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Community-Engaged Audit for Reform: One District’s Approach Address Equity Issues

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Abstract

The traditional equity audit itself is going through a reform process. The process began with Skrla (2004, 2009) reimagining the traditional audit with a focus on equity. However, researchers support the notion of using audits to disrupt and dismantle oppressive practices and systems (Khalifa et al., 2016) and involving the community to ultimately have power through the audit process (Green, 2017). Translating theory into practice can be more difficult when school leaders cannot rely on their personal training and experience to solve the problem. The purpose of this case study is to analyze how one urban school district implemented a community-engaged approach to address equity. The researchers used a single instrument to analyze grounded community-based participatory research (CBPR) to understand how a district can attend to equity issues in a way that includes all stakeholders. Three themes were identified from an analysis of the data during the study: 1) understanding the importance of building capacity inside and outside of the school building, 2) institutionalizing the work of equity, and 3) plan for resistance to the equity work. For those social justice leaders focused on school reform in a way that disrupts and dismantles oppressive systems, a community-engaged approach can address technical issues of the district. But, more importantly, it is a process to root out and deal with those deeper issues in a safe space so a new cultural story can be created and adapted to the current needs of the community.

KEYWORDS: leadership, equity, community-based equity audit, school reform, social justice leadership

In early spring 2020, Texas schools went virtual due to COVID 19 pandemic. During this time, the many problems and issues in education were laid bare due to this sudden shift in operation. There was a sense that operating in the “new normal” would mean addressing issues around equity to support all students with rigor and excellence. During this time, it became evident that schools should embrace a reform movement that leaned heavily on equity. While the time was ripe for addressing equity issues, to sustain any changes, reform must be met with an approach that includes a variety of stakeholders and fosters solidarity in the school and community (Green, 2017).

Equity audits are a leadership tool used to collect data that informs the process of removing programmatic barriers that impede full participation, access, and opportunity for all students to receive an equitable and excellent education (Brown & Williams, 2019). With this process, leaders can assess the extent to which equity is present in such areas as teacher quality, the overall instructional setting, and student achievement and attainment (Skrla et al., 2009).
Equity audits support proactive leaders with assessing and planning for campus improvement that addresses the specific cultural, linguistic, socioeconomic, and racial dynamics present in the school community (Skrla et al., 2009). Green (2017) introduced a community-based equity audit as an “instrument, strategy, process, and approach to guide educational leaders in supporting equitable school–community outcomes” (p. 5).

According to Skrla et al. (2009) an equity audit is “a systematic way for school leaders -- principals, superintendents, curriculum directors, teacher leaders – to assess the degree of equity or inequity present in ...their schools or districts” (p. 3). Equity audits gained their roots in civil rights enforcement, as outsiders have utilized them to determine compliance with various civil rights statutes (Skrla et al., 2004). While it is becoming more common to use them in school districts, the traditional equity audit has also been utilized in business, government, and health sectors (Skrla et al., 2004). However, equity audits have also been used by districts to analyze curriculum in various content areas and programs (English, 1988). Curriculum audits can be used to understand how a school district's curriculum and programming support constituents in the classroom and in the community. Finally, departments of education have also used audits to address school reform and accountability. Equity audits can support a district’s initiative to increase academic achievement by analyzing deficits in the system.

Skrla et al. (2004) wanted to reconceptualize the traditional audit in terms of equity. Specifically, the audit can and should be used to address school accountability, but that is just “one part of a larger system of schooling practices characterized by equity and inequity that is expressed in multiple dimensions of schooling. Thus, to close achievement gaps and to educate equitably all children, we suggest that a larger idea of equity, a systemic equity (Skrla et al., 2004, p. 137).

Community Work in Schools

A community-engaged equity audit is essentially community participatory research. By engaging the community through the equity audit process, stakeholders, and district personnel have a say on how the school community will move forward. It is important for leaders to be able to do this community work in the local area for a variety of reasons. Community-engaged work supports trust-building, respect, and understanding of differences. By working together, the school district and the greater community, leaders are able to build not only a consensus about how to address equity but also proposed solutions that will support equitable outcomes.

