



An Equity Audit: Is it in your future?

Perhaps you've just been asked to direct an equity audit for your school, and your head is bursting with questions. What is an equity audit? How do you conduct one? What is the outcome? What resources are available? You're nervous just thinking about the task. Even if you have already decided to engage in an equity audit, we offer the following information to consider prior to beginning this assessment.

The Task

Take a deep breath. The task is doable, and help is available. This article offers six suggestions on how to run a successful equity audit. You'll learn key aspects of what to pay attention to and where to go if you need help. Although there are no guarantees, if you follow these suggestions, you're more likely to obtain useful information. The six suggestions come from our knowledge of, and experience in, examining equity in a variety of systems.

What is an equity audit? An equity audit is a study of the fairness of an institution's policies, programs, and practices. Such audits represent a significant investment in resources – human and material. Thus, it is worthwhile to anticipate potential challenges and plan for addressing them. The goal is that the process will move as smoothly as possible and the results will be helpful in informing next steps. Now, a word about equity audits in educational settings. What's the difference between a regular audit and an equity audit? An equity audit specifically looks at policies, programs, and practice that directly or indirectly impact students or staff relative to their race, ethnicity, gender, national origin, color, disability, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, or other socio-culturally significant factors. A regular organizational audit may have an equity component, but that is not its specific purpose.

What is an Equity Audit? An Analogy.

Service: providing shoes.

Equality: everyone gets a pair of shoes.

Equity: everyone gets shoes that fit.

Equity Audit: determining

- (1) who "everyone" is,
- (2) what constitutes "shoes," and
- (3) creating decision-making processes for how "fit" is identified and evaluated.

An equity audit may be extensive in scope or narrow. Looking at an entire school's (or district's) policies, programs, and practices is a major undertaking. More narrowly focused examples include equity audits related to particular aspects of school functions such as transportation, graduation, or professional learning. For instance, one component of a transportation study might be to examine the length of the bus ride to and from school for students based on their race or ethnicity. Another example is a graduation requirement study that compares graduation rates of students to examine relationships among, and possible disparities correlated to, race, ethnicity, language, gender, or (dis)ability. Or a staff-focused study might examine the experience of teachers and other instructional staff in relation to the schools to which they are assigned.

Why conduct an equity audit? Numerous situations can lead to taking such action. One of the impacts of regular congressional review of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act is that it brings attention to persistent disparities in the learning experiences and opportunities offered in U.S. schools. As a result, schools across the country have incorporated various equity components into their organizational improvement plans. The need for an equity audit can originate in many ways: from local self-awareness to a mandated compliance with federal law when the U.S. Office for Civil Rights has issued a finding of discrimination and the district needs data to determine how pervasive the problem may be. Moreover, in any period of political uncertainty, a school or other organization may simply want an equity framework in place to quickly harness credible evidence in service of meeting important local needs related to educational equity

The Challenge

What makes equity audits challenging? We maintain that by their very nature – attention to societal, organizational, and personal values and how those are enacted – equity audits are fraught with great potential for conflict. School personnel may have no clear sense of the range of inequities that can exist in their schools. They may see an audit as totally unnecessary and a diversion of resources.

Depending on the history of the school's leadership, equity may never have been an acknowledged area of concern. Hence, little or no disaggregated data on students or staff may be available. Or, there may be an attitude of "it's not my problem" associated with data being gathered and supplied to an external agency, but no internal examination of the data has been common. All these reasons – and others – can interfere and generate resistance to an audit.

What follows are some suggestions to smooth the path to and through an equity audit. Each suggestion is prefaced with a question. The question is to help you assess your current understanding with answers directly following.

Question#1: The more people see the need for action the more likely they are to support it.

Answer: True. Depth of understanding of the need parallels intensity of support.

Suggestion #1: Have a broad base of participants who represent the community served.

To get useful and accurate data, it is critical to have representatives from the groups affected by the policies, programs, and practices being studied in the audit. Without such “stakeholder” involvement, the audit can be seen as the majority examining the minority and convey a message that the minority is “the problem.” A more broadly based group will both (1) provide pertinent insight and (2) more likely send a “we’re all in this together” message. A necessary condition for an authentic equity audit might be expressed as “we’re conducting this audit to provide data that will tell us the extent of our inequities and guide us in resolving them.”

