Beginning to Address Equity in Tier 1 Systems

Equity work has long been associated with the notion that educational outcomes will improve if only practitioners can provide the right support to the right students. Typically these “right students” are students of color, students from marginalized groups, and students who are underserved by our societal systems in general. The idea that “these students” could succeed if only we intervened is shortsighted and ultimately harmful to all students because it implies within-student problems and ignores the role of systems, including education, in outcomes. While it may be more comfortable to point to within-student causes for disparate outcomes, the reality is that educational systems have remained largely unchanged since their establishment over 100 years ago. These systems were created and maintained by predominantly White, college-educated, middle class educators and have a far greater impact on students’ academic outcomes than most other factors. In recent years, COVID-related issues have served to magnify systemic inequities, subsequently increasing disparities in student outcomes.

Where to Start

School teams can begin to address long-standing system inequalities like disparate outcomes in attendance, participation, and achievement in a number of ways. Regardless of where a team starts, there are core components that must be addressed in order to create change that will sustain over time. The PBIS Cultural Responsiveness Field Guide: Resources for Trainers and Coaches (CR Field Guide) (Leverson, et al., 2021) coupled with the School-wide PBIS Tiered Fidelity Inventory (TFI) (Algozzine, et al., 2014) provides teams with specific directions that are directly connected to the essential features of Universal PBIS. For schools implementing PBIS, we recommend using the TFI to measure the efficacy of PBIS across tiers. The CR Field Guide provides a framework, process, and activities to determine the level of influence school staff’s personal experiences have on decisions that lead to disparate outcomes across student groups. The CR Field Guide also provides examples of actionable steps for leadership teams to incorporate student and family voice in meaningful and authentic ways.

Data

Points of Entry

One important way to begin this work is to closely examine systemic data. The Center on PBIS has published two documents entitled Using Discipline Data within SWPBIS to Identify and Address Disproportionality: A Guide for School Teams (McIntosh et al., 2014) and A 5-point Intervention Approach for Enhancing Equity in School Discipline (McIntosh et al., 2018) that give more in-depth support for addressing equity through data.
Whether using the aforementioned tools or another approach, we recommend beginning this work by gathering data to understand the overall context of the system. Data should be in both quantitative and qualitative form:

**Quantitative data:**
- Student outcomes such as academic achievement (e.g., grades, standardized test scores, graduation rates)
- Access to school-wide programming (e.g., participation in AP classes, athletic teams, clubs)
- Disciplinary patterns (e.g., ODRs, suspensions, expulsions)
- School climate survey results (e.g., School Climate Survey Suite)

**Qualitative data:**
- Student, staff, and family perceptions of school climate and culture of the building and its connections to the community
- Feedback from surveys of students, staff, and families about the school behavior support systems (e.g., Formative Input Surveys)
- Information from focus groups or community forums

Ideally, systems should have the ability to easily and efficiently disaggregate both types of data by race/ethnicity, special education status, and, if possible, socio-economic status. When examined together, these data sets can illustrate how well a system is functioning and the degree to which affected parties are connected to, supported by, and invested in the system.

**Potential Challenges to Consider**
As teams uncover disparate outcomes in their data, it can be difficult for staff to accept ownership and responsibility for those outcomes, especially when considering that most, if not all, school staff show up every day with the best intentions toward their students. This discomfort can lead to a tendency to bring up within-student or family factors that could contribute to disparate outcomes, rather than focusing on those factors over which educators have control. Leadership teams must be prepared to support staff in shifting conversations back to the factors that are under our control as educators, and to systemic inequities that lead to disparate outcomes. Shame and blame generally do not work well in guiding these conversations, so school teams should be prepared to validate the discomfort of colleagues and actively engage them in deeper, truly reflective conversations about the system as a whole.

**Identity**
**Points of Entry**
As referenced in the CR Field Guide, addressing equity in Tier 1 systems must include identity awareness work on the part of both students and practitioners, as well as ongoing investigation into the impact of
those identities on school and classroom cultures. Identity work must also include an explicit focus on learning about and affirming the cultures and experiences of families, students, and communities.

Generally schools are viewed as being devoid of identity outside of their athletic mascots, but in fact they are the culmination of a complex web of interrelated identities that must be explored and acknowledged. First, the part that individual identities play needs to be understood. The cultural identities that every single person brings to the school whether as a student, family member, or staff member, all impact how the school functions. Second, the collective identity of school staff sets the culture of the school: aspects such as the shared view on education, students, expectations, and punishment versus discipline all work to define often unspoken school norms when the majority of staff take as given. Without recognition of this shared identity, it is easy to assume that everyone operates from the same shared background and set of beliefs. The identity of the school in the community also distinctly matters. A school that is seen as an extension of the community or a valuable resource to the community operates differently than a school that is seen as an island unto itself. School personnel who view themselves as the sole experts on the students and student needs tend to have difficulty establishing trust with families and communities; whereas those who view themselves as professionals with expertise in content and instruction but actively partner with families to ensure service to the whole child are more likely to invite trust and shared ownership.

There are a number of ways to begin identity work that can be found in the CR Field Guide, along with additional resources found in the Center’s guide on discussing race, racism, and important current events with students (Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2021) including a personal/social identity wheel that was shared during the PBIS Leadership Forum 2021 Roundtable on embedding Equity in Universal Systems: https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/inclusive-teaching/social-identity-wheel/.

