

IS COMPLIANCE “TRUMPING” MISSION? FINDINGS FROM AN EQUITY AUDIT PILOT*

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Abstract

Summary/Abstract NEEDED



NOTE: This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of education administration. In addition to publication in the Connexions Content Commons, this module is published in the *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation*,¹ Volume 6, Number 4 (October - December, 2011), ISSN 2155-9635. Formatted and edited in Connexions by Theodore Creighton and Brad Bizzell, Virginia Tech and Janet Tareilo, Stephen F. Austin State University. Topic Editor and double-blind reviews managed and facilitated by Editor, Linda Lemasters, George Washington University.

1 Sumario en español

En 2006 los legisladores de un estado del medioeste pasaron la ley un "Plan de Mérito" que requiere un conjunto común de dieciséis créditos para la graduación de colegio secundario. La política representa una interrupción aguda del pasado, donde sólo un crédito (en el Civismo) fue requerido para la graduación, y para donde la organización tradicional del plan (el colegio estudios preparatorios, vocacionales y generales) limitó acceso para muchos estudiantes a los cursos ahora requirió para la graduación. El desafío más grande educar a líderes, en función de conformidad, colocado por los nuevos requisitos de crédito ha estado en matemáticas; todos los estudiantes ahora deben completar cuatro créditos en matemáticas, antes que el dos o tres créditos la mayoría de los colegios secundarios requirieron anteriormente, y esos créditos deben incluir Álgebra y la Geometría.

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*Version 1.3: Oct 8, 2011 5:36 pm GMT-5

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2 Introduction and Background

In 2006 the legislators of one mid-western state passed into law a “Merit Curriculum” that requires a common set of sixteen credits for high school graduation. The policy represents a sharp break from the past, where only one credit (in Civics) was required for graduation, and where the traditional organization of the curriculum (college preparatory, vocational, and general studies) limited access for many students to the courses now required for graduation. The greatest challenge to school leaders, in terms of compliance, posed by the new credit requirements has been in mathematics; all students must now complete four credits in mathematics, rather than the two or three credits most high schools previously required, and those credits must include Algebra I and Geometry.

High school principals and math educators have been struggling to respond to this policy mandate. Murphy’s (1990) research on policy implementation suggests that regulatory policies like increasing the number of required credits can be implemented quickly and successfully, in part because such changes are easily quantifiable and also “built on existing school structures,” (Fowler, 2004, p. 275), in this case, the credit-granting system institutionalized across the country.

The researcher hypothesized, however, that a powerful competing school structure—curricular tracks often well established by middle school—will continue to confound educators attempting to implement this mandate. Most high school principals and math educators have been operating within deeply tracked academic structures where the mathematics curriculum especially has been differentiated between college bound, career-technical, and general studies students. The Merit Curriculum, in essence, calls for the dismantling of traditional organizational structures that research suggests have institutionalized inequities for decades (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Gamoran, 1992; Lee & Burkham, 2003; Lucas, 2001; Kerkoff, 2000; Mickelson, 2003; Oakes, 1985). The state mandate represents a redistributive policy; it requires providing access for all students to a college preparatory curriculum that previously had been reserved only for some students. Research by Kirst and Jung (1980) and Peterson, Rabe, and Wong (1986) suggest that redistributive policy changes are complex and require years, perhaps decades, for successful implementation.

Based on these understandings, the researcher believed that, without appropriate tools and assistance from intermediary organizations committed both to improving mathematics instruction and to insuring that organizational structures support equal access for all students to a rigorous curriculum, high schools would implement the mandated mathematics curriculum in ways which simply perpetuate traditional institutional inequities. Both internal and external assistance and support have been shown to be critical factors in successful education policy implementation (Berman & McLaughlin, 1978; Louis & Miles, 1990).

In determining what form additional assistance might take in helping schools implement this policy mandate, the researcher selected the equity audit. Equity audits have been useful in civil rights enforcement as well as examinations of school curricula (Kahle, 1998; Mitchell & Poston, 1992; Skrla, McKenzie, & Scheurich, 2009), and have been effective in “leveraging educational equity in the present climate of mandated, high stakes educational reform” (Skrla, Scheurich, Gracia, and Nolly, 2006, p. 257). Models developed by Poston (1992) and more recently by Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, and Nolly (2006) served as the foundation for the equity audit developed for this project.