Unless people can see the need for an equity audit, they are not likely to be supportive and may actively work against its data gathering activities. They need to acknowledge the importance of examining student achievement and staff performance in light of race, ethnicity, gender, language, religion, disability, and similar factors associated with social, political, economic, and educational disparities. They need to understand the language of equity -- concepts such as implicit and explicit bias and stereotyping, institutional racism and sexism, and equality and equity. Those involved need to be open to examining their own views about culture, understand the variety in perspectives that others may have, appreciate the benefits that diversity can bring, and know strategies for dealing with differences.

Resources: Leading Every Day: Actions for Effective Leadership, 3rd edition, 2013, (by Joyce Kaser, Susan Mundry, Katherine E. Stiles, & Susan Loucks-Horsley. See section on Leading Change.)

Question#2: Gathering data on performance will usually be sufficient for determining disparities.

Answer: False. Skimming off just a top layer of data can lead to inaccurate decision-making. Short cuts in equity audits can take you in the wrong direction.

Suggestion #2. Design the audit to be systemic – it should touch on all parts of the system.

Equity permeates an entire organization’s policies, programs, and practices, affecting staff as well as students. If inequities are pervasive (as they often are), then an audit needs to take

¹ Alternatively known across time under various names, such as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) or Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015).

a comprehensive view. That means examining student access to educational programs, the programs themselves, and the results of such programs – all inputs and outputs.

For example, rather than just examining the completion rates of students taking Algebra I, you look at the policy (all students take Algebra I in the 8th grade), the algebra curriculum, student assignments to classes, supports for students needing help, and qualifications and assignment of teachers teaching algebra. There are patterns of inequities that are found in schools' procedures and assumptions that a systemic audit can bring to light. The purpose of an equity audit is to highlight, discuss, and generate a pool of potential different responses to the identified systemic patterns.

One caveat here: Don't confuse being systemic with examining many aspects of your school's or district's policies, programs, and practices at the same time. As the algebra example above suggests, dive deep to get to the real issues in your high priority areas. We recommend a root cause analysis to better understand causality as well as pervasiveness. And in that process, remember to disaggregate your data. The identification of sub-groups can bring to light nuances of similarities and differences that make such broad groupings misleading.

Resources: Using Equity Audits to Create Equitable and Excellent Schools, 2009, by Linda Skrla, Kathryn Bell McKenzie, & James Joseph Scheurich (see section on the case for systemic audits).

Question#3: There is a relatively short learning curve in mastering the art of conducting an equity audit.

Answer: False. Learning to successfully conduct an equity audit requires mastering a large body of knowledge and a set of specific skills.

Suggestion #3: Have a minimum of two experienced and skilled people on your team. One person with equity audit expertise and one with expertise in organizational evaluation (sometimes a single person will have both).

Leading an equity audit is not a task for a novice. Whether your audit will be conducted by internal staff or external consultants, you need a person(s) skilled in conducting audits and especially equity audits. Certainly junior persons can be team members, but an experienced person needs to provide leadership.

In addition to being experienced, at least one of the people heading up the audit needs to demonstrate skills in evaluation. The evaluation expert needs to know how to design an equity study, how to gather and interpret data, how to present results, and how to make recommendations for change.

They also need to be culturally and interculturally competent.. This means being aware of their own cultural orientations, the perspectives of different stakeholder groups, and strategies for working within and across professional and personal cultures. They also need to be seen as trustworthy to all stakeholder groups, including those who may be in the minority.

Resources: Three publications from the American Evaluation Association are excellent resources for standards: "Guiding Principles for Evaluators" (2004), "Cultural Competence Statement" (2011), and "Draft Competencies" (2017).

Question#4: It is possible to conduct an equity audit without having a vision of equity for your school or district.

Answer: True. It is possible to get started without having a vision, but the need to make decisions will force you to develop clarity around your purpose.

Suggestion #4. Build into your audit a vision of equity for the schools and district.

