



SOCIAL POLICY HUB FOR  
EQUITY RESEARCH IN EDUCATION

# **AN OVERVIEW OF EDUCATIONAL EQUITY INDICATORS**

**FOR COMMUNITIES AND  
THEIR PARTNERS**

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**October 2022**

# FOREWORD

The research-practice partnership (RPP) between the Social Policy Hub for Equity Research in Education (SPHERE) at Rhode Island College and the Center for Youth and Community Leadership in Education (CYCLE) at Roger Williams University started with a few conversations between Adrienne and Keith—the respective directors—in 2018. After working together on projects related to student safety and mental health support in schools, we decided to try a more ambitious project—Schools and Communities Organizing for Racial Equity (SCORE). SCORE began as a participatory action research project involving youth from the Providence Public School District (PPSD) and parents recruited through a partnership with Rhode Island-based Parents Leading for Educational Equity (PLEE). We launched SCORE Providence in February 2021, and successfully facilitated a nine-member, intergenerational community research team (CRT) through ten months of political education, training in quantitative and qualitative research design and implementation, and equity indicators development. A subset of SCORE Fellows have carried the work forward into 2022 for the ultimate design of a research-informed SCOREcard of educational equity indicators for Providence. As we write this, we are preparing to launch a SCORE process in two new districts, with hopes that we can continue to expand.

Before diving into this work, however, we wanted to know what the research said about what we were preparing to do. We had suspicions that communities, especially youth and families of color who make up the majority of our nation's public school system, are not consulted about what gets measured in education and that measures of school accountability have traditionally been determined by top-down processes and without community-based input. As a result, in our experience, accountability for school improvement and success often relies on oversimplified indicators, such as standardized tests, that leave out the perspectives, priorities, and expertise of youth, parents, and community members. Thus, Brenda Santos—the author of this report—was charged with the task of researching equity indicator systems at the local, national, and international levels. We wanted to know how, if at all, community members have been engaged in indicator development and what factors to consider when developing SCORE's equity indicator system.

Brenda brilliantly captured what she learned from examining dozens and dozens of systems, and in this report leaves us with seven practical insights. We now share this report so that communities and their partners who wish to develop their own equity indicator systems have a research base for doing so. As we continue our work

with SCORE, we will regularly return to these insights to guide our work toward three objectives: 1) **measure what matters** to students and families of color, students and families experiencing economic hardship, and others most directly impacted by inequities; 2) help school districts understand, be responsive to, and be held accountable to **community priorities for educational and racial equity**; 3) **share school district progress** on community priorities with youth, parents, and other community members. We hope that other communities and district partners can use, and build upon these insights to develop equity indicator systems that meet the needs of parents, students, and families.

In solidarity.

Keith Catone, Executive Director of CYCLE

Adrienne C. Goss, Director of SPHERE



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# ABOUT SPHERE

The mission of SPHERE is to engage Rhode Island College students and faculty, in partnership with Rhode Island community members, in conducting and disseminating research for equitable educational and social policies. SPHERE endeavors to help Rhode Islanders understand, and become more involved in education policy decisions. SPHERE aspires to be a leading education and social policy institute in Rhode Island. As a policy hub, SPHERE connects with Rhode Island's education stakeholders in multiple spheres of influence by linking research, policy, and practice.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The following groups and individuals were instrumental in creating this report and I, the author, gratefully acknowledge their contributions and claim all limitations as my own.

- ▶ The student and parent members of the community research team from the SCOREcard project in Providence, RI provided a constant example of community-driven equity indicator development, as they worked to construct novel ways of framing accountability and improving schools. I am grateful to have learned from them.
- ▶ Juan Pablo Blanco, Dr. Keith Catone, Vianna Mercedes, Tracie Potochnik, and Joanne Thompson from the Center for Youth and Community Leadership in Education (CYCLE) at Roger Williams University provided a wealth of expertise on community activism as well as advice and feedback on this report, reminding me often of its potential for practical use.
- ▶ Brandee Tate from the Gates Foundation has championed community-based school accountability and advocated strongly on behalf of this work. She contributed directly to the ideas in this report as well as to resourcing that made it possible.
- ▶ Dr. Adrienne Goss from SPHERE at Rhode Island College mentored this project from start to finish. At every stage, she offered crucial knowledge, ideas and advice. Any success the report has in providing both thorough review and pointed insights is largely attributable to Dr. Goss's generous and thoughtful attention.

## **Suggested Citation:**

**Santos, B. (2022). *An Overview of Educational Equity Indicators for Communities and Their Partners*. Social Policy Hub for Equity Research in Education.**

# CONTENTS

Executive Summary.....	6
The Purpose of this Review.....	9
Methodology.....	10
Defining Educational Equity.....	11
Defining Educational Equity Indicators.....	12
Educational Equity in Social Context.....	13
International, National, & Local Systems.....	14
Community Responsiveness: A Characteristic of Local Indicator Systems.....	15
Expanding Categories of Indicators: Access, Experience, Achievement, & Decision-Making.....	17
International and National Indicators: Focus on Inputs, Outcomes, & Context.....	19
Local Indicators: Spotlight on CUNY ISLG Equity Indicators Projects.....	21
National Support for Local Systems to Monitor Educational Equity.....	23
Curriculum & Instruction.....	25
Impact on Communities.....	27
Insights for Communities Embarking on Educational Equity Indicator Work.....	28
References.....	32