According to Skrla, McKenzie, and Scheurich (2009), school leaders, including high school principals and those responsible for developing and implementing curriculum, can use equity audits as a “systematic way . . . to assess the degree of equity or inequity present in three key areas of their schools or districts: programs, teacher quality, and achievement.” They emphasize that audits “put streamlined, practical strategies in the hands of leadership practitioners at a time when such tools are sorely needed” (p. 3). In response to curricular mandates in this state, developing an equity audit that principals and math educators could use to assess and reflect upon the equitable implementation of the mandate in their mathematics curriculum seemed useful.

The researcher sought funding to collaboratively develop and pilot an equity audit instrument focused on implementation of the new mathematics requirements. A design team was recruited that consisted of: three university professors, one an expert in secondary leadership, another an expert in comprehensive school reform, and a third an expert in diversity and equity; two mathematics specialists from state-funded K – 12

educational support organizations with a history of significantly improving math achievement in poor urban schools; and, in the field, mathematics teachers and department chairs from a diverse set of schools who agreed to pilot the instrument and the process.

Prior to meeting, members of the design team were sent materials to read describing equity audits and their use. The model suggested by Skrla, McKenzie, and Scheurich (2009) guided the process, with a special focus on two specific dimensions from the model: achievement equity, specifically high school graduation tracks; and teacher quality equity. During a series of work sessions and electronic discussions, the design team established common goals, defined key terms, and developed items to include in the audit questionnaire and a process for completing it. The central purpose of the project was to design the “practical strategies” suggested by Skrla, McKenzie, and Scheurich (2009) that would assist school leaders, particularly principals and math educators, in identifying indicators of equitable implementation related to achievement and teacher quality equity that could serve as “targets” or evidence of deficits in equitable implementation of the state mandate in mathematics.

The instrument developed by the team consisted of 38 items, 18 addressing the demographics of the school, and the remainder related to the mathematics program. Because achievement equity related to graduation tracks and teacher quality equity were a primary focus of the audit, many of the items were designed specifically to elicit responses and provoke reflection about these dimensions. Examples of items directed at achievement equity follow.

If you group students by ability for Algebra I, what percentage of your students are in the:

- slower paced or lower level Algebra I courses?
- faster paced or higher level Algebra I course?

If you group students by ability for Algebra I, which of the following sub-groups of students are you concerned may be disproportionately represented in the slower paced or lower level courses? (Please check all that apply.)

- Males
- Females
- Free/reduced lunch students (low SES)
- Students new to the district
- Racial or ethnic minorities
- Special Education students
- None

The grouping of students for Algebra I instruction in our high school could best be described as (choose only one response):

- Heterogeneous (varying abilities in math within the same classroom)
- Homogeneous (similar abilities in math within the same classroom).

In the equity audit model suggested by Skrla, McKenzie, and Scheurich (2009), it is important to acknowledge the existence of different academic tracks, and to examine data that reveal patterns of assignment to those tracks based on SES and race or ethnicity to reveal disproportionate enrollment. This researcher believes it is also important, given recent trends in both high school and post-secondary completion rates, that assignment patterns related to gender also be examined. Examples of items directed at teacher quality equity follow.

Math teachers are assigned to teach math courses or sections based on which of the following: (please check all that apply.)

- Seniority in the district or department
- Their expressed personal preference for teaching specific courses
- Their expressed personal preference for teaching certain kinds of students (e.g., more or less advanced math students)

- Administrative decision/authority to assign teachers to courses
- A deliberate attempt to provide struggling math students with the teacher best able to help them be successful
- A deliberate attempt to insure that the most advanced students have the most experienced or skillful math teachers

Which of the following statements best describes the current allocation of math teachers to specific math courses? (Please check all that apply.)

