



BY KIFFANY PRIDE

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the longstanding pattern of lower scholastic performance among marginalized groups of students negatively impacted by poverty, disability, and race (Kuhfeld et al., 2020; NCES, 2020). This gap in achievement demands that all of us question whether we are paying enough attention to educational equity in our schools and systems. Education leaders, in particular, have a responsibility to ensure equity for each student. Without

intentional efforts, we are part of the problem and not the solution.

As assistant commissioner of learning services in the Arkansas Department of Education, I believe that state leaders have a unique and important role to play in advocating for students and creating equity. We can help schools make systemic changes. That starts with establishing what equity is.

The perception among educators and citizens continues to be that practices around equal rights equate to provisions related to equity. But

equity is not about creating uniform opportunities for all; it is about creating conditions in schools to reduce disparities that may result from poverty, race, or disability (Peurach et al., 2019).

As schools experience a shift to a more diverse body of students, many equity leaders question the “evenhanded” approach in schools and point out that we must meet different students’ needs differently to guarantee that all students graduate prepared for college or career (Noguera, 2001).

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created a heightened sense of urgency to confront inequities. We believe that the pandemic should not deter us but further compel us to address equity courageously and systematically with resolute actions for the benefit of each student. Over the last year, the state department of education has engaged in four essential practices for building equity described here.

1 USE DATA TO UNDERSTAND STUDENT LEARNING PATTERNS.

Establishing a process to examine the current reality of student achievement is a critical step to ensure equity. Many educators recognize the value of data, but the challenge is to create consistent practices for examining data and using the results.

To understand where we need to make changes to teaching, we need to look at data at the microlevel to identify trends in the performance of subgroups and individuals. For example, when our state looked at foundational literacy skills in early elementary school — a factor strongly associated with students’ long-term learning trajectories — we discovered a startling pattern. Kindergarteners from all backgrounds typically started in the average range, but over the K-2 experience, the trend

in performance for student groups varied tremendously.

Overall, we saw significant gaps in achievement and growth for our students in poverty and an even wider gap for our ethnic groups. African American students and English learners tended to have erratic trajectories. Though alarming, this data created heightened awareness that we were achieving our intended results for some students, but not for all.

To facilitate this kind of data dive, state leaders for math, literacy, and science engaged in professional learning about how to analyze state-level data and draw conclusions about achievement patterns and needs. They also engage in ongoing professional learning and coaching about building students’ foundational skills through equitable practices. This allows them to support regional specialists in learning to align data results, equitable practices, and strategic plans.

2 DEFINE WHAT IT MEANS TO HAVE AN EQUITABLE SYSTEM.

Educators often struggle to define equity clearly and consistently. This creates confusion, disconnection among efforts, and even suspicion and distrust about the work and makes it difficult to

create a safe atmosphere to do the right work. If the goal is to ensure that each student is ready for a career and college, then we must clearly state our goals and align our efforts so that each learner can reach his or her fullest potential.

In Arkansas, we formalized a process for state leaders to collectively define equity. We involved multiple stakeholder groups and engaged a national education partner to guide the process and facilitate a conversation across six agencies under the department of education.

Aligning our definition of equity helped us establish the expectation that the equity lens would be applied systemically across each agency. As each agency develops a strategic plan to change the trajectory of outcomes for underserved populations, the equity lens will be at the foreground of planning, even as each agency determines how that lens will be used and what equitable practices will be applied in its work.

One of our goals is to ensure that the equity lens is applied in classrooms serving children with different learning needs. Applying inclusive practices in general education classrooms is an ongoing focus of study for state and regional leaders. We have engaged in inclusive principal leadership work

through the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO, 2020), and we also support regional professional learning and coaching efforts focused on inclusion.

For example, we implemented a pilot project in four elementary schools representing different regions of the state focused on ensuring that students with Individualized Education Plans and other struggling learners have meaningful access to core instruction and established systems of intervention.

Though in the first year of implementation, the principals and teachers have reported encouraging anecdotal data reflective of cultural changes involving general and special education teachers planning together on a regular basis, and increases in skill attainment for students. Also, there are signposts of success such as students exiting from special education services. This is one of many pilots that we will continue to implement to systematize practices that foster equity.

3

DEVELOP A STATEWIDE COMMITMENT TO EVIDENCE-BASED INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES.

To create equity, we need systems to guide and support equitable classroom instruction. We need pathways for implementation at the classroom level and processes for consistently examining qualitative and quantitative data to determine if those practices are happening and if student learning targets are being met.

In Arkansas, we have created a network of curriculum leaders, and we are providing collective professional learning in evidence-based instructional practices and tools to support each learner.