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Efforts to move beyond the blunt use of student test scores as the main metric of school quality have included the development of equity indicator systems. Increasingly, equity indicators are part of the school accountability equation. Rather than simply identifying schools as succeeding or failing as traditional standardized metrics often do, equity indicators provide leaders with information about more facets of schools so that they can target improvement efforts. Equity indicator systems focus on the degree to which school practices and policies replicate, exacerbate, or counteract social inequality, explicitly aiming to fulfill the core function of schools, to provide all children with what they need to learn and grow. Equity indicator systems enable greater community responsiveness, and if implemented in partnership with community members, facilitate on-going community-based activism that fuels a virtuous cycle of engagement, support, and improvement.

This review of educational equity indicators takes the position that community responsiveness should be a core value and characteristic of educational equity indicator systems. As experts on local needs, experiences, and dreams, community members should play the central role in determining how educational equity is defined in local contexts and be positioned with the power to hold districts accountable to meeting community standards. Therefore, this review aims to support community-based efforts to develop educational equity indicators by providing an overview of existing systems.

This review of national and local indicators revealed that systems typically include indicators that could be categorized as related to equitable access to resources, to student experience of the learning process, and to achievement or

outcomes. The second category, student experience, seems to have emerged most recently as attention to the learning environment, social emotional support, and other aspects of school less traditionally associated with academic opportunities or outcomes have gained attention. I urge the addition of a fourth category of indicators that would measure the degree to which community members, including students and caregivers, are able to equitably engage in school decision-making. This review

found no existing indicators that related to equitable decision-making. Without positioning caregivers or students as the people to whom schools are accountable, or ensuring their continued involvement through on-going structures, the power and sustainability of equity initiatives anchored in indicator projects are limited. This review found that, while equity indicator projects almost always named community engagement as a priority, they usually fell far short of meaningful community participation in the development of indicators. Community-driven equity indicator development is an area of intense need, one that this report aims to make a small contribution to resourcing.

Other opportunities, challenges, and tensions were found in this review of educational equity indicators. For example, the National Academies (2019b) urges the development of local equity indicator systems for schools, but favors the use of standard metrics. Data for standard metrics is more likely to be available across geographic regions, unlike community-responsive metrics, which could be harder to implement and impossible to analyze comparatively. Also, questions remain about how student outcomes should be measured, given the way traditional achievement measures have incentivized instructional, programmatic, and other decisions in schools that have sometimes been harmful to students and communities. Equity-focused calls for active and deeper learning and for culturally-responsive pedagogy prompt questions of how to ensure consistency and avoid contradiction in systems that measure student learning experience and outcomes in more and broader ways.



Despite the challenges, education equity indicator systems profess to hold a number of bold aspirations for impact. This review suggests that they are currently most successful in orienting policy makers toward equity concerns. Equity indicator initiatives have had mixed success in increasing transparency with the public about equity in schools, and there is still little evidence of equity indicators empowering communities to advocate for reform. These successes will be necessary before equity indicator projects can facilitate deep partnerships between

leaders and community members or begin to shift systems of accountability such that community members are positioned to hold school systems accountable to their standards.

To community members engaged in educational equity indicator projects, this report offers the following recommendations for consideration:

- Begin with community needs and values, local experiences, and connections between school and the broader social context.
- Consider educational equity broadly. Go beyond academic outcomes to consider access and opportunities, student learning experience, and decision-making.
- Think about feasible implementation when choosing indicators. Learn what data is already available. Keep the total set focused and manageable.
- Ensure that data can be disaggregated by race, income, language, etc. in order to identify disparities.
- Go beyond traditional numerical measures and collect peoples' stories to include in your data.
- After indicator development, keep the community involved in equity reviews, using the indicators, analyzing the data, and planning the policy responses.

Community-driven equity indicator projects represent a significant shift in the logic and practice of school accountability. They hold tremendous promise to initiate and sustain equity-focused school improvement.





# THE PURPOSE OF THIS REVIEW

The purpose of this review is to provide an overview of existing educational equity indicators for communities embarking on their own projects of developing equity indicator systems. Students and caregivers are at the center of community-driven equity indicator work, which might include partnerships with local school districts and other community-serving institutions. Given a broad scan of existing educational equity indicator systems, this review will focus on what these systems measure and how they are organized. Because this work seeks to assist communities in future work, this review is especially attentive to how community members, including caregivers and students, meaningfully participate in projects to design and implement educational equity indicators: what roles they have played, how much power they have held, and how community agency can be expanded in future efforts.

Schools are social institutions, responsible and accountable to the communities they serve. Indicators provide school leaders and policy makers with the information they need to make progress on community-responsive measures of school quality. Indicators also serve communities directly by increasing transparency and supporting community advocacy for school change. Educational *equity* indicators focus on the degree to which schools reflect or exacerbate social inequality versus serve as a force for broader social equality through

their practices and policies. Community members hold the most critical knowledge of community needs and aspirations, and should be at the center of school improvement efforts, including equity indicator development.