Localism is a term that describes community decision making as a process that allows the local community to adapt to a changing environment (Porteous, 2013). For school leaders, adapting to a fast-paced and changing environment is part of the training. However, schools are not sheltered from community influence, which often includes parents and adults who understand education from their limited lens of schooling as they experienced it. For school leaders, deliberately engaging the larger community that surrounds a school or district can reveal the culture, mindsets, and ultimately lead to adaptive change (Porteous, 2013).

Of course, any type of localized, democratic, or community work is a slower process. Therefore, educational leaders also must balance the urgency of critical issues confronting the schools with more systemic culture-based systems that need to happen to make long-term sustainable changes. This is where leadership begins to take on many forms. Leadership should also be an opportunity for leaders to, “fix themselves self-consciously as participatory
activists. Their work seeks to unearth, disrupt, and transform existing ideological and/or institutional arrangements” (Fine, 1994; Theoharis, 2007, p. 17).

Through this lens, the leader as a social justice advocate, one can see how the school cannot divorce itself from the community to achieve this goal. The principals in one case study found that they had to strengthen the school community and reach out to marginalized parents in the larger community (Theoharis, 2007). To do this, the leader has to understand the values and underlying dynamics of the community culture outside of the school building. The cultural values or “story” tells the leader “what is important, what are priorities and what are obstacles” (Porteous, 2013, p. 527). Porteous (2013) goes on to define how understanding the culture of the greater community can answer some fundamental questions, like:

1. Who we are? (our identity - often rooted in history and traditions).
2. Where we are now? (our understanding of reality - the context in which we exist).
3. Where we want to go? (our purpose, aspirations, and visions of the future).
4. How we will get there? (our problem-solving processes).
5. How we relate to authority and react to leadership? (our hierarchy dependency).
6. What is stopping us? (obstacles and resistance to achieving our aspirations).
7. What is the scope of our responsibility? (our commitment to act) (p. 527).

Another reality is knowing that even within the dynamics of the larger community and their value system, there are numerous and often competing stories (Porteous, 2013). However, this is an opportunity for the leader to problem solve and usher in a safe space for the community to grapple with some difficult conversations that will ultimately affect the schools. The combination of local community-based leadership and socially just educational leaders know that, while slow at times, working with the community will begin to adjust these cultural stories to support deep-rooted action that will benefit those families being pushed to the margins.

**School Reform**

The quick changes or “technical” changes in schools are easy to implement and can be addressed through a leader’s current expertise or experiences. This type of change is usually shallow and doesn’t require a change in the system, culture, or values of a school system (Porteous, 2013). Too often, these are the changes that leaders look for as “low-hanging fruit” to show evidence of progress. Leaders can understand these types of problems easily and even plan for possible fixes. However, in true school reform, it is more likely that those problems that will yield long-lasting results cannot simply be changed by relying on the leader’s or outside experience. Minkler (2005) agrees stating, the “complexity of urban health problems has often made them poorly suited to traditional “outside expert”-driven research and intervention approaches.” Reforming any system, including education, is to fight against a system that is so deeply rooted in the status quo one cannot rely on a predetermined past to address problems in an uncertain future.
Conceptual Framework

This qualitative case analysis was framed by the concept of social justice leadership. As various leadership theories evolve, it is fitting that they also adjust to address the gaps in current leadership theory. More recently, there is a body of work addressing social justice leadership in education (DeMatthews, 2014; Goldfarb & Grinberg, 2002; Theoharis, 2007; Wang, 2018). In its simplest form, social justice leadership speaks directly to understanding the characteristics and actions of a leader as they pursue social justice goals for their context (Wang, 2018).

Social justice leadership according to Goldfarb and Grinberg (2002) is defined “as the exercise of altering these [institutional and organizational] arrangements by actively engaging in reclaiming, appropriating, sustaining, and advancing inherent human rights of equity, equality, and fairness in social, economic, educational, and personal dimensions” (p. 163). Social justice leadership theory centers the equity in terms of deconstructing policies and procedures that create obstacles for student populations being pushed to the margins. In addition, while focusing on the ethical, moral, and humanistic values of social justice, leaders must also recognize the impact of culture and history on school systems while pursuing substantive changes (DeMatthews, 2014).