The state's network is the Teaching and Learning Collaborative. Its main participants are curriculum leaders in school districts. The emphasis, in this school year, has been on effective teaching in every classroom because we know that effective teaching directly

links to effective learning (DuFour & Marzano, 2011). The state has a systematic process to identify and implement evidence-based strategies that are student-focused and supported by research, and we are providing opportunities to district and school leaders to influence instructional practices in classrooms. Districts have developed or are in the process of collaboratively developing instructional snapshots that delineate schools' instructional models.

To further promote systemic practices around equity, we are endorsing high-leverage practices. Beyond specifying instructional strategies, it is essential to build knowledge, provide resources for professional learning, and establish job-embedded supports to ensure the application of high-leverage practices (McLeskey, 2019).

Accordingly, we have held monthly professional learning for state specialists and bimonthly regional professional learning for content specialists to increase the depth of understanding about high-leverage practices, and we developed study guides for specialists to use in hosting collaborative learning sessions in schools and districts.

We are near the completion of the first year of state and regional training. The next step will include defining implementation efforts in regions and establishing clear metrics by which to establish the realization of high-leverage practices being implemented in classrooms.

4

INCREASE DIVERSITY IN THE EDUCATOR WORKFORCE.

Recruitment and retention of a diverse group of educators is also critical to achieving equity. One way we are addressing this goal is through the state's Office of Educator Effectiveness and Licensure. The state established the Grow Your Own Initiative to address teacher shortages in geographical areas where there are larger populations of diverse students and simultaneously

reduces barriers to obtaining licensure for would-be educators of color and from low-income backgrounds.

Barriers to certification include but are not limited to obtaining the required bachelor's degree and passing the certification assessments. The Grow Your Own initiative also builds pathways to support local residents with the aspiration to be educators with resources to help with entrance in educator prep programs and supports mentoring to follow through with licensure requirements.

Though early, we are seeing in multiple districts that a diverse group of aspiring educators have gained licensure and committed to working in the local school district to support teaching and learning.

CREATING CONNECTIONS

Addressing the disparities in education has many layers and will mean establishing a systemic process to speak to the inequities and build progressive practices to meet the needs of each student. This takes collaboration across levels.

In Arkansas, the state government has largely established and orchestrated policy and practices in schools, but school districts and their leaders are the heart of implementation (McGuinn, 2015). Beyond policy-driven initiatives, state leaders must take an active role in leading schools to meet the expectations outlined in the Every Student Succeeds Act for students to demonstrate grade-level achievement and growth each year. As a state leader, I believe this is one of my professional and ethical duties, and I advocate for equitable practices in schools for the advantage of each and every student.

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Continued on p. 39

importance of connections across the district and aims to have an influence on the other schools and larger systems in which they work. Principal Steele is proud of the way her school built a strong culture from the original “travel team” — the term she uses to describe the small group that got to travel to Harvard — to the rest of the school and feels frustrated by not being able to expand to the district. “If we want to make true systemic change that will manifest in my campus, we have to see it happening at the district level.”

NETWORKING ACROSS SCHOOLS

Networking serves as a powerful accelerant of race and equity work, including the five components described in this article, in many ways. The ability to exchange ideas with other schools and school leaders reinforces each of the five approaches while providing a safety net of ideas and resources to allow principals and their teams to stand strong in the face of opposition to the work. In these virtual networks, we see both accelerated development of the team as a “we” and camaraderie among teams that provides for deepened collaboration and accountability. Individual learning magnifies as team members catch the excitement across schools.

The network is particularly powerful

ACCESS TO THESE TOOLS AND OTHER RESOURCES

More information about the tools and processes in this article can be found at **SchoolsTransforming.org**. Schools Transforming is a new nonprofit organization founded to continue providing direct support to schools and districts when RIDES’s grant funding comes to a close in June 2021. In addition, the tools and archived information about RIDES will be available at rides.gse.harvard.edu through June 2022. Note that as a matter of Harvard policy, the continued use and development of these tools at SchoolsTransforming.org do not constitute an endorsement of the nonprofit on the part of Harvard University or the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

for principals, as it helps them move from isolation to connectedness. Etienne says, “I get outside the bubble of my town. ... (Y)ou no longer have this lonely road. You see other agents moving the work along. ... (I)t puts gasoline into the fire to move this work forward.” When situations get messy, when there is pushback, he notes, “You have RIDES and your networks in your pocket.”

MOVING BEYOND TALK

With a strong network to support the five components, school equity leaders in many different roles become clearer about who they are and where they stand and become more vocal and confident in taking on the challenges of equity work. They are able to maintain patience and calm in the face of opposition and stand up for the core

value of equity. Most of all, the base of knowledge and support helps them model this courage for others in their community and move beyond talk to take action — and that is vital for the whole community.

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4 practices for leaders to build equity

Continued from p. 32
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