Because indicators are a form of school evaluation, they raise concerns reminiscent of standards-based accountability, which has contributed to the deficit positioning of students and communities, narrowed curriculum, and brought sanctions, including school closure, especially for schools and districts serving primarily Black, Latinx, and low-income students (Oliva & Martinez, 2021). School improvement reforms have often defined educational equity according to external, not community, standards, and established lines of accountability for school improvement on those measures that either ignored or harmed community members, especially students and caregivers. It is important, therefore, that community members meaningfully participate in equity indicator projects, specifically that they take part in determining how equitable schooling is defined, and that they are positioned to hold school leadership accountable to community standards for educational equity.



# METHODOLOGY

This review includes international, national (United States), and local examples of educational equity indicator systems in order to draw useful conclusions about how a global versus United States versus local scope relates to the nature of the indicators, their purpose, and their use. Given the focus on empowering local community-driven equity indicator projects, more equity indicator systems and projects were examined, at greater levels of specificity and depth, at the local level than at the national level. International indicators were examined only at the broadest level in order to contextualize the national and local work. Studies and artifacts (including websites and brochures) were collected using academic databases, including ERIC and PsychINFO, as well as Google, which helped to surface a wider range of on-the-ground projects. These were read, sorted, and re-sorted in order to develop insights about existing and future equity indicator systems.

# DEFINING EDUCATIONAL EQUITY

The National Equity Project defines educational equity as follows: “Each child receives what they need to develop to their full academic and social potential” (National Equity Project, *Educational Equity Definition*). Importantly, educational equity is not defined simply in terms of equal distribution of educational resources across groups, but is instead inherently community-responsive. Paula Dressel of the Race Matters Institute defines equity not as treating people equally, but “justly according to their circumstances” (Dressel, 2014). The Portland Office of Equity and Human Rights defines racial equity as “when race does not determine or predict the distribution of resources, opportunities, and burdens for group members in society” (OEHR, n.d.). Researchers in both K-12 focused studies (Lauer et al., 2003; Roscigno & Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999; Sulis et al., 2020) and studies of higher education (Korn, 2015; Perna et al., 2006; Willems, 2010) generally define inequity in education as a statistically significant relationship between achievement/attainment (and/or the conditions of education) and the socioeconomic identity of students. Carlon Howard (2021), co-founder of the Equity Institute in Providence, RI, notes that achieving educational equity starts with reflection on the needs of individuals and communities, and could require strategies that extend beyond the traditional boundaries of schools and school systems to interventions “such as promoting housing security, improving food access, and addressing poverty through economic policy” (para. 2).

## ***Educational Equity means:***

- ▶ ***Schools provide what each student needs to reach their potential***
- ▶ ***Racial or other differences do not determine or predict students' educational experiences or outcomes***
- ▶ ***Looking both within and beyond school buildings for strategies***

# DEFINING EDUCATIONAL EQUITY INDICATORS

This review focuses on indicator systems. Educational equity indicators have been defined in terms of their function. Organizations and communities developing equity indicators aim to create a useful tool that leads to action to address inequities. CUNY Institute for State and Local Governance (ISLG), which has led numerous equity indicator projects across the United States, defines indicators as “tools” used “to understand and measure equity and track progress toward increasing it over time” (CUNY ISLG, 2021). The National Academies, in a report aimed at encouraging a national system for local equity indicators, writes that indicators are “used to track progress toward objectives or monitor conditions over time. For education, an indicator would allow meaningful examination of equity between key population groups, such as those defined by socio-economic status, race and ethnicity, or English proficiency” (National Academies, 2019a, p. 34). While indicators tend to involve data in the form of statistics, powerful local equity work often involves the collection of qualitative data, including the stories of

community members, represented in words or visually (Strive Together, 2020). Inherently, all indicators derive from values and goals (whose goals and values is a central concern of this report) and rely upon representation rather than direct observation to compare and evaluate progress toward equity over time.

- ▶ ***Indicators are tools for measuring equity and tracking progress over time.***
- ▶ ***Indicators can involve statistics as well as data in qualitative forms, like stories.***
- ▶ ***The purpose of equity indicators is to lead to action that reduces inequity.***

# EDUCATIONAL EQUITY IN SOCIAL CONTEXT

*Communities developing educational equity indicators in inequitable social contexts must examine the connections between conditions within and outside of schools, plan for ways to counteract inequitable norms in their work, and vigilantly monitor reform efforts and their consequences for their impact on students and families.*

Educational equity pursuits are inseparable from issues related to equity in the broader society. Social, cultural, and economic inequalities in the broader social context lead to inequity in schools, unequal resources and “disrespectful or unsupportive school environments,” which in turn result in “unequal achievements and attainments” (Hutmacher, 2001, p. 18). Swiss scholar Walo Hutmacher calls these unequal learning and achievement results the “internal results” within the educational system, and explains that they lead to external results: continued social, cultural, and economic inequalities in the broader society.