Building on the work of previous scholars, Theoharis (2007) defines social justice leadership as the leader making “issue(s) of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States central to their advocacy, leadership practice, and vision” (p. 223). This definition centers on addressing and eliminating marginalization in schools. The leaders in this school are intending on building on this tradition of social justice leadership in a coherent and participatory way. The use of CBPR as a methodology paired with social justice leadership as the guiding framework gives the case study a solid foundation to analyze the data.

Addressing the Range of Inequities

Many educational leaders are ill-equipped to effectively address the range of inequities underserved communities experience (Green, 2017). Many leaders will define and place problems in the school setting; thus, recommendations for change will focus on internal practices (Sarason, 1997). Equity audits are “a systematic way for school leaders -- principals, superintendents, curriculum directors, teacher leaders – to assess the degree of equity or inequity present in...their schools or districts” (Skrla et al., 2009, p. 3). However, other researchers have expanded on this definition to address oppressive practices (Khalifa et al., 2016) and community work (Green, 2017).

School reform has traditionally looked inside the schools themselves to address campus issues. However, this leaves out the important and necessary link of addressing the impact the community has on setting up and reinforcing a culture within the school (Price, 2011). Maier et al. (2017) released a brief about the importance and effectiveness of community schools. Two pillars of community schools are family and community engagement and collaborative leadership and practice (Maier et al., 2017). Community schools are often found in “neighborhoods where structural forces linked to racism and poverty shape the experiences of young people and erect barriers to learning and school success” (Maier et al., 2017, p. 1). While the four pillars of community schools are of benefit to all schools, layering an equity lens on the community school will also highlight the need.
for any equity audit to also be a collaborative practice that involves family and community engagement.

Sarason (1997) stated, “No complicated, traditional social institution can be changed only from within. There has to be some support for change from within, but there also has to be strong external powerful pressures for change” (p. 338). The colliding health, justice, and economic crises of the 2020-2021 school year became a powerful call for change. Analyzing the most effective changes that will usher in a new direction for education, the researchers are advocating for a greater focus on a call for equity. However, the system will not change if it is guided only by those within the system. The greater school community needs to partner with the schools in the community to support a culture of learning, collective trust, and shared responsibility (Maier et al., 2017).

The opportunity exists to understand better how a community-engaged approach can be implemented to address school change with an equity focus. An in-depth qualitative case study exploring the processes and systems put in place to create a community response towards equity can be used to gain a conceptual and pragmatic understanding of this type of participatory equity audit. The objective of this case study was to understand how a school district can implement a community-engaged equity audit to create, implement, and support their equity initiatives.

To understand this case, the researchers chose to do a single instrumental case study to analyze how this urban district can attend to equity issues in a way that includes all stakeholders. The researchers decided to ground the case study in community-based participatory research (CBPR). The equity council and the process in understanding its role and impact is, at its core, a community-based approach. The study presented in this article is a qualitative case analysis that describes and interprets this district’s plan and implementation to create a community equity council that will support the district’s initiative in identifying, analyzing, and recommending solutions for identified gaps. The researchers focused on the following exploratory question: How can district leadership institute equitable changes through a community-based equity council?

According to Balls-Berry and Acosta-Pérez (2017), “CBPR is an equal partnership that builds on the strengths of the community and the research team to ignite social change” (para. 4). Since CBPR is specifically devoted to addressing social change, it “fosters equitable partnership, capacity building, co-learning, and action toward...social justice” (DeJonckheere et al., 2019, p. 482). CBPR focuses the research on a specific geographic location (small urban school district) and uses “shared decision-making process and the development of an advisory group with community members and researchers” to achieve the social change (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011).

The researchers used six types of data collection, including documents, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observation, and physical artifacts (Yin, 2009). The researchers were invited to participate and observe in equity council meetings. In addition, the researchers collected documents such as equity council agendas, presentations, board proclamation, and district internal survey data. Archival data were used to set the stage for the council meetings. The researchers were able to see the previous years’ testing, climate surveys, programming, human resources, and financial data. The researchers were also asked to conduct interviews and focus groups of council members, students, staff leaders, and parents participating in the council. Finally, during the in-person meetings, researchers were able to observe, take notes, and access physical artifacts to aid the interpretation of the case. With the
abundance of data collected during the school year, the researchers chose to employ a holistic analysis to better understand the case.

