



## What does equity require of me?

### INQUIRY CYCLE TAKES A SYSTEMS APPROACH TO DISMANTLING INEQUITY

BY TAMMIE CAUSEY-KONATÉ

**M**ultiple pandemics, including COVID-19, systemic racism, and the opioid crisis, and other international emergencies have laid bare longstanding inequities that have made access to a high-quality education out of reach for too many historically marginalized students. Moreover, research reveals that

education leaders often perpetuate, even if unintentionally, the very inequities that the public relies on them to dismantle (Khalifa, 2018; Theocharis, 2009; Green, 2016).

We need to reform and reinvent the education systems and practices that we have inherited. To do so, education leaders must commit to enacting a bold vision of *all* — not just some — students thriving. They need

opportunities and support to develop and implement that vision.

The “Do the Right Thing” Equity Inquiry Cycle is a systems approach to professional learning designed to help education leaders develop an equitable vision and dismantle educational inequity. It is intensive and designed to be sustained over time to have real and lasting impact on educational systems.

The cycle is grounded in African



epistemology, which is characterized by one’s “... ethical obligation (King, 2017; Nkulu-N’Sengha, 2005) to pursue wisdom for enhancing the human condition and not merely for intellectual purposes” (Causey-Konaté, 2018, p. 15).

The inquiry cycle is framed around Spike Lee’s film, *Do the Right Thing*, which uses the local, immediate, and historical setting of a diverse but predominantly Black neighborhood as a contextual tapestry that forms a backdrop for the tension, frustration, and illogic of contests for power. The film’s power contests, like so many in the world of education, take place at the intersection of race and poverty.

The film’s title sends a clear message about how such contests should end — with fairness and justice — and the equity inquiry cycle is designed to send the same message by advancing resolution of a foundational question: What does equity require of me as a humane and just leader in education?

The equity inquiry cycle consists of five parts that are intended to disrupt racialized norms by asking education leaders to address how their biases and assumptions, and subsequent policies and practices, contribute to inequity (Espino, 2018). The iterative

nature of the cycle is meant to compel education leaders to engage in the continual appraisal of their personal and professional commitments and investments in supporting educational equity.

The “Do the Right Thing” Equity Inquiry Cycle made its debut at the 2018-19 Southeast Comprehensive Center Equity Summit in Jackson, Mississippi, hosted by American Institutes for Research. This multiday event included educators from six states: Alabama, Michigan, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Texas. Each state identified an equity champion who would serve as the state’s key point of contact for the event and lead for the state’s three- to four-person team.

Participants engaged in equity-focused professional learning before and during the summit. Before the summit, they participated in cultural immersion experiences that ranged from the Institute for Educational Leadership’s intensive, three-day civil rights learning journey to less intensive Mississippi-based community, museum, and university tours focused on educational equity as a civil right.

During the summit, they explored equity-focused data, tools (such as

interactive maps of education assets and vulnerabilities), and strategies as part of an equity audit process. They worked to identify state-specific equity strengths and challenges, evidence-based strategies and initiatives, and indicators of student learning, which were designed to inform states’ draft ESSA-related equity accountability commitment plans to be implemented after the summit.

While the equity summit in full has not met since 2018-19, some of the original participating state agencies approached the Southeast Comprehensive Center for guidance and support with planning their own versions of the summit. In response, the center developed an equity summit guide to support state agencies in using the equity inquiry cycle. Here, I describe how the equity inquiry cycle works, how it was implemented during and after the summit, and how this work can push us all forward.

## THE EQUITY INQUIRY CYCLE

The equity inquiry cycle consists of five parts:

**1. Why do the right thing?** The first part of the cycle uses a set of shared, culturally immersive, baseline experiences to inform, awaken

consciousness, inspire reflection, compel accountability, and spur collective commitment to redressing the roots of inequity in local, geographic, and historic contexts.

During the equity inquiry cycle pilot, this took the form of a series of cultural immersion activities held the day before the summit and designed to highlight current inequities' roots in the not-so-distant past. The equity champion from each state participated in a three-day civil rights learning journey set in the Deep South and organized by the Institute for Educational Leadership.

They visited historical sites such as the family home of civil rights leader Medgar Evers; the site of the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer murders of three civil rights workers; the starting point of the Selma to Montgomery marches in 1965; Edmund Pettus Bridge, the site of the 1965 attack and beating of civil rights protestors known as Bloody Sunday; and the Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church, which had served as the hub for organizing the Montgomery bus boycott events.