Because inequitable schools are situated in and connected to inequitable social contexts, communities developing equity indicators must also be mindful of the ways in which they go about their work. Policy efforts to reduce inequity have insufficiently acknowledged and addressed structural barriers to equity (Harper et al., 2009). Educational equity indicator development requires both attention to structural inequity and methods informed by an equity lens, which might include an approach to communities that recognize community strengths (Harper et al., 2009; Yosso, 2005). Harper et al. (2009) warn of the risk of interest convergence, where policies aimed at alleviating inequities simultaneously serve dominant and/or institutional interests and ultimately fail to make transformative change (Bell, 1980; Boler, 1999; Emdin, 2016; Johnson, 2020; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Nolan, 2011). The more indicator systems focus on student experience and include ongoing mechanisms for community engagement, the more effectively they can guard against factors that undermine equity goals.



# INTERNATIONAL, NATIONAL, & LOCAL SYSTEMS



The review of existing equity indicator systems and projects that follows starts with international and national indicators, then discusses local indicator systems and projects, and concludes with an outline of the National Academies' work to encourage local development of indicators using common criteria and shared data sources. At a high level, international indicator systems typically align with a development framework, while national and local indicator systems within the United States are situated within a civil rights framework. International indicator systems have traditionally conveyed the degree of educational equality in a nation or region as a kind of meta-indicator for the nation or region's development or progress, according to international standards. In contrast, educational equity indicators in the United States are typically grounded in the national historical and contemporary context of civil rights, specifically the history of racial discrimination and oppression and the goals of racial equality and justice. Inherent in this distinction between international indicators under the auspices of development and national and local indicators contextualized within U.S. civil rights history are corresponding differences in who exactly is agitating for accountability for educational equity through indicators and why.

# COMMUNITY RESPONSIVENESS: A CHARACTERISTIC OF LOCAL INDICATOR SYSTEMS

In contrast to international indicators, which are most focused on educational attainment and outcomes, national and local indicator projects are more likely to also consider student experiences in school and the responsiveness of schools to the specific needs of students and communities. According to Jeff Duncan-Andrade (2021), the term “culturally responsive” leads to essentializing people through racial stereotype; community responsive means that “you are recognizing [that] the culture of the youth and the families and the history where you do the work is unique to that space” (Duncan-Andrade, 2021). To do that, he tells educators, “[you] have to become an ethnographer of the community you serve” (Duncan-Andrade, 2021). Increasingly, local educational equity indicator work in the United States is grounded, at least in part, in standards for equitable education defined by communities.

Following Duncan-Andrade’s advice requires attention to the specific characteristics of local communities’ contexts. NYU’s *Culturally Responsive Curriculum Scorecard Toolkit* (Education

*Community responsive means that “you are recognizing [that] the culture of the youth and the families and the history where you do the work is unique to that space.” To do that, “[you] have to become an ethnographer of the community you serve” (Dr. Jeff Duncan-Andrade, Community Responsive Education).*

Justice Research & Organizing Collaborative, n.d.), which is used by a growing number of districts to evaluate the cultural responsiveness of literature curriculum, illustrates both attentiveness to student experience and the pitfall that Duncan-Andrade names. The NYU tool, a scorecard that measures the diversity of authors and literary characters represented in school curriculum, could also lead to essentializing students of color if applied as

a generic measure of cultural responsiveness. Applied to equity indicator work, Duncan-Andrade's push underscores the need for stronger community involvement in the development of equity indicators. One equity indicator example, the Loving Cities Index, begins each of its reports with a narrative history of the city to contextualize the current reality (Schott Foundation, 2020). Three of the equity indicator projects led by The City University of New York (CUNY) Institute for State and Local Governance (ISLG) – Tulsa, Oakland, and St. Louis – explicitly frame their work within specific, local contexts of historic and contemporary racial injustice and violence (City of Oakland, 2018; City of St. Louis, 2021-2022; City of Tulsa, 2022).

***Educational equity indicator systems in the United States are rooted in movements for civil rights. Increasingly, local context and community-responsiveness are central to their theories of action.***



# EXPANDING CATEGORIES OF INDICATORS: ACCESS, EXPERIENCE, ACHIEVEMENT, & DECISION-MAKING

National and local indicator systems are organized in a variety of ways, including by grade level. This review organizes indicators into three categories: equitable access to resources, student experience of the learning process, and achievement or outcomes. Equitable access and outcomes are categories frequently utilized to organize indicators in international, national, and local systems. The second category I suggest, student experience of the learning process, is the newest of these three in the conversation about educational equity indicators. Rather than sorting

indicators into “inputs” and “outcomes,” organization into three categories suggests a narrative view reflective of community experience with educational institutions: it begins with community access to educational resources, then attends to community experiences in the institutions, and finally looks at equitable outcomes.

This review also proposes that a fourth category needs to be included: equitable engagement in school decision-making. While equity indicators related to access, student experience, and outcomes can *establish* the standards for holding schools and districts accountable, communities need educational equity indicators related to democratic processes – specifically for caregiver and student voice – in order to maintain the power to *sustain* those standards. The development of sustainable, equitable systems needs to accompany all equity reform initiatives (Foster-Fishman & Watson, 2012).

This review did not find equity indicator projects that explicitly included indicators related to equitable engagement in school decision-making or that positioned caregivers or students as the people to whom districts would be accountable through concrete structures. This gap



threatens to limit equity indicator system work in at least two ways. First, the initial development of indicators related to access, experience, and achievement will reflect caregiver and student experience, needs, and aspirations only in proportion with the degree to which leaders were effective in meaningfully engaging these groups. Second, without indicators providing for ongoing caregiver and student voice in school decision-making, any systematic engagement of caregivers and families in the indicator development process stops there, limiting the sustainability of community-responsive efforts by design. Because of the direct, foundational, and sustaining relationship between community voice and student access, experience, and achievement, the model below positions caregiver and family voice in decision-making below and across the other categories.

