



Practical tools

for improving equity and dismantling racism in schools

BY LEE TEITEL AND MARY ANTÓN
WITH SAMUEL ETIENNE, ELIZA LOYOLA, AND ANDREA STEELE

Racial equity is a deep-seated value for principals Andrea Steele of Tucson, Arizona, Samuel Etienne of Elizabeth, New Jersey, and Eliza Loyola of Austin, Texas. As they strive to fulfill these values in their schools, each of these principals has found valuable tools and approaches, as well as a supportive virtual network, as they engaged in an equity improvement process developed at the Reimagining Integration: Diverse and Equitable Schools (RIDES) Project



Samuel Etienne



Eliza Loyola



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The goal of the RIDES Project is to disrupt systemic inequity in America's schools by building individual and team capacity to tackle race and

racism. Central to that has been the development of a carefully structured Equity Improvement Cycle that guides and supports equity teams in schools, districts, and charter management organizations with improvement tools, practices, and examples that promote diversity, equity, and true integration.

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TOOL 1: QUICK SELF-ASSESSMENT ON THE ABCDs		
Use the chart below to assess how important you think this <u>should be</u> in your school, with 1 being low importance and 4 being high importance. Then assess how well you think your school is doing in reaching that outcome, using this key: 1 = unclear or not started; 2 = beginning or small pockets; 3 = fairly regularly; 4 = solid, part of our practice		
Purpose	Your sense of how important this should be 1 = low, 4 = high	To what extent do you think your school is reaching this outcome? Add notes that support your assessment
Desegregation: getting the diverse bodies in the building		
Excellent Academic outcomes for all		
Belongingness for all		
Commitment to understand and dismantle racism		
Appreciation for Diversity		

Jackson) of the Equity Improvement Cycle. We have engaged in Equity Improvement Cycle work with more than 70 schools or districts — some that came to Harvard to learn to use the cycle, dozens more that we and our colleagues have supported as independent consultants, and still others we are beginning to work with through the newly formed nonprofit Schools Transforming.

Our experiences point to powerful ways that dismantling institutional racism in schools requires five interconnected components:

- **Vision:** Being clear and transparently public about why you are doing this work is essential for engaging stakeholders, tuning your processes, and supporting people through the long marathon of equity improvement.

- **Personal and team equity culture:** Mindset shifts and deep personal learning about racism, privilege, and power need to be dynamically interwoven at the individual, team, and school or system level.
- **Improvement processes:** Improvement science, data cycles, and other processes are necessary. They draw on data, provide analytic tools, and support development of plans and their thoughtful implementation.
- **Shared ownership:** Broad engagement across stakeholders is powerful when it is through shared ownership, not compliance. Whenever possible, the work should be done *with* students, not to them or for them.
- **Connectedness:** Deep equity

improvement takes place when it is done systemically — linking what happens in classrooms, hallways, administrative offices, and the community to each other and to deep belief structures about ideological and institutional racism held by all.

Each of these components by itself is necessary, but not sufficient. It is in the presence of all five that genuine sustainable work gets done. To bring the pieces together and work as a professional learning accelerator, we recommend a sixth component:

- **Networking across schools:** Equity work can be challenging, isolating, and hard to sustain. Participating in communities of practice with counterparts in other settings helps school and district leaders get ideas, support, accountability

partners, and more as they work to implement all five of these approaches.

In this article, we elaborate on each of these approaches and provide examples of how to apply them, drawing on the experiences of Steele, Etienne, and Loyola — principals who are one, two, and three years, respectively, into their engagement with the equity improvement process developed by us and our colleagues at RIDES.

We also provide sample tools that can be used to put these equity actions into practice. These are just a few of the dozens of assessments, curated articles and books, webinars, and how-to videos we have created (see box on p. 39).

VISION

TOOL 1, p. 34

In too many settings, vision statements and the goals on which they are built are vague and ill-defined (“We want equitable outcomes for all students”) or overly narrow (“We want to close the achievement gap.”). Often, they are developed, owned, and understood only by a handful of people at the top of the organization.

To help schools and districts develop and implement visions that are clearly defined and broadly owned, the

approach we developed at RIDES offers guidance on implementing the ABCDs: providing high-level **A**cademics and fostering a sense of **B**elongingness for all students, demonstrating a **C**ommitment to understand and dismantle racism, and helping students develop an appreciation of **D**iversity.