All other summit attendees chose from options selected to center them in the historical reality of the civil rights movement: a bus tour of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians community, a tour of the Museum of Mississippi History and Mississippi Civil Rights Museum, and an historic tour of Jackson State University.

**2. How to do the right thing.** This stage of the cycle bombards participants with irrefutable evidence of inequity and its detrimental effects, followed by opportunities for individual and collective reflection, brainstorming, and strategizing about how to move forward.

Activities included keynote speakers and plenary sessions led by stakeholders with vastly different perspectives, including educators, an economist, an expert on biliteracy, and education advocates. Participants, in cross-team reflection sessions, reflected on strategies presented and aligned them

with state priorities.

**3. What is the right thing?** Participants examined a repertoire of evidence-based practices, policies, and pedagogies for addressing educational inequity. We offered a variety of breakout sessions and a world café structure, a format for hosting large-group dialogue that incorporates seven design principles: Clarify the context, create hospitable space, explore questions that matter, encourage everyone's contribution, connect diverse perspectives, listen together for patterns and insights, and share collective discoveries.

This part of the cycle also included state team working sessions, during which states reviewed the ESSA plans to determine whether they sufficiently attended to data trends and evidence-based practices previously discussed.

**4. Do the right thing.** Strategic action planning builds on the previous parts of the cycle, using a state-specific, problem-based inquiry approach in which diverse stakeholders collaborate and commit to specific steps for a more equity-focused system.

Participants engaged in two rounds of concurrent sessions covering evidence-based equity strategies, a community strategy session, two plenaries featuring tools and district examples, and state team planning sessions, during which we worked with state teams to draft actionable equitable system plans.

**5. Doing the right thing.** This stage of the equity inquiry cycle challenges participants to establish systemwide conditions for refining and implementing their equity action plans and engaging in continuous improvement. Educators participate in ongoing, regularly scheduled, systematic reflection with other education stakeholders on their in-progress plans, clarify areas within those plans that call for further refinement, and participate in problem-solving conversations with other professionals.

The final session of the summit reinforced the equity-focused work that states had begun and set expectations

and conditions for continuing the work. Teams received packets of information for continuing their planning processes.

To support the refinement and implementation of state actionable equitable system plans, Southeast Comprehensive Center offered coaches to work with key points of contact for state teams to plan ongoing working sessions. In addition, equity champions who took part in the civil rights learning journey would continue to connect regularly to exchange resources, share state updates, and develop a plan to expose other state representatives to the learning journey, thereby restarting the cycle.

## CONTINUING THE WORK

Following the summit, Southeast Comprehensive Center coaches engaged with state teams during regularly scheduled meetings to refine their plans and brainstorm and solidify ideas for implementation. Summit participants attended and served as presenters in a three-part Equity in Action webinar series.

State teams continued their equity efforts: Mississippi, for example, worked to further diversify the educator workforce through a teacher residency program and a performance-based credential program. The Michigan team hosted an event to highlight the perspectives of African American females.

The work of dismantling inequity is ongoing. For Equity Summit participants who wish to continue, or for others who may wish to begin engaging in the equity inquiry cycle, I offer three next steps:

1. Anchor your daily practices in your individual accountability and the urgency of the foundational question: What does equity require of me as a humane and just leader in education?
2. Repeat the first three parts of the equity inquiry cycle. This requires you to continually integrate opportunities for learning,

growth, and equity-centered action for the intentional benefit of all learners, particularly the most underserved.

3. Map and implement actionable solutions that prioritize historically underserved populations of learners and are guided by your individual and collective reflections with equity champions and other equity-minded education stakeholders.

This work can push us forward toward an equity-focused system that engages all stakeholders and is characterized by empowerment, excellence, justice, restoration, and transformation. The actions and structures we create now must be designed and implemented with unflinching dedication and first responder-like urgency. The need for a system of equity-focused education that drives the “Do the Right Thing” Equity

Inquiry Cycle also implores your present and continuing allyship in creating and sustaining such a system for our youth.

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## Standards Assessment Inventory (SAI)

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For more information, contact Tom Manning at [tom.manning@learningforward.org](mailto:tom.manning@learningforward.org).

