

Data-Driven Equity

Districts dig into the numbers to address long-standing racial disparities

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As part of its DIRE Racism in School Series, ASBJ examines how data gathering and analysis provides a system-level approach to creating more equitable learning experiences.

Like many educators of color, Peter LeBlanc has experienced firsthand the disparities found in school districts across the U.S. He saw them working as a teacher and administrator in Texas, and then again when he moved with his family to Des Moines, Iowa.

“I’ve seen how certain schools in certain area codes got responded to, or how certain schools in certain area codes got resources that others didn’t,” says LeBlanc, a 10-year elementary school principal for Des Moines Public Schools. “I’ve experienced sitting across from a parent looking in my face and telling me, ‘I’m a racist but my son isn’t, so you can’t tell me my son said X, Y, Z.’ The fact someone can feel compelled to say those things to your face and think there’s nothing wrong with it? It’s there. It’s definitely there.”

Now LeBlanc is charged with helping to alleviate “it”—systemic racism against students and educators of color—in his 32,000-student district. Armed with findings from a recent district equity audit that found issues with Des Moines’ curriculum, recruiting and hiring practices, and support for minority students and staff, LeBlanc is part of a broad districtwide initiative dedicated to eliminating racism in “all of its facets.”

Districts large and small are looking for ways to address long-standing and deeply embedded issues around race and equity. Solid data gathering and analysis, as well as ongoing feedback from staff, students, and community members, are critical in reversing practices that have been generations in the making.

“Most districts are doing now what Des Moines was doing three years ago. They’re tinkering around the edges,” says Mary Rice-Boothe, chief access and equity officer at the New York-based Leadership Academy, which conducted the district’s equity audit last summer. “They’re doing some training, some coaching, having some conversations. But it’s different to be taking in all the feedback, be willing to sit at the table with everyone who’s experiencing your school, and say, ‘We need to do better.’”

Key data points

Districts engaged in equity work generally are not surprised by three key data points, all of which impact schools to varying degrees. First, discipline referrals disproportionately affect students of color. Second, most staff in most districts are predominantly white. Finally, students of color do not feel as engaged in school as their white peers.

Jason Van Heukelum, superintendent of Virginia's Winchester Public Schools, is a self-described data advocate, even if he doesn't like what the numbers show sometimes. Winchester, which serves 4,300 students, straddles the line between rural and the fast-growing counties surrounding Washington, D.C., about 75 miles away.

"Data is only as good as your ability to collect good data," he says. "Then you've got to look at it through a critical lens and really start to dig into what it means to improve your outcomes."

Winchester's school board passed a new "data heavy" equity framework in November 2020 that focuses on six areas, including improved discipline referrals and special education placement for minority students. Other areas include the development of a culturally responsive curriculum as well as training for all staff and a focus on "inclusive engagement" with marginalized students and families.

Van Heukelum says Winchester analyzes its data in three ways, first by comparing it to other districts "like us," then to a universal standard such as proficiency. Finally, the district compares the current outcomes to how it has performed over time.

"Every time we look at data, we are using the same process," he says. "You can't be afraid of the data and you have to transparently put it forward internally and externally. We don't hide our disciplinary or achievement data. That takes a risk and a commitment by your school board, and I couldn't do that if my school board didn't have my back."

Now in his fifth year as superintendent, Van Heukelum points to advances the district has made on equity issues. These include increased achievement among Winchester's Latino population – now 40 percent of enrollment – and slow but steady gains in minority teacher recruitment, thanks to a dual-language program in the district's elementary schools. The area where no improvement has been made is on discipline referrals, which continues to disproportionately affect students of color.

Systematic approach

Three years ago, Des Moines' school board agreed to contract with the Leadership Academy to provide equity training to central office and building-level leaders on developing a common language around equity. Principals in turn worked with their leadership teams to provide professional development, and equity coaches worked with three to five staff at each school.

"In every step and iteration working with the district, we realized we were not taking a systematic approach

to the work we were doing,” Rice-Boothe says. “We needed to really go up to the balcony and see across the district the impact the work was having.”

The deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, which led to racial and social justice protests nationwide, provided the impetus for the district to take that big-picture view and conduct an updated equity audit. Superintendent Thomas Ahart—saying the district “must speak the silent part” about racism—and the school board decided to hold a series of town halls in June and July to get feedback from staff, students, parents, and community members about the district’s ongoing equity work.