The Equity Improvement Cycle we use asks sites to assess the extent to which they prioritize the ABCDs and how well they are achieving them. We also ask them to use this reflection as they fashion vision statements to motivate systemwide equity work, maintain focus on it, and hold themselves accountable for it.

Andrea Steele, principal of Cragin Elementary in Tucson, Arizona, knows that a school vision is important and that how you get to it and who owns it matter more. In her first year as a principal (2018-19), she remembers that as the district was ramping up its equity work, it asked each school to review its vision. Attending the RIDES Institute at Harvard, she and her team learned about the ABCDs and worked to formulate a specific equity-focused vision.

Knowing that the process mattered as much as the product, she waited until the end of the first year to formulate the vision so that she and her team could build on what they were

learning from students about their need for Belongingness. “That was a very powerful way to build a vision,” Steele says. “There are other textbook ways of doing it, by administrators, creating committees, but doing it this way, almost using a full improvement cycle to drive it — that’s the way I always want to create a mission and vision.”

PERSONAL AND TEAM EQUITY CULTURE

TOOL 2, below

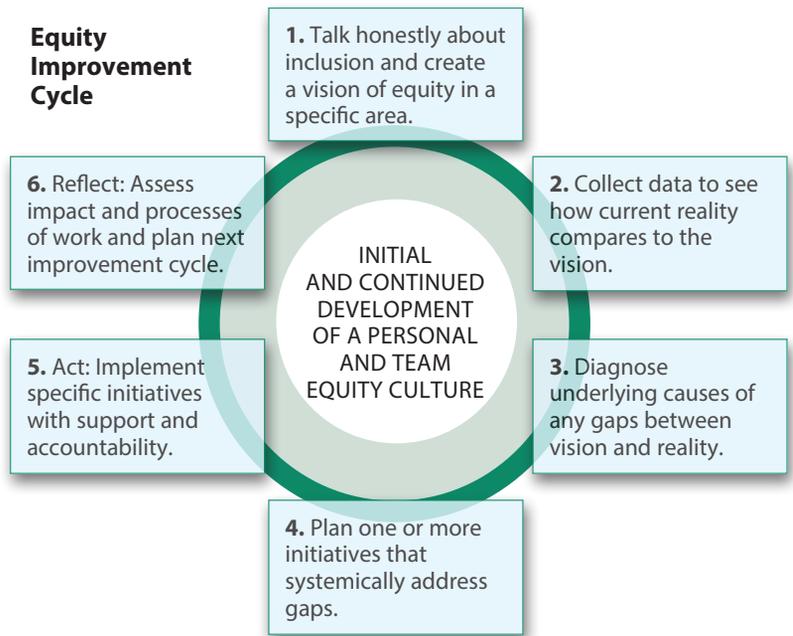
Equity teams (and ultimately schools and systems) have to have common definitions and purposes, explore individual and collective implicit biases, and develop sufficient relational trust to start and sustain deep equity work. Without doing conscious and explicit work on this, school teams will mirror the difficulties that people in this country have in talking about race, racism, and equity, making it virtually impossible to work together to address inequity. This can lead to participants of color on equity teams feeling marginalized and afraid to fully speak up — they don’t want to be seen as “the angry black woman” — because of the undiscussed issues of white fragility. Or white participants take over to become “saviors” or retreat and remain silent for fear of being called racist.

TOOL 2: QUICK SELF-ASSESSMENT ON THE PERSONAL AND TEAM EQUITY CULTURE IN YOUR EQUITY TEAM AND SCHOOL (OR SYSTEM)										
Use this key: 1 = unclear or not started; 2 = beginning or small pockets; 3 = fairly regularly; 4 = solid, part of our practice										
To what extent have you within your equity team?				... within your school (or system)?					
A Developed a clearly communicated and common WHY for doing racial equity work.	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4		
B Created common definitions of what you mean by racial equity in your schools.	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4		
C Taken a hard look at your own (individual and collective) biases and triggers.	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4		
D Forged enough relational trust to talk honestly about all of the above and try things out and give each other honest feedback.	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4		

TOOL 3: QUICK SELF-ASSESSMENT ON CURRENT EQUITY IMPROVEMENT PROCESSES

Using the Equity Improvement Cycle developed at RIDES at right (for more information, see rides.gse.harvard.edu/equity-improvement-cycle) as a guide, fill out the chart with these quick ratings to assess where you think you are (current), and where you want to be (preferred) on each step:

- 1** = Do not think of it, or do not know how to.
- 2** = Do this sometimes or not very well.
- 3** = Do this well and consistently.