- Our most senior and experienced math teachers are teaching our most advanced math courses and students.
- Our teachers who have a Masters Degree in mathematics are teaching our most advanced math courses and students.
- Our least senior and experienced math teachers are teaching freshman and sophomore level math courses.
- Our least senior and experienced math teachers are teaching lower-level or slower paced mathematics courses (if you offer them.)

Skrla, McKenzie, and Scheurich (2009) have found that in schools which have not “systematically evaluated levels of equity or inequity” teacher quality as measure by education and experience are distributed unevenly, with “the most experienced teachers assigned to teach the perceived top-level classes and students” (p. 35).

In what would turn out to be a faulty decision, the design team imagined a process for providing the equity audit tool to school leaders through an online and electronic process in order to facilitate larger numbers of schools gaining access to the audit. They imagined the audit being completed collaboratively, for example, at a mathematics department meeting. So the final audit instrument was piloted using SNAP online survey technology.

3 Piloting the Equity Audit

High schools were invited to participate in the pilot by members of the design team, and the sample was comprised of schools that volunteered to participate. Researchers acknowledge a potential bias in the sample as a result of self-selection. Based on recommendations by Johnson & Christensen (2000), a minimum of five schools was sought for the pilot. Six high schools ultimately participated, and were diverse in size, location, and demographics. All pilot schools were public, five of them traditional high schools and one a public charter school. Urban, suburban and rural high schools were represented in the pilot. The pilot high schools also represented a variety of sizes, from approximately 500 students to 1800 students, and regions across the state, from the largest urban center to a rural high school “up north.” (Names of all pilot schools have been changed for reporting results of this project publicly.)

A math department head or school administrator served as primary contact. Contacts were informed in advance that they would complete the questionnaire electronically as a web-based survey, and were emailed a list of school data they would be requested to use during the audit process. They were also strongly encouraged to involve others in the process of gathering data and completing the questionnaire. Responses on the electronic questionnaire served as one source of data (though the sample is too small for statistical applications) for determining the success of the instrument and process and to determine the need for revisions in the instrument. These responses, however, were not nearly as informative or helpful as the on-site interviews that followed.

Electronic submission of the questionnaire by the school was, in fact, followed by a site visit and personal interview with the person(s) completing the questionnaire. Visits and interviews were conducted by the researcher using a structured interview format as soon as possible after the audit was completed. One pilot school participant declined to be interviewed. Five of the schools then became “pilot case studies” as described by Yin (2003, pp. 78 - 79). Recorded interviews with school representatives who completed the audit process serve as a second data source for the pilot.

4 What the Pilot Revealed

Although the pilot had unexpected outcomes, the combined analysis of questionnaire responses and interviews at the pilot school sites provided important insights not only into the schools' response to the state curricular mandate, but also, and perhaps especially, to their readiness to address equity issues related to implementation. All schools were able to complete audit items related to commonly asked demographic questions. But several of the pilot school participants left blank audit items related to teacher quality equity or academic equity. The interviews revealed an important (and unexpected) distinction between schools in the sample that might be described as "compliance-focused" implementers and "mission-focused" implementers.

4.1 Mission-focused Implementers

Two of the schools in the pilot, Chancellor Academy, a public charter, and Sunrise, a traditional high school, had been established within the past decade, and specifically to advance a clear mission. Chancellor Academy, located in a large urban center, was established as a college preparatory academy that held high expectations for all students, despite its low SES and minority population. Sunrise High School, the largest in the pilot, enjoyed strong visionary leadership since it was established, and was involved in a national comprehensive reform network (Coalition of Essential Schools) through which it was working to implement a small learning communities grant. Responses during interviews in these two schools consistently reflected an emphasis on working toward "what is best for our students" or the larger "mission" of the school. Compliance with the curricular mandate was almost a non-issue, and in both schools, providing equitable educational opportunities for all students appeared to be a norm, the way things were done. The following passage, from the interview at Sunrise, is representative:

SR: We had twelve of our teachers in our district that gave up six days this summer of their own time with no pay plus we had two days this week, Monday and Tuesday of this week, to participate in an Algebra I workshop on curriculum. These teachers are all interested in going back for the Algebra II next summer for eight days. So there are those opportunities out there.

BB: But here's what I'm hearing you say, you'd probably be doing this anyway.

