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Focus on Equity

A quarterly research brief to maximize student success

About this brief

This quarterly research brief brings equity research to practice through a practitioner lens. With the goal of supporting, extending, and expanding the collaborative, statewide equity work, it will focus on the practices that make the greatest impact for California's most vulnerable youth. The brief discusses timely implications of the research for application in classrooms, schools, and districts and provides reflection questions and resources for teachers and administrators to use during grade- or department-level collaborative conversations.

This debut issue of *Focus on Equity* explores how schools and educators can work to fulfill the promise of *Brown v. Board of Education* as we mark the 65th anniversary of this landmark decision.

Ruby Bridges being escorted out of school by federal marshalls

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Focus on Equity

Focus

Each year, we celebrate the historic 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* — and we wrestle with the reality that U.S. schools remain inherently unequal in 2018[1]. In 1954, Oliver and Leola Brown from Topeka, Kansas objected to the reality that their third-grade daughter, Linda, and her two younger sisters had to travel an hour to attend an all-black school when there was an all-white school just a few blocks away. The Supreme Court determined and established that separate schools for black and white students are unconstitutional, and this momentous case serves as a springboard for equity work in schools today.

How can schools and educators work to fulfill the promise of *Brown* to dismantle segregation and inequity in education? This is a big question — one that inspires us to respond thoughtfully, compassionately, and urgently. The data is devastating: black children are more than five times more likely[2] to attend high-poverty schools than white children. Historically marginalized students, including black and Native American students, are three times more likely[3] than their white peers to be suspended from school — and the same students experience notably higher dropout rates (Diplomas Count Report, 2010). The list of imbalances seems endless. Yet by looking back at the landmark *Brown* case, we step forward in this moment, and by doing so, we can more fully engage in courageous conversations[4] regarding equity and begin to change the trajectory for our most vulnerable youth.

The new Equity Department at the San Diego County Office of Education, which serves 42 demographically diverse school districts and Juvenile Court and Community Schools Programs, stepped into this multifaceted equity work with a clear mission. Our team initially gathered input from more than 100 educators and community leaders from around the county to hear their ideas about ways to transform our work to meet the needs of our most vulnerable youth, namely students who are African American, Latinx, Native American, or students from groups that are not a permanent status (e.g., English learner, homeless, foster youth). The goal of this collaborative and complex work is to individually and collectively interrupt inequitable practices to achieve the full promise of *Brown* – an equitable, diverse, multiracial school system that serves all students. The messages around equity from these stakeholder groups were clear: be proactive; make schools community hubs for learning and wellness; involve student and family perspectives; prepare reflective, equity-conscious leaders and teachers; model best practices for both academic and social-emotional learning; and pay attention to racialized outcomes (Powell, 2009). In addition, the following themes emerged: hire more counselors and fewer school security guards; attend to students' immediate needs, such as healthy lunches, bus passes, functional desks, welcoming and nurturing learning spaces; and create teaching and leadership pathways for people of color.

To begin to tackle the task of fulfilling the promise of *Brown*, three interconnected and foundational points of entry can guide our work:

1. Know ourselves. When we create the time and space to reflect and explore our own identities and own our responsibilities to this equity work and to our students, we are better positioned to lead the work in a sustainable way. We start this hard work by recalling our own positive and negative school experiences. This initial self-exploration, including understanding our *why*[5], sustains us through this complex and difficult work; ultimately, we are guided by our why. Then, we can begin to delve into the idea of our own earned and unearned privileges, as we all need to heal from the effects of oppression. A possible next step might include the deep and difficult work around micro-aggressions and implicit bias, both individual and systemic. Among researchers in the field, there is widespread agreement that well prepared teachers are the single most important factor in student achievement. This self-work is critical to our schools and civic life; the work starts with us.