*Categories of Indicators with Examples*

<b>Access <i>Opportunity to Learn</i></b>	<b>Experience <i>Community</i></b>	<b>Achievement</b>
Pre-school enrollment	Culturally responsive pedagogy	Academic preparation (for the next grade or college)
Available AP classes	Restorative justice	Graduation rate
<b>Caregiver and Student Voice in Decision-Making</b>		
Data transparency		
Democratic school governance structures		

Most existing indicators focus on access (what is sometimes called “opportunity to learn”) and outcomes. Fewer indicators focused on the “learning process” (which could include “community responsiveness”) and none focused on on-going community voice in decision-making, a category that is needed to sustain indicator-driven equity change.

# INTERNATIONAL AND NATIONAL INDICATORS: FOCUS ON INPUTS, OUTCOMES, & CONTEXT

Both international and national (U.S.) indicators typically focus on answering two questions: (1) is the allocation of educational resources (including funding, quality/tenure of teachers, and access to higher education) equitable and (2) does the data suggest a relationship between race, class, or other type of status and students' academic performance (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015; Korn, 2015; Lauer, 2003; Martins & Veiga, 2010; Perna et al. 2006; Roscigno & Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999; Sulis et al., 2020; Willems, 2010). UNESCO's (2018) *Handbook on Measuring Equity in Education* demonstrates how indicators could be grouped in these two general categories, inputs and outcomes, and utilized to structure statistical analyses that test for inequitable resourcing and achievement (p. 56).

Hutmacher et al. (2007) urged that

international measures of educational equity like the ones promoted by UNESCO should reflect the social nature of education and extend beyond statistical comparisons and correlations. Despite the critique, educational equity continues to be defined along the lines of equitable resourcing and outcomes in the international context. For example, OECD's 2018 report, "Equity in Education: Breaking Down Barriers to Social Mobility," defines educational equity as "equal learning opportunities" for all students and outcomes that are "unrelated to their background or to economic and social circumstances over which students have no control" (p. 15). However, the report also makes broader recommendations including developing teachers' capacity to detect student needs and manage diverse classrooms, reducing the concentration of disadvantaged students in particular schools, fostering student well-being, and encouraging parent-teacher communication and parental engagement (pp. 41-47).

National systems also seem to be expanding beyond inputs and outcomes, and attending to community need and student experience. For example, the Great Lakes Equity Center's 2015 Policy Equity



Analysis Tool includes ratings for the following: “responds to the current district/school context and issues,” and “enumerates specific student groups to be responsive to students who have been historically marginalized in school settings” (p. 5). For the Great Lakes Equity Center, this shift is consistent with its explicit role as a civil rights organization. In 2011, the Great Lakes Equity Center was funded by the U.S. Department of Education, which carries out the 1963 Civil Rights Act and its later statutes. Originally called a “desegregation assistance center,” its mission is rooted in the historic movement for social equality in the U.S. Similarly, the National School Board Association’s guidance for measuring and monitoring equity in schools also emphasizes responding to students’ specific needs and is framed within the history of civil rights in the United States (Center for Public Education, 2016). In contrast to these national (U.S.) examples, even where human rights are central to international indicators, international educational equity indicator systems are more economically focused and part of holistic measures focused on development rather than on social justice.

*Comparing International and National/Local Systems in the U.S.*

International Indicators	National/Local Indicators in the U.S.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>typically focus on answering two questions: (1) Is the allocation of educational resources (including funding, quality/tenure of teachers, and access to higher education) equitable ? and (2) Does the data suggest a relationship between race, class, or other type of status and students’ academic performance?</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>generally limited to measures of inputs (resources) and outcomes (student performance)</li> <li>rooted in an international development framework</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>more likely to also include indicators directly reflective of community needs and geared toward student experience</li> <li>rooted in a national and/or local civil rights context</li> </ul>

# LOCAL INDICATORS: SPOTLIGHT ON CUNY ISLG EQUITY INDICATORS PROJECTS

Educational equity indicator projects exist in local communities across the United States. They take a variety of forms ranging from scoring rubrics that allow for monitoring educational equity in a community over time (e.g., Orleans Public Education Network) to indices that map levels of community need in order to monitor the allocation of funding to geographical locations (e.g., Advancement Project). In addition, many projects and organizations working to facilitate greater equity in local communities have their own measures of education equity (e.g., Strive Together, 2020), which they utilize to monitor progress toward their goals and effectiveness of their work. This review is focused on education equity indicator projects that seek to hold school systems and leaders accountable for educational equity, rather than on equity indicators devised by equity-focused organizations in order to evaluate their own work.

In this section, I elaborate on a sample of education equity indicator projects facilitated by the City University of New York (CUNY) Institute for State and Local Governance (ISLG) selected for its explicit purpose of measuring educational equity within a local system for the purpose of holding system leaders accountable to meeting community needs. The CUNY ISLG Equity Indicator project developed out of a need for community-responsive city-level equity indicator work. It developed indicators that compare the most and least advantaged groups within six themes (economy, education, health, housing, justice, and service). The ISLG Equity Indicator project notes that community engagement is a vital part of developing indicators, but ISLG does not position these stakeholders as collaborators in the development of equity indicators through its processes for indicator development.