SR: We would be doing that whether...

BB: Whether the muckimucks in [the state capital] said do it or not.

SR: Yeah. The new curriculum, I would say the biggest thing the new curriculum has forced us to do is find some alternate senior level math classes to offer. But other than that...we've had these common assessments for years and we just adopted a new math program so we're rewriting all of those . . . and we think they're very important and formative and summative assessments, that's what we're all about. So we've been doing it. So for us here, when I answered that question I'm like well in response to the [Merit Curriculum], not really. It really was, because we're already, we would have done it either way . . . participation in professional learning communities. I mean we're doing critical friends groups and it was not in response to...so it's something that's been ongoing here. So it wasn't in response, it's just enhancing what we've been doing.

As we discussed the Sunrise response to the teacher quality equity prompts, it became even clearer that the school's practices were driven by a vision for the school, and a well established culture that embraced both equity and best educational practice:

BB: What's true here?

SR: What is true is we look at the big picture and the question that had been asked before that when you had asked how teachers, math teachers are assigned to teach math courses or selections based on which of the following and the only one I did not check was seniority in the district. We don't...

BB: You do not...

SR: Absolute do not, absolutely do not. We do not believe in that. In the math department everybody teaches every level. We think that's very important and we haven't done that for years in this district. Since I've been here I refused to allow our new teachers to be placed with the most challenging students. And so the rest of them, we do ask teachers what are their preferences. We do base it on what they can teach, base it on trying to make sure that nobody has five preps or four preps. So trying to give people, but...

BB: What do you feel is the primary driver here in assigning teachers to courses?

SR: What is best for students.

BB: What is best for students.

SR: Looking at what teachers work best at what level with what types of students. We try to assign, and it's not our most senior teachers or our least senior teachers, we try to assign our best teachers to our most challenging classes and to our upper level classes. We really look at being able to move people around too.

The response at Chancellor Academy to state the mandates was similar:

CR: Well our school began in 2002, which was before any of the Merit Curriculum evolved. And so we created the higher expectations of our ninth through twelfth grade students before the state ever intervened with the culture of a school . . . We do have a lot of crime, but we also hold students to high standards with curriculum . . . And that's the reality of it, always having high expectations and exceeding state standards because if you look at where the state lies with graduation rates and other things, it still falls short.

Chancellor, in fact, required four years of mathematics for all students prior to the Merit Curriculum, and the school's response to teacher quality equity was similar to Sunrise:

BB: And how are teachers assigned to teach those ninth grade classes?

CR: Well (pause) what we do is, well number one they're certified, but number two is we try our best to put our stronger faculty as freshmen, those that want to work with students that have a huge fluctuation of skills. By the time they're in ninth grade, it's like a roller coaster of who has the skills and who doesn't. And when they're in twelfth grade, from us keeping them, they don't stand out as much. It's far and beyond the most challenging grade to work with. So that's usually our stronger staff.

BB: And you really are looking at who works best, and wants to work with ninth graders?

CR: Correct.

BB: And your [math teachers] are comfortable teaching a vast array of skills?

CR: I have yet to have a faculty member say they would not teach freshmen.

Evidence from both the questionnaire and the interviews for these two schools revealed that teaching assignments are not determined by seniority, but by matching the needs of the students with the skills and dispositions of the teachers, and participants could readily site data related to the performance of specific student subgroups about which they were concerned.

4.2 Compliance-focused Implementers

In contrast, the three remaining schools in the pilot, based on the interviews with their math leaders, seem to be "compliance-focused" in all aspects of their implementation of the Merit Curriculum in mathematics. Language patterns in the interviews revealed that compliance with policy requirements was the sole consideration in curricular or instructional decisions for mathematics, and that teachers were assigned based on seniority. Issues related to any aspect of equitable implementation appeared not to have been a consideration in their implementation decisions. As the math leader from Webster High School stated: "We have not looked specifically at what groups are not passing." The curriculum director from Vernon High School, when asked if the Merit Curriculum has helped equalize opportunities for their students or if there has been any discussion about equitable access to such math courses as Algebra I and Geometry, responded: "I think the main focus is meeting the requirements of the mandate, but I think we do realize that it's kind of becoming more of an equality issue, especially with the special ed students; the special ed students need to have some experience with these Merit Curricula."