The town hall conversations illustrated the expected issues around discipline, staffing, and student engagement. Not expected was the finding: “The current school system is perpetuating systemic racism.”

“On the surface, most of the issues were not surprising,” Rice-Boothe says. “What was surprising was the level of injury and trauma pulled out during those engagements, particularly among Black staff members as well as students and families who talked about how that trauma lived with them year after year after year. Those stories hit them pretty hard.”

One person affected dramatically was LeBlanc, who soon was tasked with developing deeper anti-racist training for district schools. He moved from his elementary school to the Office of Talent Support, where he now works with teams across the district to address these findings. The work of the teams will form the basis of a strategic plan the board will consider in time for the start of the 2021-22 school year.

“When you find the system you’re working in is perpetuating systemic racism, that’s not easy to hear, especially for me as a Black man working in a leadership role in this district,” LeBlanc says. “It was very eye-opening data, and the findings really told us that while we’re making some headway, we’re not nearly as far as we thought we were.”

Address it head-on

Texas’ Fort Worth Independent School District has been dealing with issues around systemic racism for the past five years. In February 2016, the district created a Division of Equity and Excellence, and the school board created a racial equity committee “for the purpose of fighting against systemic racism directly.”

But after the deaths of Floyd and Taylor last June, the board went a step further, agreeing to conduct a districtwide audit similar to the one in Des Moines and signing a “racial and ethnic equity pledge.” The audit is ongoing, with results expected by the end of the 2020-21 school year.

“To be silent is to be complicit,” Superintendent Kent Scribner said in a statement accompanying the equity pledge. “When we see racism, we must address it head-on. When we hear words of prejudice, we must speak up against them. When we learn of an act of intolerance, especially if it occurs in one of our campuses or in one of our classrooms, we must confront the situation and take action with urgency and

unity.”

Sherry Breed, chief of the Office of Equity and Excellence, is now in charge of a series of ongoing conversations with community members about race and equity issues, issues that have been exacerbated by the pandemic. Data from those conversations already has shown the district must go “deeper into the school buildings” with anti-bias and restorative practice training for staff, and points to deeper issues between Fort Worth’s affluent and low-income families.

When the pandemic started and schools closed in March 2020, Breed notes many of the district’s families did not have internet access, computers, and, in “too many cases,” food. While the community has been “for the most part” supportive of efforts to help low-income families, she says a divide along mostly racial lines has emerged over the return to in-person instruction.

System-level work

While data is critical to understand where you are and where you’ve been in terms of equity, those deeply engaged in this work say districts must continue to connect to students, staff, and families.

“Data is going to measure where we’re going, and it gives us some sort of compass on where we need to go, but at the same time you must not negate or water down the fact that data is only going to get you so far,” says Carl Rush, Winchester’s equity and community engagement coordinator. “There’s a portion of you that has to start speaking to the language of the heart. We are grappling with the balance between the two as we continue going down this road.”

Rice-Boothe says the Leadership Academy’s equity audits take hard data as well as anecdotes and perspectives into account. The goal, she says, is to avoid “random acts of equity” that “look good and look nice” but ultimately will not move your district forward.

“This work has to be at the system level,” she says. “You have to engage everyone, from the board all the way through the leadership through your staff and community, for the work to happen. You can’t stop at training or coaching. You must look deeply at the policies and practices that are pushing up against what you are trying to do. That’s the hard work and it’s slow, but it does pay off.”

Several months into his new role, LeBlanc says he’s heartened by “the small steps we’ve taken so far.”

“I’m encouraged by the momentum and the conversations we hear happening from the cabinet level to our schools to our business and finance department, to our transportation department, everything across the district,” he says. “The key for us is figuring out how to ride that momentum and continue to see this work through. You can’t say you’ve done enough and fall back into those comfort zones.”

Author

Glenn Cook

Contributing Editor

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1680 Duke St. FL2, Alexandria, VA 22314-3493. Phone: [\(703\) 838-6722](tel:(703)838-6722) Fax: [\(703\) 683-7590](tel:(703)683-7590) E-mail: info@nsba.org

Media Contact: media@nsba.org

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