In 2017, the Rockefeller Foundation funded ISLG to assist in the development of frameworks in six cities: Dallas, New York City, Oakland, Pittsburgh, St. Louis, and Tulsa. In St. Louis, the project was one explicit outcome of the Ferguson Commission's Report in the aftermath of Michael Brown's murder by police. All of the local implementation projects employed ISLG methodology for identifying high level focus areas or themes, topics, and indicators, as well as the ISLG principle of scoring 0-100 for each indicator. In St. Louis, the themes paralleled the Ferguson Commission's signature priorities.

Like in New York City, local implementation projects elsewhere included community engagement as a part of the process of developing indicators, but community members did not themselves develop indicators. Rather, the officials who developed the indicators utilized community insights, typically collected at community meetings and/or through surveys, as one input (along with external research) to inform their work (City of Dallas, 2021-2022a; City of Tulsa, 2022;

CUNY ISLG, 2021). In some cases, community focus groups were engaged for feedback on draft indicators (City of Oakland, 2018; City of St. Louis, 2021-2022). Project leaders also sometimes engaged the professional leaders of community-serving agencies as proxies for community members (City of Pittsburgh, 2017). In these cases, the people that project leaders engaged would not meet Stoecker's (2003) definition of community: "the people living with the problem and those organizations that they democratically control" (p. 41). This review found no equity indicator projects in which youth or caregivers played a role in co-constructing indicators. While these projects intended to engage community members, they did so in limited ways and never included parents or students in the project of meaningfully defining educational equity in their local communities, developing indicators for themselves, or holding districts accountable to community standards of educational equity.

### ***Limitations to Community Role in Indicator Development:***

- ▶ ***Community outreach limited to small groups and/or few engagements***
- ▶ ***Community-members positioned as data-sources, not decision-makers***
- ▶ ***Community engagement with draft indicators limited to providing feedback***
- ▶ ***Professional leaders of community-serving organizations engaged instead of community members themselves***

# NATIONAL SUPPORT FOR LOCAL SYSTEMS TO MONITOR EDUCATIONAL EQUITY

In 2019, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine advocated for the development of a nationally centralized system of educational equity indicators to monitor performance and change over time (National Academies, 2019a). These indicators, their report urged, could “help convey when disparities arise, identify groups most affected by them, and inform policy and practice measures to improve equity in pre-K through 12th grade education” (National Academies, 2019b). The report recommends that state and local indicator systems focus on two categories, access to resources and opportunities and student outcomes, and utilize existing reporting wherever available. The report emphasizes the value of comparative measures of school, district, and state performance, and “recommends that the federal government - under the guidance of an advisory board - work with states, school districts, and educational intermediaries to develop the national equity indicator system and incorporate it into their relevant data collection” (National Academies, 2019b). In a supplemental guidebook for states and school districts, *Building Educational Equity Indicator Systems*, the National Academies attempts to resource state and district leaders who want to implement the recommendations in the *Monitoring Educational Equity* report, but the main thrust of their recommendations is for

federal investment and coordination utilizing the indicators recommended by the National Academies report to establish on-going national reporting.

National Academies’ focus on access and achievement is a function of its goal of establishing sustainable baseline educational equity systems across the country. The report emphasizes the importance of consistency across systems for two main reasons: the feasibility of data collection (sustainability) and the opportunity for comparative analysis across locations and time frames (impact). While National Academies urges on local work, and attempts to resource it, its focus is not on responsiveness to specific community needs, but rather on how local communities can most effectively establish equity indicator systems that illuminate access and achievement disparities. Their report suggests 16 “indicators of disparities” in Pre-K education, K-12 education, and educational attainment; nine of those indicators are labeled “opportunity,” and seven are labeled “outcome” (National Academies, 2019a, p. 3).

To develop suggested indicators (National Academies, 2019a, p. 3), the committee engaged in a research process focused primarily on the collection and use of data (pp. 28-38). This included listening sessions with experts in data collection and reporting, as well as with policymakers. The



process does not appear to have involved direct engagement with educators, students, or parents. Nor do the National Academies' recommendations for states and school districts appear to include engagement with these stakeholder groups. While some of the indicators labeled opportunity could be understood as related to student learning experience (school climate, for example), the recommended indicators do not include any measure of family engagement in school, satisfaction, or role in defining equitable opportunity and outcomes. The National Academies' work offers communities that are developing equity indicators some important insights related to data availability, sustainable implementation, and comparative analysis, and is a voice for national support for local indicator work.