Webster's mathematics representative admitted that when he completed the audit and was asked to indicate percentage of students by race or ethnicity, "it was more of an estimate . . . off the top of my head . . . so they were accurate but yet estimates. I didn't put an exact number there." Later in the interview when he was asked if their math department had ever considered examining enrollment or success rates by SES, or race and ethnicity, he stated they "had not considered . . . or even worried about that. . . It hasn't seemed to be an issue for us at all" despite the fact he described his school earlier in the interview as extremely diverse by SES and had referred to African American and Asian students. The interview continued:

BB: So did you find, as you think about that, did you find that prompt, those questions, [about enrollment and success rates of certain demographic groups] helpful in understanding your math program and its effect on students or not so helpful? Asked another way, would gathering that extra information be valuable or more trouble than it's probably worth for your school?

WR: I think it might be, it's troublesome and it might be hard for us to really figure out how to use it.

BB: Have you looked at or done any disaggregation of students, your students who are having trouble passing these in terms of gender or in terms of race or ethnicity or poverty, free and reduced lunch?

WR: No. That's a great question. No we have not looked specifically at what groups are not passing those.

BB: Do you think it would be helpful in any way?

WR: Possibly. I think, I think at this point, our school is not large enough to the point where I mean to look at that data there may be five kids that didn't pass all four of those tests last year and of those five, is that really a large enough sample space to...

BB: To find a pattern?

WR: To find a pattern, exactly . . . So that creates a new bookkeeping headache for us as well. Like I said I now have a file drawer or file cabinet full of these old testlets as proof that they have passed and we're now in the process of . . . what can we do better bookkeeping wise to keep track of who has passed and who has not passed and yes they can retake it and have they? How many times should we allow them to retake it before it just becomes a random guessing game for them?

Instead of a focus on equity in these schools, or even the quality of mathematics curriculum or instruction, the focus during these three interviews was on meeting the technical requirements of the mandate, especially in terms of credit requirements, and, even, as suggested above, the "bookkeeping headache" they face as a result of the mandate. The following quote, from a math leader at Webster High School, is representative of these pilot schools:

WR: Mainly our goal is to get everybody through Algebra I, geometry, and Algebra II; that's the new state requirement. And now there's also an additional requirement that everybody has to pass a math class their senior year, so you're looking at four, not necessarily four years of math, it's four credits of math . . . but one of them has to be their senior year.

BB: They have to take it during their senior year?

WR: Yes, yes. Because the state doesn't want kids taking a year off and then going into college and, 'whoa, gosh, it's been so long since I did this,' and then the colleges are saying these kids can't do this math. Well they can do it, it's just they've forgotten some of it. They need some help refreshing.

BB: Because they had senioritis for a whole year.

WR: Exactly. And that's created a bit of a loophole too, so now they are taking a year off their junior year. And that's the year that they take the ACT, so now we're fighting that battle with we're changing our handbook and our policies a little bit.

BB: Interesting.

WR: Yeah, with making sure the kids are doing something their junior year too because that's the biggest year. That's the ACT year.

In an interview with the Curriculum Director from Vernon High School, located in a blue collar community adjacent to an urban center, working with the math faculty to implement the Merit Curriculum, he described his role as making "sure that we're providing the appropriate classes, that we're providing the alternative classes in case students do not complete, are not on course or on schedule to complete, offering some . . . online credit recovery. And just something that we have to keep an eye on." Discussions related to the technical aspects of the mandate such as students earning the appropriate number of credits, or identifying credit recovery programs, dominated the interviews in these three schools.

Interestingly, during interviews in two of the compliance-focused schools, the issue of changes in the academic schedule were brought up by the school representative without prompting from the researcher. Stanford High School had recently moved from a block schedule to the trimester. When asked if they had done that specifically because of the Merit Curriculum or if they had been moving toward that decision previously, the math department chair explained:

SR: I think we were heading that direction, but we had just a lot of things happening at the same time. You know there was concern, we were, first of all we were using the four by four block, ninety minute blocks, change classes at the semester. And we enjoyed that. With the Merit, the concern was would kids have any time for electives. And of course being able to recycle students at the trimester.