The Case

The district studied is a small one, identified in the study as District A, in a large city in Texas. In the 2020-2021 school year, the district supported a total of 4,786 students on its five campuses. The campuses include an early childhood center, two elementary schools, one junior school, and one high school. The teachers in the district average 14.1 years of experience and 53% have at least one advanced degree. The racial/ethnic breakdown of the district is about 51% White, with the next largest demographic as Hispanic, which is about 41%. All other ethnicities are each below 3% of the total student population. The percentages of the students in various programs are in Table 1.

Table 1.
District A Programming Percentages 2020-2021 School Year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Limited English Proficient</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economically Disadvantaged</td>
<td>20.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bilingual</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gifted and Talented</td>
<td>19.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Two specific incidents spurred the need to address racial equity in the district. In the summer of 2020, three White high school students were seen on video using a racial slur and laughing. This was circulated via social media and the district promptly issued a statement denouncing the video and the actions of the students. Following the incident, students asked the school board to institute stronger policies “related to racial slurs, discriminatory language and behavior among students.” These incidents occurred during the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement during the Summer of 2020. Similar to the racial reckoning the nation was experiencing, this district was grappling with its own history as well. According to activists and historians, the history of the district is rooted in racial practices and discrimination. The foundation for the incorporation of this district is still felt and evidenced to this day.

Students who attended the district in the 2020-2021 school year are keenly aware of the community’s cultural story, stating: “So, so we grew up knowing that, and I hope this is not too crude, but we just, we grew up knowing that, you know, the White folks had the power;” and “I think it's a very like tight knit. It's a tight knit community. It's a very closed off community. It can be isolating at times.”

During the 2020-2021 school year, the district decided to create an equity council of community members, including students, school leaders, parents, business owners, teachers, and other staff members to participate in an open and honest dialogue about the data. The goal of the council was also to collaboratively (school and community) leverage each other’s strengths to problem solve ways to address practices and policies that support inequitable practices.
The process happened in three phases, although not consecutively. Phase one was exploratory, in which council and leadership would look at numerical data and equity survey results and look for gaps, misalignments, and patterns. This process included a deep dive into 61 data sources. The second phase was explanatory, in which the council would look at the qualitative research to understand possible explanations. This included thirteen different focus groups with student and staff as well as sixteen interviews with students, staff, administration, and alumni. Finally, the third phase was the synthesis phase. Council members would meet face to face and virtually to discuss the data between teams and ask additional questions of district leaders. The following analysis addresses the major themes that came up during this process.

**Results of the Process**

The researchers studied a school district for approximately 10 months to support the development of their equity initiative through an audit process. The district chose to do a community-engaged equity audit to ensure stability and support from all stakeholders in the community. Instead of seeking “quick fix” solutions, they sought out “an approach to address adaptive and systemic problems that require time, trust, experimentation, iteration, and commitment to shift from deficit to asset-based perspectives about students, families, and communities” (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002; Henderson et al., 2007; Green, 2017, p. 5; Mapp & Hong, 2010). The researchers identified three themes from an analysis of the data in this case study:

1. Build capacity inside and outside of the school building.
2. Institutionalize the work.

**Build Capacity Inside and Outside of the School Building**

Members of the school and greater community need to understand the significance of how equity work will substantively improve the district and impact everyone. Skrla et al. (2004) suggested the first step will be to create a committee of influential stakeholders. In order to build capacity, leaders have to work on the mindsets of the community and the district personnel. The staff may be tentative or opposed to substantive changes because they are comfortable with the status quo (Theoharis, 2007).

However, District A decided to build the capacity beginning with the school board. The district leadership presented the framework to the board of trustees on two separate occasions. Ultimately, the board agreed to the formation of an equity council in support of the audit. During the summer of the 2020-2021 school year, the Board issued a resolution in support of the audit stating, in part:

WHEREAS, recent events have increased the need for our community and leaders to stand in solidarity around our students and staff members of color to ensure a culture that embraces racial equity practices and an environment free from discrimination and prejudice in our classrooms and on our campuses.

WHEREAS on July 20, the Superintendent recommended the development of a district equity council for the purpose of: establishing a framework to identify, measure and
eliminate any bias, prejudice, or unlawful discrimination in our school system that may affect student achievement and learning experiences and to promote learning and working environments that welcome, respect, and value racial equity, diversity, and inclusion.