# CURRICULUM & INSTRUCTION

Most existing indicators approach curriculum and instruction in terms of inputs (or “opportunities” in the language used by the National Academies) and demonstrated learning outcomes at the *programmatic* level (i.e., Advanced Placement [AP] course offerings and scores). Although there are numerous tools

for measuring cultural responsiveness, this review found no existing equity indicator systems measuring cultural responsiveness within specific course content or instructional practice. Scholars, students, and families have urged school and curriculum leaders from the local to the national level to examine curricula and teaching practices through an equity lens (Gay, 2000; Jackson, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Love, 2019; Moje, 2007; Muhammad, 2020). The paragraphs below explore equity in curriculum and instruction in more detail for two reasons: this is currently an area neglected in most indicator systems, and future efforts to incorporate it into broader education equity indicator systems promise to reveal significant tensions between the goal of equitable and responsive student learning and the practice of measuring student achievement (Gagnon & Schneider, 2017).

Systems for the examination of curriculum or instructional practices through an equity lens tend to stand alone, not within a broader set of educational equity indicators designed to measure equity across a school or a system. One example is the Education Justice Research and Organizing Collaborative (EJ-ROC)’s Culturally Responsive Curriculum Scorecards. The scorecards were developed in response to the NYC Coalition for Educational Justice’s report, *Diverse City, White Curriculum: The Exclusion of People of Color from English Language Arts in NYC Schools*] (2019). The



report found the overrepresentation of white authors and characters in books taught in New York City's pre-K through middle school classrooms. In Rhode Island, the Equity Institute has developed a Culturally Responsive Walkthrough Tool that includes three categories of indicators focused on classroom environment, relationships, and instructional practices, including the selection of content (2020). Finally, Learning for Justice, formerly called Teaching Tolerance, has developed a "framework for anti-bias education," that includes standards and learning outcomes for grades kindergarten through 12 (2020). The framework is organized into four domains based upon Louise Derman-Sparks' (1989) four goals for anti-bias education: identity, diversity, justice, action.

Education scholars have conceptualized equity in curriculum and instruction within design frameworks and revealed new complexities (CAST; Center for Urban Education, 2015; equityXdesign, 2016; National Equity Project, *Liberatory Design*). Muhammad proposes a pedagogical framework grounded in a historical theory of Black literacy (2020) and consisting of "four layered pursuits": identity, skills, intellect, and criticality. Mehta and Fine's 2019 study of deeper learning, anchored in the Hewlett Foundation's deeper learning competencies (Hewlett Foundation, 2013), identifies three components that characterize deeper learning: mastery, identity, and creativity. These equity models of curriculum and instruction challenge assumptions and power dynamics inherent in traditional educational models, including teacher-centered instruction, and instead emphasize student identity and active learning.

They also illuminate tensions that could emerge in a comprehensive project of designing equity indicators, especially the way that using standardized tests to measure learning outcomes can lead to overemphasis on academic minimums and undermine curriculum and instruction reforms (Mehta and Fine, 2019). McDermott (2011) has written that "performance accountability can have perverse effects" (p. 181), which present themselves at the levels of districts (Robinson & Simonton, 2019), schools, and classrooms (Gagnon & Schneider, 2017). While No Child Left Behind (NCLB) incentivized schools to inequitable treatment of students largely through overemphasis on standardized test results, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) has allowed states to develop indicator systems with multiple measures of success, including those focused on equity (Cardichon & Darling-Hammond, 2017). As we move in the direction of more indicators related to students' experiences in school, the community responsiveness of schools, and the on-going voice caregivers and students have in school decision-making, the need for coherence in educational equity vision and indicator systems is critical to avoiding competing and contradictory measures and incentives.

***Measures of equity in curriculum and instruction must be incorporated into indicator systems. Doing so will require new ways of thinking about accountability for student outcomes.***

# IMPACT ON COMMUNITIES

The six cities that participated in the first round of ISLG's equity indicator work have each produced annual reports that illustrate how indicators of educational equity can illuminate challenges and trends upon which policy recommendations can be based. The data provides the information needed to ask these questions: what disparities exist, why, and what now. In Dallas, the first report indicates that listening sessions with community members were held to help officials make sense of the data and surface additional concerns from stakeholders, including gentrification and inequitable disciplinary practices (City of Dallas, 2021-2022b). It is rarely clear how specifically the reports have influenced policy or impacted students and communities, but the reports themselves do demonstrate how the indicators have prompted explicit reporting

on educational equity on a regular basis, and, in Dallas, the ongoing engagement of community members in the process of making sense of and responding to the data. Similarly, the National Academies report suggests that indicators could inform public debates, policy including investment decisions, and research in ways that target educational inequity (2019a, p. 34). Thus far, the impact of equity indicators upon the community has been largely indirect, through the increased awareness policy makers gain about education-related inequities. To a lesser extent, equity indicators have enhanced public transparency and offered new data sources to community activists. Other potential impacts, including strengthened community partnerships and accountability to communities have yet to be broadly realized.