Step	Current	Preferred
Personal and team equity culture (relational trust, common language, etc.)	1 2 3	1 2 3
Clear and shared vision of equity in specific area	1 2 3	1 2 3
Collection of data to see how reality and vision match	1 2 3	1 2 3
Diagnosis of gaps to look at underlying root causes	1 2 3	1 2 3
Action planning (with systemic approach)	1 2 3	1 2 3
Implementation with support and accountability	1 2 3	1 2 3
Reflection on process and plan next improvement cycle	1 2 3	1 2 3

Eliza Loyola, principal of the Menchaca PK-5 in Austin, Texas, brought her team to a virtual clinic offered by RIDES in August 2020 and noted immediately the power of stories in helping develop relational trust on her team: “We spent time at the clinic telling our stories about race. Afterward we spent two months in our weekly meetings, sharing our stories of race, racism, and childhood experiences. I think that that has been tremendously valuable in helping to build trust among our team and building understanding about other life experiences. You can talk about the importance of understanding other

people’s experiences, but it only works if you put in the time to do it.”

**IMPROVEMENT PROCESSES
TOOL 3, above**

Systemic improvement toward equity is hard because many schools and systems do not have robust improvement processes that use data thoughtfully and deliberately and that help educators diagnose patterns, generate solutions, and then implement, assess, and refine them. Equity improvement is especially challenging when teams have not developed clarity, relational trust, and other hallmarks of personal and team

equity culture because team members will not talk honestly and clearly with one another.

At RIDES, we approached this by building a six-step recurring, structured Equity Improvement Cycle that centers personal and team equity culture with both an initial and a recurrent focus. Beginning with an articulated vision for a specific equity focus area (Step 1), the Equity Improvement Cycle guides participants to (2) collect relevant data to identify gaps between vision and current reality and (3) analyze those data to understand what the root causes of those gaps may be, before going on to (4) planning, (5) implementing, and

(6) reflecting on progress and planning the next cycle.

The principals make clear that progress around the cycle is not always steady — there are zigzags and recursive minicycles, but they find the general movement and its structure useful in developing and maintaining momentum. Sam Etienne, principal of Winfield Scott School #2 in Elizabeth, New Jersey, has been engaged with the Equity Improvement Cycle developed at RIDES since November 2019. He is passionate about several aspects of the cycle: the use of data (“The data don’t lie,” he says), the engagement of students (“The process lets us hear what the students have to say”), and the longer-term cyclical nature of it (“We can’t do this just to check off a box. This is multigenerational work”).

He offers a specific example of how the district recently used data from a recent survey of students his district uses as part of its partnership with Panorama Education, a company that helps districts survey students, staff, and families on issues like sense of belonging or social emotional learning. In addition to the standard survey questions, Panorama and RIDES staff developed a new bank of questions about how well the students think the school has facilitated them talking about race and equity.

The district discovered that some of the lowest student ratings of the entire survey were in response to these questions. Prior experience with the Equity Improvement Cycle meant that the school knew exactly how it needed to use those data to make change. “Looking at the cycle, we are creating small focus groups with students and with teachers to look at the data,” Etienne said.

Etienne also uses the structure of the Equity Improvement Cycle to help his staff stay intentional when the temptation to be reactive threatens to take them off track. “They say, ‘What are we going to do? What’s the action?’” he says, “And I say: Let’s follow the process. Let’s look at what the students have to say.”

TOOL 4: QUICK STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT AND OWNERSHIP SELF-ASSESSMENT

Take a minute to think about who played what roles in the last equity improvement initiative in your own setting (current) and what you would prefer.

Use the following to indicate depth of involvement:

- **A** = actively engaged, involved in planning, understood what and why doing it
- **P** = passive participant, recipient of efforts, with little or no understanding of why
- **D** = disconnected, left out, uninformed

Who	Current	Preferred
Central office	A P D	A P D
Other administrators	A P D	A P D
Principals	A P D	A P D
Teachers	A P D	A P D
Other staff	A P D	A P D
Parents and/or community members	A P D	A P D
Students	A P D	A P D

SHARED OWNERSHIP

TOOL 4, above

Even with a clear vision, personal and team equity culture, and strong improvement processes, schools and systems routinely leave key stakeholders out. Students are often the passive recipients of equity improvement efforts, and parents are left out altogether.