Having piles of data is likely to be overwhelming without a vision of what equitable policies, programs, and practices look like. At a bird's eye view one might say that equity exists when students have "the greatest opportunity to learn enhanced by the resources and supports necessary to achieve competence, excellence, independence, responsibility, and self-sufficiency for school and for life" (Skrla, McKenzie, & Scheurich, 2009, p. 14). But what does that look like? How do we know it when we see (or do not see) it? How do we guarantee that such conditions continue to exist?

For example, what is the equity standard for your schools' mathematics program? Do all the district's schools have a set of guidelines or standards for a common desired state? Is the "standard for mathematics" that the school averages are within the margin of error for the district average? Are standards differentiated? For whom? Why? Who needs help the most? How are decisions made? Without determining what a school or district wants for its students, interpreting the data and using it for decision-making is difficult.

"Nice," you say, "to have a vision, but what if we don't have one? Are we doomed?" No, not at all. A useful "vision of equity" is dynamic. Develop one as you move along. There will be some moving forward/moving back as you review your data and examine your priorities and resources. At some point, however, you definitely need to set a vision for your high priority areas, or you will not know what actions to take.

Resource: "Setting Strategic Direction: Vision, Strategy, & Tactics by Steven Robbins, Inc., 2017. See www.stevenrobbins.com/articles/category/leadership. This article lays out a path to developing a vision.

Question#5: There are effective strategies for dealing with resistance.

Answer: True. You need not be caught defenseless in the midst of resistance. There are ways of anticipating and resolving conflicts.

Suggestion #5: Resistance is inevitable; expect it and be prepared.

If a change is to be effective, it will generate questions. Recognize that not all questioning is “resistance” (though some will be). Wanting to understand before committing to change is a good thing. This is especially true for equity changes. What is your school’s or district’s institutional culture about change? Do you have a theory of change? Perhaps change is seen as disruptive and negative, something to be avoided. Questions, reluctance, and other forms of “resistance” can be a barometer of the potential impact of the change. Remember, in most cases, the greater the change, the greater the resistance. Knowing the source and type of potential resistance can help you respond positively rather than defensively or fearfully. Let the push-back of the resistance be an indicator of what staff, students, parents, and community are thinking and feeling about social justice issues in the schools.

There are two major ways of decreasing resistance to change: increase the tension of not supporting the change (for example, document thoroughly the need for change) or decrease the tension related to trying the new way (for example, determine the concerns of the resisters and respond with appropriate actions).

Resources: Leading Every Day: Actions for Effective Leadership, 3rd edition, 2013, (by Joyce Kaser, Susan Mundry, Katherine E. Stiles, & Susan Loucks-Horsley. See section on Leading Effective Groups.)

Question #6: An equity audit is not complete until a plan for making changes has been developed and implemented.

Answer: True. Every system has room for growth and improvement.

Suggestion #6: Develop and implement a plan to make changes based on the equity study.

Is your school or district prepared to develop a plan and implement changes suggested by the data and to monitor and report progress and problems? Nothing will get you into trouble more quickly than ignoring pertinent data.

A plan is needed to discern which data are pertinent and for what. The commitment to follow through needs to be made at the beginning of the process, revisited, and confirmed along the

way. Certainly, changes to an initial plan can be made as the equity audit progresses, but you will lose your credibility and accountability by abandoning a plan before it has even had a chance to be implemented. The plan is an on-going process with feedback loops built in that will last a number of years. Certainly, revisions will be made over time, and the commitment to equity needs to continuously reaffirmed.

Resources: The federally-funded Equity Assistance Centers provide a range of services to school districts across the country. All four centers have a variety of materials on equity audits, which are available at no charge to educational institutions. To find the center serving your area, go to www2.ed.gov.

Following these guidelines should make your task a bit less anxiety-inducing and lead to a successful equity audit. Such an audit will provide solid evidence of the state of equity in your school or district, something that should serve your organization, agency, and its stakeholders well.

At MAEC, we offer the following equity audit for your consideration.

MAEC's 2021 Equity Audit. <http://www.maec.org/equity-audit>