impact youth. Allow for questioning of deeply held beliefs or assumptions to bring different perspectives and experiences into the dialogue.
3. **Ascertain root causes, relevant best practices, and alternative research-based solutions.** This can be one of the most difficult steps as it moves from identifying red flag areas to diagnosing problem and identifying meaningful solutions. Look systematically at available research and best practices targeted at the root causes identified through this analysis to ensure that the scope of possibilities are known and discussed.

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2 As noted in the introduction, professional development and training in cultural competence and to challenge deficit-based beliefs are necessary components and should be part of this district-wide priority to provide an environment in which these conversations can take place.

4. **Select strategic solutions.** At this point it is important to prioritize both short-term and long-term strategies. These may include additional training or hiring of staff; alteration of policies or procedures or development of new policies; identification of new data to collect; development of new programs for students; or revisiting of strategic plans or vision statements of the district.
5. **Evaluate progress.** Re-examining the data sets periodically and making adjustments to policy and practices are necessary to ensure that the issues that are identified through these conversations are addressed. It is also important to celebrate even the smallest of successes.

## USING DATA TO SPARK CONVERSATIONS AIMED AT CREATING CHANGE

In the following two examples, I [Lesli Myers] share my experiences as an administrator in two different school districts to describe how I used data to spark difficult conversations about race. These examples informed our joint thinking and the development of the ERASE framework.

### Example 1: Using Data to Spark Conversations with Students

Several years ago, I was working in a school district that was experiencing significant turmoil. Fights were prevalent and the atmosphere was so charged that the Department of Justice came in to mediate some of the challenges and difficulties that the community was facing. Black and Brown students and their families would regularly complain to staff about inequity and unfair treatment.

On a fall day, I was sitting at my desk and was notified that hundreds of students had organized a walkout and were protesting outside of the high school. My presence was requested to help determine what was going on. After a few short conversations with the protesters, I was able to identify who the student organizers were and asked if we could have a discussion about the situation. After a promise that I would do much more listening than talking, the students reluctantly agreed to stop protesting and meet with me in the cafeteria in the high school.

For two and a half hours, I sat and listened to Black, Brown, and rural students talk about their educational experiences and interactions in their schools. For example, one student emphatically shared that he received a discipline consequence for lingering in the hallway past the ringing of the bell while the White student with him received a verbal reprimand. Another student was angered that he overheard an administrator speaking about his behavior and it was mentioned that this was a “generation issue” because his father behaved in the same manner. During the meeting I heard words such as *discrimination*, *harassment*, *privilege*, *inequality*, and *injustice*. I inwardly cried as I wrote over twenty pages of handwritten notes and regularly conducted checks for understanding to ensure I was accurately capturing their lived experiences.

One of the major themes that emerged<sup>3</sup> involved unequal treatment of students in discipline decisions, expectations, and suspensions. In response, I created a student discipline review panel that provided a vehicle for students to

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3 I applied a simple qualitative analysis to my notes on the students’ statements, using open coding to identify distinct concepts and categories and assign first-level concepts into second-level categories.

review and analyze discipline data (race/ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, grade level, infraction and outcome), and provide feedback on the code of conduct, which was a key policy impacting disciplinary outcomes.

Because trust was an issue with many students, I was the only adult who attended the student discipline review panel meetings. I entered the meetings with the hope and expectation that having students look at data would provide an additional lens with a unique perspective. I showed students a bar graph of the disaggregated discipline data, outlined the discipline process, and gave them a glossary. The students broke into groups of four; I asked them to begin by simply looking at the data. Next, I had students ask questions of the data (e.g., what were the number of student subgroups?) and identify the key findings. Were there any numbers or percentages that stood out or raised concern? Then they identified areas for improvement (what immediately “sounded the alarm” for the group?) and, based on their analysis, recommended action for how we – as a district – could improve our school discipline policies to address the inequitable results they found.

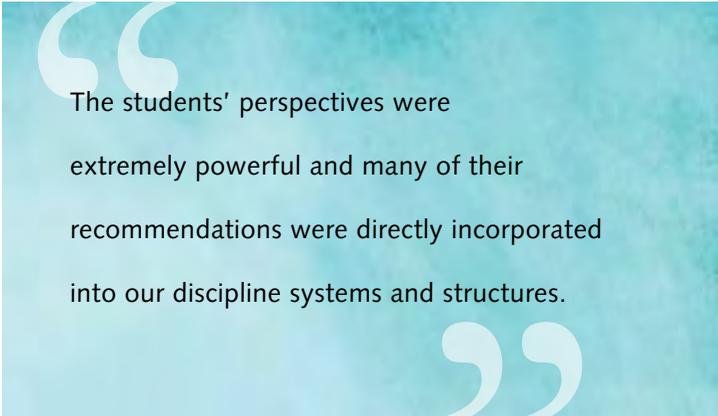
These conversations with students were relatively easy, since the students were invested, inquisitive, and genuinely interested in the analysis and the dialogue. Their perspectives were extremely powerful and many of their recommendations were directly incorporated into our discipline systems and structures.