BB: I'm hearing this a lot, that high schools that have been in block have moved to trimester.

SR: Well with the Merit you have to cover so many things and unless you want to decimate elective choices for kids, which I think are very important part of high school.

The concern over credit acquisition and credit recovery that seems to dominate the thinking in some schools is expressed here as "recycling students" through courses which they have failed previously.

A similar conversation occurred during the interview at Vernon:

VR: We just got out of our block schedule which was, back in the '90s I think, was the philosophy that was the way to go, and we've been on that. But we went to a seven period day this year.

BB: Rather than a trimester approach?

VR: Yeah.

BB: You're at semesters but you went back to a more traditional day?

VR: But we've still got it, even our county it's pretty balanced. There's about half the schools are on trimesters and half of them are on either a six or seven period day.

BB: And you feel those changes have been actually generated because of the mandates?

VR: Definitely, the Merit Curriculum.

BB: And the fear about students needing more time. Do you feel like your decisions are being driven out of a fear of failure, student failure more than anything else?

VR: Yeah.

BB: Not being able to get the credits in or to catch up?

VR: Yeah, it's all about, I think it boils down to them graduating, getting all those requirements in. It wasn't based upon that we feel like we need more elective classes, we need less electives. It really boils down to are these kids going to be able to pass these classes in this type of schedule without having half of our student body doing credit recovery? We want to stay away from that as much as possible.

Unlike the mission-focused schools in the pilot that seemed to let best educational practices and the best interest of students drive decision-making, the compliance-focused schools seem driven by the desire to "get all those requirements in" and insuring students earn the correct number of credits and pass the common assessments in those courses.

Also in contrast to the mission-focused schools where the strongest math teachers worked with the students most in need of excellent math instruction, the compliance-focused schools' responses related to teacher quality equity indicated that math teachers were assigned to classes primarily by seniority. As the math department chair at Stanford High expressed it, "Well, I think like a lot of districts, those people who have been there longest usually get to choose their schedule . . . We end up with the most senior people choosing their schedule." To his credit, this department chair taught a section of Algebra I.

An item analysis of responses from two of these three schools also revealed some puzzling contradictions. For example, Stanford and Webster indicated they grouped students heterogeneously for Algebra I instruction (item 35), but in several other items related to the delivery of Algebra I (22, 29, 30, 31), they indicated they used homogeneous grouping practices. Only Vernon indicated consistently in these items and in the interview that it grouped students homogeneously for instruction.

4.3 The Audit Process

In terms of the audit *process*, although the design team originally believed that using a web-based tool for the audit would be convenient for users and provide access for a larger number of schools, the online process proved to be isolating for the primary school contact, who, in every case and despite encouragement to collaborate with others, ended up completing the questionnaire alone. The only collaboration in each case was requesting specific data from school staff (counselors, secretaries) to complete the questionnaire. At

least one participant, in one of the compliance-focused schools, acknowledged he understood the request for collaboration, and that it would have been a beneficial experience:

VR: I felt like I would have liked to have had my math department take the survey with me, which I think was an option . . . I didn't do this but I could have probably easily just printed off the questions that were give to me and when we went to a department meeting, sit down and have a conversation with those teachers about that.

Rather than promoting dialogue and discussion that the design team envisioned, the electronic process shut it down. After piloting the electronic format and analyzing the results, the researcher and design team now advocate for: 1) a collaborative in person process best facilitated by an external support provider from a local educational service agency, university, or school reform organization; and 2) revising several of the audit items to include more open-ended and specific prompts that provoke reflection among faculty members about the practices they have adopted, especially as it relates to academic and teacher quality equity issues.

4.4 Conclusions

The pilot of this equity audit designed to help school leaders respond to a state curriculum mandate suggests first that not every school is ready or able to participate in such a process, especially without external assistance. Skrla, McKenzie, and Scheurich (2009)

have found in [their] work over two decades . . . that people in schools overwhelmingly do not have a clear, accurate, or useful understanding of the degree of inequity present in their own schools, [and that] . . . in typical school settings, teachers and administrators frequently avoid the topic of race completely as a possible factor in discussions about achievement gaps (p. 5).