2. Know our students. A growing body of research underscores the value of addressing the specific needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students and their families. Culturally responsive pedagogy is defined by Gay (2010) as "using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning more relevant and effective for them." This practice promotes student connectedness with schools, decreases behavior challenges, and advances learning. By learning about each student's experience through a historical and cultural context, we come to truly appreciate our students' experiences and begin to remove one of the greatest barriers to learning — school connectedness. It also leads to intentionally creating cultures that nurture the capacity of broadly literate, college- and career-ready students. The National Center for Urban School Transformation (NCUST) has research to support that teachers in high-performing urban schools consistently take the time needed to learn about their linguistically and culturally diverse students (Johnson, Perez, & Uline, 2013). These high-performing schools gather and analyze quantitative and qualitative data — and question beyond the numbers to get a better understanding of their students' strengths and misconceptions. In essence, they create cultures that build autonomy and agency for students of color. For example, classroom teachers can collect illuminating information about their students' strengths and needs through icebreaker activities, journals, presentations, home visits and interviews (Gottlieb, 2016). When students perceive that the adults in the school want them to succeed, students do well (Johnson, Perez, & Uline, 2013).

3. Know our system. There is a popular saying in improvement work: *a system is perfectly designed to get the results that it gets*. School systems are inherently complex and require educators to explore solutions to problems that address these complexities (Snowden, D. and Boone, M.,2007). Systemic oppression continues to be at play in schools. We can begin to counteract this by understanding the historical context of our U.S. education system and looking at all students and communities through an assets-based lens (Yosso, T.J., 2005).

According NCUST research (Johnson, Uline, and Perez, 2017), high-performing urban schools have three key characteristics: effective instruction, positive transformational culture, and access to rigorous curricula. In order to move toward excelling in these three areas, we need to better understand the problems in our system, uncover root causes, and make visible the inconsistent processes that lead to racialized outcomes for students and their communities (Powell, 2009). For example, schools might examine everyday inequalities, such as student access to successfully complete high school "a-g" courses or tolerance policies that perpetuate negative outcomes for students of color. The goal is to make the processes within a system increasingly clearer so that school communities can make informed decisions and move toward high performance.

In order to bring transparency to the problem, it is necessary to gather and analyze initial quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data might include academic, behavioral (e.g., referrals and suspensions), and social-emotional (e.g., student experience and connectedness to school). Qualitative data might include equity audits, needs assessments, classroom observations, empathy interviews, and focus groups. Then we need to investigate the root causes of the problems. Using visualization tools, such as a fishbone diagram or the Five Whys Protocol, can help school communities understand and address the depth of the problems and distinguish among problems, symptoms, and root causes. For example, a common problem in school is the disproportionate number of children of color receiving behavior referrals. In this scenario, a symptom is a student receiving a behavior referral, and a root cause is the reason why the student received the referral. Ultimately, it is critical to equity work to make the processes in our system visible. One way to create clarity is to engage teachers and staff in a process-mapping activity, such as looking at how students are placed in middle and high school courses. In this case, process mapping would illuminate the possible inconsistencies in how students are placed in courses and the inequities that so often emerge (Bryk, A., et al. (2015).

Implications

By exploring and aligning the many moving components in our system, we can make the abstract concrete. We will know if and to what extent our students experience high-quality learning and connectedness to school. We will know whose voices are valued and which perspectives are left out. We will know if and to what extent we provide enriching opportunities, such as the arts, robotics, and ethnic studies.

As we move forward with our equity work in San Diego County, these three foundational actions — know ourselves, know our students, and know our system — provide a solid starting point. This helps us explore the structures, processes, and opportunities needed to create a shared vision, and measurable outcomes around this work and continue to take the next step – and then the next – toward fulfilling the promise of *Brown.*

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Questions

1. What is our individual and collective 'why'?
2. What is a micro-aggression? When have we experienced micro-aggressions? Where have we observed micro-aggressions manifest in our school context?
3. What do we know about our students? How does our system show that it values our students cultural and linguistic experiences?
4. What systemic processes are already in place to gather quantitative and qualitative data about our students learning or connection to school? What picture does this paint?
5. How is the data collection process aligned with district protocols for ensuring student data privacy?
6. What is one way we might move forward in our context to know ourselves, know our students, or know our system?

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[5] Sinek, S. (2009). Start with why: How great leaders inspire everyone to take action. New York, N.Y.:

[6] https://www.schoolreforminitiative.org/

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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