Potential Challenges to Consider
Identity work can be misperceived as something that is critical only for colleagues or students who are Black, Indigenous, or other People of Color (BIPOC). Again, building and district teams must be prepared to guide this work by communicating the critical nature of school staff first examining their OWN identity along with what that identity means for the spaces they set up, maintain, and oversee within school systems. Although not every team or member may have expertise in these areas, teams should expect these potential barriers and be prepared with resources, materials, professional development opportunities, and supportive connections to other colleagues or experts in the field.

Attending to Controversy and Misinformation
School staff, families, and community members, regardless of political leanings, share a common desire for all students to be successful and become productive members of society. Misinformation and “controversy” around Critical Race Theory, equity, and anti-racism is abundant and serves only to shift focus away from meeting the needs of ALL students toward a cynical, political, divisive, and ultimately
detrimental argument. Focusing on this argument serves to protect the status quo, instill fear and uncertainty in school leaders and staff, maintain inequitable outcomes, and broaden the political divide our nation is facing.

**Connect Equity Work to Shared Goals - Building Political Will**

Recognizing that current controversies are designed to instill fear and doubt in educators and leaders, there are a number of things that schools can do to plan, prepare, and continue to do the necessary work of creating equitable systems. First, schools need to identify the “why” of this work. Although moral and ethical explanations are important parts of explaining why, those tend to be easy to dismiss. The “why” needs to include concrete examples of how a system is negatively impacting students (see Data section above), how those outcomes are inconsistent with the school or district mission, and include current impact of those outcomes. Equity in schools is not a zero sum event. Schools that do this well are not taking resources from one group and providing them to another; they are simply changing how they deliver their service of education to all, which ultimately improves outcomes for marginalized AND non-marginalized groups (Gion et al., 2022; McIntosh et al., 2021).

Second, especially given the emphasis on school safety, school and district teams need to be positioned to connect the creation of an inclusive, equity-centered environment to key factors of ensuring school safety. It is well-documented that when students feel seen, valued, and connected to those around them, school environments are more safe overall. When asked if schools should operate in a way that ensures that ALL students succeed and feel supported, almost all people, regardless of political orientation or background, will agree. School community members are regularly (and rightfully) unable to answer the question of “who should be left out?” nor can they address why leaving some students out would be appropriate. Creating environments that are equity centered and inclusive ensures that all students flourish.

Lastly, much of the controversy is rooted at a national level. Concerns raised at a local level can frequently be traced back to coordinated national efforts designed to undermine educational equity, disconnected from local needs. Assuming the core of the issue is that families need more voice and ownership over how schools operate, a constructive answer is to examine and revise current policies and practices to increase ALL student, family, and community voice. When school and district teams invite affected parties into the process and demonstrate transparency in decision making, they can build trust and unity both within the school and the larger community.

**Avoid the Paralysis of Perfectionism**

In equity work, there appears to be a pattern in the responses of systems and the humans who support them. It is worth noting that, as mentioned earlier, humans who support school systems likely have the best of intentions when it comes to meeting student needs and truly want to make a positive impact. When faced with equity issues and clear evidence of inequitable outcomes, this desire to make a positive impact can manifest itself in a paralyzing form of perfectionism.
For many White practitioners, the prospect of engaging in equity work, while viewed as necessary, can feel scary or risky due to "colorblind" teachings of years ago. Colorblind teachings encouraged a view of "we are all the same" and prompted a distinct lack of conversation around race or ethnicity, connected to an erroneous belief that White practitioners should not engage in this work as it is "not their place." These teachings also resulted in a fear of offending people who identify as BIPOC or other marginalized communities by saying the wrong thing. This calls to mind the adage "when we know better, we must do better," as it has become increasingly evident that the equity issues faced by schools and districts can only be resolved if educators work together collectively and visibly to address the issues. Additionally, we cannot address what we do not speak of. Thus, there is power in White practitioners using their influence and privilege to engage in this work, have difficult conversations, run the risk of making a mistake, learn to apologize sincerely when making mistakes, and commit to changing for the better. We must collectively agree that the responsibility for creating necessary change can not be placed on the people being harmed by unjust systems, but on those who maintain those systems. Additionally, we know now that the emphasis of change efforts must stay on improving outcomes for ALL students rather than “saving” a few students. Students, especially those from marginalized communities, do not need to be “saved” or “fixed.” Rather, students need education leaders and practitioners who work to eliminate systemic barriers to high achievement for ALL.

### The Leadership We Need for Systems Change

This urgent need to change systems that are having a damaging effect on marginalized groups brings with it some difficulties that are predictable and can be planned for. First, leaders in this work must correctly assess the current state of their systems and identify areas for consideration, including navigating limited budgets, competing initiatives, staffing shortages, or anticipated community resistance to change efforts. During this process it is predictable that systems will attempt to use these need areas as reasons to delay the systems change process. Teams and leaders must continue to engage in order to initiate the change process and utilize a data driven action plan outlining necessary steps for change and measurable change outcomes. Teams should start with their inequitable outcome and system data to identify small action steps toward improvement, take action on those steps, and scale up using a continuous improvement process. This allows teams to address concerns and make gradual adjustments to overcome barriers.

Finally, we must emphasize the need for White practitioners to ensure that BIPOC colleagues, families, and experts or people from marginalized communities are valued as leaders in the work in authentic and responsive ways. White practitioners should leverage the racial privilege afforded them to challenge systemic inequities and create space within systems for people who identify as BIPOC to be seen, share stories, teach, and ultimately lead.
References


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