To counter this, RIDES shares examples of intensive improvement processes that fully engage students as equal partners with the adults. As Principal Etienne notes, “We know that when it comes from the students, it has a bigger impact.”

The RIDES approach asks teams to list the stakeholders in their settings and rate their participation in the equity improvement work as actively engaged, passive recipients, and disconnected and to redesign efforts to be more inclusive.

In addition to engaging a different, expanded set of stakeholders, it is important to engage stakeholders

differently — to move from compliance or the use of hierarchical authority to engagement and ownership. Etienne describes how powerful a simple intervention of having a weekly coffee hour with the teaching staff has been to combat the isolation and lack of connection during the pandemic. He found that as teachers got more comfortable, they started volunteering more, taking ownership of some of the innovations they needed to put into place for online learning, and speeded up the transfer of ideas.

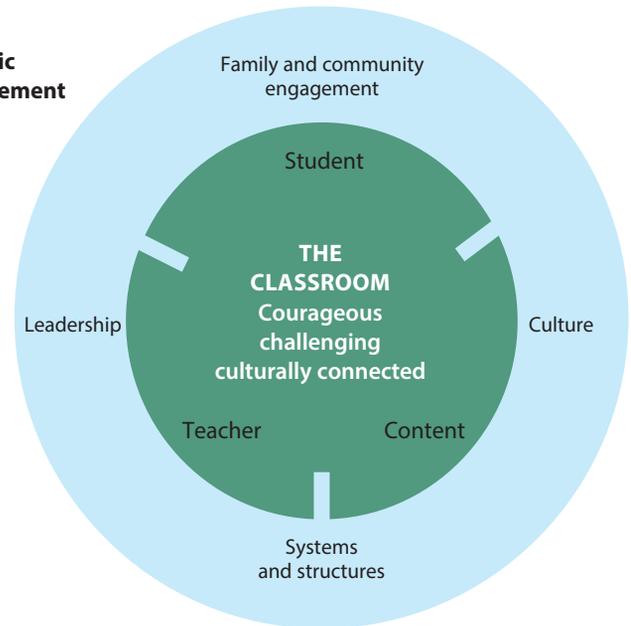
He now has teachers taking primary responsibility for professional learning. “This lateral work — this work where teachers are learning from other teachers as part of the team — is much more powerful. We have all the answers that we need in the people that we have. We as leaders need to figure out how to make that work.” He adds that as a Black principal with a mostly white faculty, he finds that this shared ownership is especially important.

TOOL 5: QUICK SELF-ASSESSMENT ON THE SYSTEMIC NATURE OF YOUR EQUITY IMPROVEMENT PROCESSES

Use the graphic of the Systemic Improvement Map developed at RIDES at right, along with the maxim that you cannot work on diversity and equity without consciously dismantling beliefs about racism at the individual, interpersonal, institutional, and ideological levels.

Think of a recent equity improvement initiative at your site and use an X to show what connections you made to each systemic lever, then use the column on the right to indicate what else you could have done to make a stronger connection among those levers.

RIDES Systemic Improvement Map



Systemic levers	What connections we made (x)	What we could connect to
Students		
Teachers		
Content		
Leadership		
Culture		
Systems and structures		
Families		
Overall beliefs about individual, interpersonal, institutional, and ideological racism		

CONNECTEDNESS

TOOL 5, above

We find it all too common that educators look for silver bullets—single solutions to complex interrelated challenges. For example, schools will adopt an externally prepared culturally relevant curriculum without helping teachers explore their implicit biases or how their own lack of education and

understanding about race and racism affect their interactions with students. Or, when asked, districts can produce a long list of the efforts they have made in the last two years to focus on equity, but those efforts are isolated and don't reinforce each other.

We addressed this challenge by developing a Systemic Improvement Map that highlights the connections

that need to be made throughout the system and to the larger set of beliefs about individual, interpersonal, institutional, and ideological racism, and provides tools to help equity teams assess this.

Even as all three principals have made progress in building the internal connections among initiatives within their schools, each recognizes the

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

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