

RESEARCH BRIEF

— ADVANCING RACIAL EQUITY CHANGE —

PK-12 Equity Director Positions: Designing and Supporting the Role

Overview: This brief provides PK-12 equity directors, superintendents, and school boards with information to help them set up and support equity directors' leadership work.

Key Question: What do district leaders need to know and do to support the leadership work of district equity directors?

School districts across the country are creating equity director roles to address their long standing issues of racism, inequity, and oppression. The equity director role is not an easy leadership position. And it is unlike many more well-established district leadership roles. The people who fill the role—primarily Black and other women and people of color—are often made vulnerable because of uncertainty about their role and responsibilities, unclear organizational goals, and racial-gender oppression in the workplace. Despite this, districts continue to create equity director positions. And willing and capable leaders continue to fill them. This brief provides PK-12 equity directors, superintendents, and school boards with information to help them set up and support equity directors' work, advocacy, and leadership.

Do's for Supporting Equity Leaders

- Configure the equity director role with adequate power and authority to allow directors to put their equity leadership “know-how” and skills into action.
- Recognize the experiences and knowledge of Black and other women of color in the role and amplify their influence in leading for equity.
- Ensure that equity directors have an explicit theory of change that dismantles historic and current forms of oppression and rebuilds just educational experiences.

Don'ts for Supporting Equity Leaders

- Don't create equity director positions with one person who does not have adequate resources, time, and support to lead district transformation.
- When addressing directors' experiences of oppression don't put all the emphasis on self-help and individual self-care while ignoring organizational problems that cause harms.
- Don't pursue equity work with unexamined assumptions, lack of clarity about the change process, and actions that don't transform the district as a system.

Configure the director role with adequate power and authority that allows directors to put their equity leadership “know-how” and skills into action.

Role configurations describe directors’ organizational position and influence to carry out their leadership work. Supportive role configurations offer supervisory responsibility and authority, financial resources and budgetary discretion, influence on superintendent and board relations, and involvement with district professional development and instructional matters needed to fulfill the responsibilities of the job.

- Equity directors have more success when they have access to generous financial resources, including influence and authority over budgetary decisions and allocations.
- Equity directors who have the leeway to be innovative and creative express greater optimism, satisfaction, and describe their work as more impactful than directors whose charges are narrowly defined, rigidly bounded, or all encompassing.
- For the role to be most effective, equity directors need opportunities to reshape their roles, responsibilities and resources in ways that will maximize their impact in realizing equity in their district context.

Recognize the experiences and knowledge of Black and other women of color in the role. Amplify their power and influence in leadership for equity.

Equity directors bring crucial expertise to their work from their experiences navigating oppression in institutions, in addition to their formal preparation. Yet Black and other women of color experience constraints of racism and sexism as they work to create more equitable structures, policies, and practices in their districts. We call this “double jeopardy.” Districts should recognize this double jeopardy and take proactive steps to make their organizations affirming for women leaders of color while also providing them access to professional learning, affinity networks, and supports.

- Superintendents, school boards, and respected district leaders should publicly model learning and reflection from equity director recommendations as well as explicitly challenge racial- and gender-stereotyped assessments of their leadership.
- Equity directors who are explicitly and publicly supported by executive leadership are better able to mitigate “racial battle fatigue” that stems from inadequate resources, microaggressions, sabotage from colleagues, and attacks on their work.
- Equity directors need access and opportunities to be heard and influence work in the district. Districts can maximize equity directors’ voices and influence by providing routine access to decision-making tables, school boards, principals, and schools.
- Equity directors often have few peers in their own districts with whom to continue their professional learning and share practices. Districts can provide resources and opportunities to connect equity directors to professional networks, coaching and communities of practice beyond the district.



Ensure that equity directors have an explicit theory of change that dismantles historic and current forms of oppression and rebuilds just educational experiences.

School districts should have explicit theories of change for their equity work. Equity refers not only to parity of outcomes but also the processes and experiences that lead to outcomes. A theory of change refers to “a belief or a perspective about how a situation can be adjusted, corrected, or improved.” Theories of change outline steps to desired outcomes and help guide collaborative planning, action, analysis, and critical reflection that centers the experiences of Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian, and Pacific Islander youth, adults, families, and communities.

- Developing explicit theories of change can help clarify underlying racist assumptions about your school district's local context and help eliminate race-evasive approaches, status-quo thinking, and practices that fail to transform unequal dynamics of power in the district.
- Theories of change should confront and disrupt anti-Blackness, settler colonialism, structural racism and their intersections with sexism, classism, xenophobia, ableism, LGBTQIA+ oppression, and transphobia (and all other forms of oppression) policies, practices, and organizational norms.
- Theories of change should articulate how the district will rebuild a better education system that offers students that have been most marginalized by the district just and equitable educational experiences. A just and equitable experience will realize their full humanity, center their experiences and voices, and provide space for them to be authentic co-creators in their education.

The Leadership for Equity Research Project is a collaborative of research teams who work together to understand how leadership can make public school systems racially equitable.

The project was started in 2016 and is co-led by Drs. Decoteau Irby (University of Illinois at Chicago), Terrance Green (University of Texas at Austin), Ann Ishimaru (University of Washington), and includes graduate research assistants across the three participating universities.

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To access more evidence-based research about equity directors and district-level equity leadership, visit our Lead for Equity website. Receive updates and the latest information on our research by signing up to our newsletter or following us on social media.

References

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