They suggest that teachers, and especially principals, “need assistance in learning to recognize” the “large and persistent patterns of inequity internal to schools” (p. 5). This pilot made that clear. What this project revealed to this researcher and the design team is that the audit tool is *not* central; what *is* central is the process of collaborative response and reflection to carefully designed audit items skillfully facilitated, preferably by an external agent. Only schools with an already existing culture of reflective practice, and a clearly articulated mission and vision that embrace principles of equity, may see the value of such a process and benefit from it without outside assistance. For other schools, the audit becomes just one more data point, one more report to complete.

Despite its ineffectiveness for most of the pilot schools, however, the findings from this study suggest the need for further research on an issue of increasing concern. In response to the growing list of state and federal mandates, the distinction between pilot schools whose leadership appears to be mission-focused and for whom equity is a component of school vision, and those that appear to be compliance-focused in the absence of a clear mission or larger purpose related to student equity deserves further investigation. Of particular interest is how leaders in these schools talked about the school's response to the mandate, the language they chose. Leithwood and Riehl (2003), in their synthesis of research on leadership behaviors for school success, identified direction setting as one of three critical behaviors for school leaders that require skill in articulating a vision and communicating ideas that establish a clear direction for the school. In particular, the way language was used by leaders in the mission-driven schools to describe their response to the state math mandate suggested a very different focus and led to different outcomes than those within the compliance-focused schools.

Contrast the direction suggested by statements from leaders in the mission-driven schools such as, “always having high expectations of our ninth through twelfth graders” and doing “what is best for students” with the direction suggested by statements from leaders in the compliance-driven schools: “the main focus is meeting the requirements of the mandate;” “our goal is to get everybody through Algebra I, geometry and Algebra II;” “ it really boils down to are these kids going to be able to pass these classes without half of our student body doing credit recovery?;” “with the Merit the concern was . . . being able to recycle the students at trimester.” In fact, the language used by leaders in the compliance-focused schools often suggested an expectation of student failure and a focus on planning directly related to that expected failure. This pilot

suggests a need for further study especially of how leaders talk about external mandates and the power of language choices to set the school's direction toward mission and vision or toward mere technical compliance.

Although the sample here is far too small and this represents only a pilot study, the findings suggest that compliance may be “trumping” both a concern for equity and a larger sense of purpose related to learning. Just as Ravitch (2010) believes testing has “become a central preoccupation in the schools, not just a measure but an end in itself,” compliance with narrowly drawn state mandates may be replacing “the wider goals of democratic education” (p. 11).

The findings from this pilot study also have significant implications for professors of Educational Administration, especially those who may be using equity audits as a component of required assessments in administrator preparation courses. If it is true that compliance may be “trumping” the larger sense of purpose in our nation's schools, our efforts to prepare school leaders to lead from purpose and vision, always with a concern for equity, as expressed in the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) Standard One (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2002), seems more urgent than ever. There is certainly value in requiring that administrative candidates know how to use equity audits and understand their usefulness in identifying achievement gaps between student groups.

But this pilot suggests the equity audit might also have value as a tool administrators can use to answer important questions about their own leadership: In light of the audit experience and under my leadership, what seems to be driving our work? A clear sense of mission and vision, technical compliance to a mandate, a disconnected exercise in data collection? Is compliance “trumping” mission and vision here? How am I talking about the issues revealed through the audit to my faculty and what does my language suggest to them about my priorities and my assumptions about our students? Such an expanded use of the equity audit in leadership courses may facilitate an even deeper understanding among our administrative candidates of the imperative to provide mission-driven leadership that, by its very nature, insures the response to external mandates will be “what is best for our students.”

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6 Appendix A: Equity Audit Questionnaire

The Equity Audit Questionnaire can be accessed as a PDF from this hyperlink: Questionnaire²

²See the file at <<http://cnx.org/content/m41196/latest/MCC.pdf>>