It was more difficult to engage in these discussions with the adult staff as a follow-up to the students’ analyses. But having the students take this first step facilitated rich discussions with the adults as they heard about how students had grappled with these issues in an authentic and constructive way.

Outcomes of this powerful interaction included sharing the information with the board of education and each school principal, modifications to the code of conduct, modifications to the equity mentor program, and new professional development for administrative staff.

### Example 2: Using Data to Spark Conversations with Teachers, Counselors, Principals, and other School Staff

At the end of each year, schools and districts usually review data around academics, behavior, dropout rates, attendance, and athletic participation, among other areas. This end-of-year review provides the opportunity to see if student, teacher, and school benchmarks have been met, and also allows educators to identify problem areas that require attention for the upcoming year. Recently, my district reviewed our data on in- and out-of-school suspensions. We disaggregated



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the information along the following categories: race, socio-economic status, grade level, school, consequence, and time of year. Administrators at both the school and district level were involved in the conversation, including

assistant principals, principals, assistant superintendents, and the superintendent.

An overarching agreement was made that wherever the data led, we would focus on solutions rather than on blaming particular people or schools. What we wanted was to have meaningful conversations about why certain students were overrepresented in a particular category. We shared our key findings, which included inconsistent penalties and longer out-of-school time for students of color, then opened the discussion with questions like, What specific data points immediately jumped out on the page? Participants asked why, who, what, when, where, and how: for example, Why were so many African American males getting suspended during a particular time of day or in a particular location of the school?

Conversations such as these began with system-level data, but sometimes led to specific situations like the relationship between a particular educator and student. One outcome of the conversations was to institute a “member check conversation” when a request is made to suspend a student for five days. The principal outlines the situation in a call to a central office administrator, who can ask clarifying questions or push for additional information. This extra step allows decisions to be made with other perspectives and other ways of approaching the situation to be considered, which alleviates the immediate emotional responses that can lead to suspending a student.

These discussions sometimes elicit defensive responses like, “Jamal clearly broke one of the code of conduct rules. Are you saying we shouldn’t suspend students for this behavior?” Maintaining

a focus on the data has helped us to return the conversation to the disproportionate numbers of Black and or Latino males who fell into almost every discipline category, and to dig deeper into the reasons.

“Disruption of the educational process” was one common discipline code infraction for males of color. An analysis of discipline write-ups revealed that many teachers interacting with male students of color perceived them to be louder and more aggressive than White students. As the teacher escalated, the student would match with equal intensity. Focusing on assumptions or beliefs of the teachers allowed us to consider training teachers to respond with greater understanding of a student’s experiences at home, in some instances, or a more trauma-informed response, to help de-escalate the situation.

We started to think more deeply about moving away from initial responses based on deficit thinking that relied on punitive responses to misbehavior and that limited or failed to protect students (for example, policies like zero tolerance and inflexible codes of conduct). We started to ask what systemic changes were needed to more carefully and equitably respond to situations and how we could ensure that they were practiced uniformly and consistently across the district – for instance, through clear expectations and professional development. It is easy to become entrenched in the daily work and respond reflexively, “That’s the way it’s always been done.” Our detailed analysis of data in this example allowed educators to bring meaning and self-reflection to the differential outcomes we reviewed.

One of the most critical lessons learned with this process was that it gave administrators permission to look at data with a critical eye and expose areas of concern, rather than hide or justify the data. They clearly understood that this was a collaborative effort that was focused on problem solving rather than just problem finding, which helped create an environment of inquiry and trust among administrators, teachers, and youth. It also helped change mindsets about students from a deficit and punishment perspective to a more caring and culturally responsive approach.

### A CRITICAL MOMENT FOR OUR YOUTH

We are at a critical moment regarding race and race relations in our country, and educators are uniquely positioned to facilitate these dialogues in ways that can have a meaningful and long-term impact on youth trajectories. You can no longer wait for someone else to do this work. So we respectfully ask readers of this article to be bold and strong enough to leave your emotional, psychological, physical, and even intellectual comfort zones and incorporate the examination of data to effect change for underrepresented students.

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