



'Equity work is not a zero-sum game'

HOW ATLANTA'S CHIEF EQUITY OFFICER IS BUILDING SUPPORT FOR CHANGE

BY TAUHEEDAH BAKER-JONES
AS TOLD TO SUZANNE BOUFFARD

Tauheedah Baker-Jones is Atlanta Public Schools' first chief equity and social justice officer. She developed and now oversees the district's Center for Equity and Social Justice and the district's equity framework.

She shared some of her experiences and learnings, as well as reflections on how districts can enable equity officers to be successful, with *The Learning Professional*. Highlights of that conversation follow.

On being the district's first chief equity and social justice officer:

When I first started in this role, I encountered some resistance. To counter it, it was important to help people see that equity work is not a zero-sum game, and that this work is not about baiting, shaming, and guilt. All of us were born into this current system, none of us created it, and we all internalized and normalized it one way or another.

Although we had no hand in creating it, we do have ownership in making it better. In fact, we have a responsibility to hold ourselves

accountable for leaving the world better than it was when we got here. We owe that to those who did their part before us, and we owe it to our children. Our children deserve a better world and a better future.

To communicate that message, I had to spend a lot of time building trust. After George Floyd's murder and the reckoning that followed, I realized I needed to



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galvanize and use the power of mass communication. So I worked with our communications department, and we spent several months developing a communications strategy for equity. We were intentional about defining shared vocabulary for what equity is and isn't, affirming our community's shared values and countering false narratives.

Investing that time and having conversations with people who were apprehensive is what has made it possible to do the work. It was important for me to keep top of mind that I must meet people where they are, not where I want them to be. That approach has helped me build some unlikely coalitions across lines of difference and build support for doing the important work of equity. It took a while to get here, but it has been worth it.

On the roles and responsibilities of the equity and social justice office:

When I was creating this office [the Center for Equity and Social Justice, which launched in 2021], I was very intentional in its design because I didn't want it to be seen as separate from the other core work of the district. Equity should be embedded in all of the district's operations. In fact, best practice advised against making a separate equity action plan — equity has to be at the center of the district's strategic plan.

With the support of our superintendent and board, I was able to structure the office in a unique way so that it serves as a support system, capacity builder, and accountability partner to the other divisions and departments within the system. The office was designed to have roles that directly touch every other part of the district.

For example, we have an executive director of equitable resource strategy, whose team works closely with the district's finance, operations, and talent divisions; an executive director of equitable learning environments, whose team collaborates with the academics

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUPPORTING EQUITY LEADERS

1. Establish a clear **understanding of and commitment to equity goals**, and align your mission and policies with those goals.
2. **Allocate resources** for an equity officer and equity team as well as for their learning and development.
3. **Embed equity** in every department in the district, and empower the equity officer to build relationships across departments.
4. **Position the equity officer** as part of the senior leadership team, and give the officer voice and decision-making power.
5. Together with the equity officer, **build relationships with the community**, and communicate your equity vision and goals.

Source: Anderson, J. (2021). 5 ways to support equity leaders. *Usable Knowledge*. www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/21/06/five-ways-support-equity-leaders

and schools divisions; and a program director of equity strategy, whose team works with the district's strategy, performance, and communications teams to ensure the districtwide strategy is grounded in equity.

Included on these teams are coordinators of equity-focused professional learning, student supports, supplier diversity, and several equity data strategists. Data is an essential part of equity work because it illuminates what is actually happening. Without it, we can't substantiate that inequities are happening or that change is occurring.

Data also breaks down the ground of having to persuade folks that a phenomenon is occurring and instead focuses the dialogue on solutions. Our aim is to be data-informed and equity-guided, and our data strategists work with the district's data team to elevate key equity data points, in part through equity indexes that will be accessible to school and district leaders.

On cultivating equity mindsets:

I always say that, as systems leaders, we must go softer on people and harder on systems. As equity leaders, we sometimes focus heavily on people — helping them examine their implicit biases, develop their cultural competency, etc. While this work is important, we must keep top of mind that, as human beings, we are imperfectly perfect.