## ***Potential for educational equity indicator impact:***

- ▶ ***Orient policy makers toward equity concerns and goals***
- ▶ ***Increase transparency with the public about educational equity***
- ▶ ***Empower communities to advocate for reform***
- ▶ ***Support partnership between leaders and community members***
- ▶ ***Shift systems of accountability such that community members are positioned to hold school systems accountable***

# INSIGHTS FOR COMMUNITIES EMBARKING ON EDUCATIONAL EQUITY INDICATOR WORK

Based on what we know about the development, effectiveness, and current limitations of equity indicator systems, the recommendations below are presented for consideration by communities crafting equity indicators. These insights are based upon the review above which emphasizes the following: the focus on equity, defined as schools providing what each student needs to reach their potential (National Equity Project, *Educational Equity Definition*) so that educational experiences and outcomes are not determined by race or other social identity markers (Dressel, 2014; OEHR, n.d.); the socially situated nature of schooling (Howard, 2021; Hutmacher, 2001); the importance of community-responsiveness (Duncan-Andrade, 2021); the need to extend our conceptions of educational quality to include student experience and our sources of educational equity data to include the knowledge, including the stories, of students and their families (Cardichon & Darling-Hammond, 2017; EJ-ROC, n.d.); the continued importance of practical considerations that will lead to effective data collection and useability (National Academies, 2019a); and the need for deliberate, explicit provisions for on-going community participation in school decision-making to support transformative change (Foster-Fishman & Watson, 2012).

1. Context: Start the conversation with what the community needs and values. Attend to local experiences, and recognize connections to broader social conditions.
2. Think broadly: Instead of focusing on one aspect of educational equity (academic outcomes for example), consider indicators that reflect multiple facets of education, including access/opportunities, student learning experience, outcomes, and decision-making.
3. Think about what's feasible:
  - A. When choosing indicators, look for publicly available information (existing data) so that the indicators can be easily used.
  - B. Create a reasonable number of indicators so the process is productive and focused, and not overwhelming.
4. Think about what's actionable: Choose indicators that will give students, caregivers, and the district information they can use to make positive change.
5. Disaggregation: In order to identify disparity between groups, make sure data can be separated out by race, income, ability, language, gender, etc.
6. Data = metrics and stories: Instead of looking only at the numbers, include open-ended surveys and other methods for collecting stories of peoples' experiences.
7. Sense-making = power: After indicators are created, keep students and caregivers closely involved in carrying out equity reviews using the indicators, analyzing the data, and planning the policy and practice changes in response.

Of these practical insights, the last might be most critical. It repositions community members as the people who not only determine what educational equity means in their community, but also hold schools to meeting their standards for equity in an accountable partnership.





Along with insights, there are complexities that must be considered when endeavoring to develop community-based educational equity indicators. First, an important characteristic of community-driven equity indicator projects is that they are local, making them well positioned to employ Duncan-Andrade's (2021) concept of community responsiveness. But when equity indicators are grounded in a local context, it can be less clear how to expand projects and work toward educational equity on a broader scale. Local projects can also lack efficiency and resources or miss out on the benefit of comparative data sets.

Community-driven equity indicator projects also must wrestle with the central tensions of negotiating new roles and relationships in order to make transformative change. It is clear from this review that equity indicator projects almost always aim to engage students and caregivers, but rarely make them true partners in determining how to define educational equity. Olivos (2021), in a study of bicultural parental voice, found that measuring "parental

satisfaction" without first engaging deeply with minoritized parents about their beliefs and values actually silenced Latinx parents' voices, rather than helping them to voice concerns or input. This review reinforces the idea that input is not the same as power, and raises the important question of who gets to make decisions about the vision for a community's schools. Jackson and Andrews (2021) argue that Black parents can determine the conditions for the learning environment and then assert them. They hope that Black-led organizations will continue to draw upon parents' knowledges to develop culturally affirming instructional approaches that support Black children's learning and empowerment. They add, "Equally important, those who wield institutional power need to join the struggle for racial equity by examining how they might adopt an equitable implementation approach and shift the institutional inertia of their organizations toward freedom and liberation" (Jackson & Andrews, 2021, p. 20).

Despite the link between family connection and involvement and school effectiveness (Toppo et al., 2022), student and caregiver voice is not currently supported in school systems. Equity indicator projects reviewed here were undermined in their goal of meaningfully engaging these groups by norms that define them as passive consumers and undervalue them as assets. One potential way to challenge these norms is by employing community organizing principles toward educational change. Projects might look to organizations like Research for Organizing for resources to support community-driven educational equity indicator development, to research on community organizing,



dual-capacity building, and school change (Catone & Thompson, 2020; Mapp & Bergman, 2019; Warren & Mapp, 2011) for theoretical foundations, and to examples of grassroots local efforts for lessons and inspiration (Fuentes, 2012). But this suggestion is not offered free of tension of its own. Nygreen (2017) argues that community-based school reform efforts can reinscribe and reproduce “neoliberal hegemony and domination,” especially when it is assumed that “the interests of marginalized communities are self-evident” (p. 44). She suggests that to avoid this danger, organizers must avoid “glossing over or minimizing internal debates about aims, meanings, and strategy” (Nygreen, 2017, p. 44). In other words, when community organizing frameworks are deployed to support community-driven equity indicator development, the key finding of this review is still critical: to overcome the dominant power dynamics between community members and those with traditional forms of power, even avowed community partners and allies, a more significant shift in the power relationship must be explicitly enacted and maintained by design.

Indicator development is an important step in policy, discourse, advocacy, and practice aimed at educational equity. This overview provided a summary of existing international, national, and local projects, focusing on what they measure and how they are organized. Because this review aims to resource communities for future work, it is especially attentive to the agency of community members in existing projects, seeking insights that would support the expansion of community members’ role. It is offered in the hope that it might inform future efforts, especially those that define educational equity locally and focus on supporting accountable partnerships between community members and school districts.



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