I've found that most educators value equity. In fact, I haven't met an educator who doesn't believe that all children deserve to be educated at a high level. However, we don't know what we don't know. We were born into these systems of inequity, and every single one of us has internalized the biases, conscious or unconscious, that come with it. The problems come when our unconscious biases don't align with our values and when we're unconsciously creating barriers to equity.

Even after receiving implicit bias training and becoming cognizant of our biases, we still must work every day to ensure that they aren't getting in the way of us showing up as our best selves. It's a daily practice, and we will undoubtedly make mistakes and experience setbacks. This is why grace is a core value of my equity work. We must extend grace to ourselves and to others, and we must recognize that the folks in the system are also products of the system.

This calls us to design systems and structures that act as safeguards against the unintended disparate impact of our biases. That's why, as an equity leader, I choose to go harder on systems. We must build systems of accountability that reinforce the imperative to center

equity in our work.

We have to build systems and structures that help people implement the change they want to see, and we must build systems and structures that ensure that our students thrive, not by accident, but by design.

On equity-centered professional learning:

Professional learning is an essential component of doing equity work. To redesign systems and structures that serve as guardrails for equity, we must train people on how to see the current system that is producing the outcomes we seek to change. That's why implicit bias training, and the like, are indeed important.

In addition, we must also provide our educators with the tools and protocols they need to pause and reflect on the equity considerations and impacts of their decision-making. Once developed, we must provide training on how to implement these tools with fidelity. This is important because these protocols provide the support our educators and leaders need in translating their intent for equity into action.

This takes partnerships and integration throughout the district. For example, our coordinator of equity-focused professional learning works closely with the human resources team to embed the tools and protocols we've developed and ensure that equity is infused in our hiring processes. We have also developed tools on how to engage families in a culturally responsive way and how to analyze policy and practice through the lens of equity.

We also adopted The Leadership Academy's equity leadership dispositions and created our own set of teacher equity dispositions. [Editor's note: For more on the equity leadership dispositions, see article that begins on p. 22.] At the same time, we are working with the professional learning team to help our existing staff develop the acumen for living these dispositions in their daily practice.

On chief equity officers' professional learning needs:

Chief equity officers need role-alike opportunities to learn from and support one another. The average tenure of a chief equity officer is 2½ years — that's the second-shortest tenure, behind superintendents. Chief equity officers also hold a highly political cabinet-level role. It's a stressful journey, and it's hard to maintain over time because it's emotionally taxing.

Some equity officers themselves may have been traumatized by the system and are not only reliving trauma as they engage in this work, but are still being subject to trauma in this highly politicized role. It can be a lot to deal with. Having the support of people who understand your experience and what you are going through is important for sustainability and retention.

We also need mentorship. This can be challenging because this is a relatively new role. But many people have been doing equity work for years, even if they weren't called equity officers. Finding them and connecting them with new equity officers is crucial. I have been lucky to find my own mentors who have helped me navigate

difficult situations and stand firm in the commitment to equity when internal and external challenges arise.

Of course, support from senior-level leadership and the school board level is extremely important. (See "Recommendations for supporting equity leaders" on p. 34.) In 2019, the Atlanta school board and the superintendent created an equity policy that mandated that the superintendent factor equity into everything he, she, or they do, from operations to finance to curriculum and beyond.

That was very forward thinking for a school board, and it opened the door for the work we are doing now. A lot of my colleagues in other districts are doing this work absent a legitimizing policy, and that makes the work extra challenging.

Lastly, chief equity officers need a repository of resources and information, and a role-specific organization that keeps us up-to-date on best practices, legislation, and opportunities specifically related to the work that we are doing.

Equity work can't be successful unless we are keeping a keen eye on the environment around us — the funding, policies, and legislation that affect your work. Then we zoom in on our own locus of control — the context and cultures of our own systems and structures. That's how we make systemic change.

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