Once the Board of Trustees showed they were in full support of the process, this piqued the interest of the rest of the community. So, they were able to reach out and secure a council with parties interested in learning more about the process. Creating a council was not only the first step but also one of the most important steps. The initial plan was to have a council of 25 members. The breakdown would be as follow: five parents, five teachers, five students, five administrators, and five at-large members. The at-large members could include business leaders, counselors, professors, etc.

Once interest was there for the council, leadership used a two-pronged approach to build capacity. The goal was to help the council build in experiences supporting an equity mindset and practice skills to view data from an equity lens. To do this, agendas show that in each council meeting, time was dedicated to discussions about bias, racism, sexism, homophobia, and identity. These discussions overlapped with the data analysis. When data was presented and questions were raised, facilitators would remind them to think about the identity of students affected. These moments of critical reflection allowed for better questions to be raised about the data.

In addition, the leadership planned to also address the equity mindset of the faculty. In interviews, the faculty and staff employed by the district shared the need for additional training and resources about equity, inclusion, and diversity. The need to build capacity and have those difficult conversations was also addressed by district faculty and students.

**Quotes from District Faculty**

The heart is here. We all have the heart to do it. We just need, kind of a guidance and those tough conversations. We are not afraid to have conversations about things that make us feel a little uncomfortable here and there. And, but we build resources. We try to tackle problems and address them. But for this particular area that you're mentioning we're not there yet.

I think there's room for growth in our culturally responsive strategies and, and just methods. Because I just, from what I can see and gather so far, and also just in conversations with various teachers, I think that's an area that we could use some guidance, you know, I think our teachers just, I, it's not that they don't want to do it. I just don't know that they know how.

**Quotes from District Students**

I don't really know if this, this is more of like a personal thing of mine, but a lot of the majority of teachers at our school are White and I'm Mexican. And I just feel like my whole life, like, I've always just, I've never felt like accepted completely by them. And I just feel like I have to, like, if I want to build any type of relationship with them, they either have to be a person of color or I have to like show them like, hey, I am a person.
I had a teacher that felt like she was a little bit racist. He can just like, I feel like when you're a person of color, you can just feel it. It's no way of explaining it. But I always took that extra push. Like I had to try harder for the recognize that not only was, I like equal to, but I was willing to put in more work.

The district devoted an entire training day for all faculty focused on equity to begin the process. Every teacher was included in the training to build a common language and understanding for the staff. The ability for teachers to critically reflect on their worldview and understand that it may be different from others begins to build that equity consciousness (Williams & Brown, 2019). Increasing staff capacity by addressing issues of diversity, inclusion, and cultural awareness is the beginning of the change process. While there are not easy solutions, addressing the deeper cultural and systemic issues begins with how individuals interact and react to the students they serve. By providing ongoing staff development focused on building equity and developing staff investment in social justice, the faculty will be better able to analyze and adapt to practices that will support student achievement.

**Plan for Resistance**

Inevitable with change comes resistance from those who are more comfortable with the status quo. There will be obstacles and resistance to change through the process. Social justice leaders in schools seek to revolutionize the practices, systems, policies, and cultures that perpetuate inequality (DeMatthews, 2014). But tackling a system that is built to sustain itself can be described as the road less traveled. Freire’s (1970) pedagogy can help these leaders understand the journey in terms of the critical analysis and sense of agency needed to dismantle oppressive systems in schools. The school leaders realized they would have to plan for resistance from inside and outside the school building. This district used a few different strategies to plan for and reduce any resistance to change.

During the first council meeting, the requirements for dialogue were shared: faith, love, humility, critical thinking, and hope (Freire, 1970). Each meeting began with a reminder of the requirements for dialogue and encouraged participants to “lean into” one of the requirements and share how it impacted their discussions on that day. The introduction and analysis of these requirements set the tone for the subsequent conversations and gave participants a common language to analyze dialogue.

These leaders were intentional in their planning to reduce any resistance to change that may come from the school community. It is important to note that since this is a small district, many of the faculty play a dual role as educators and community members. Therefore, building the capacity of the faculty and staff to understand and embrace equity as a lens for school improvement will also impact the greater community. Theoharis (2007) recognized that his participants tried to counter resistance through: “raising student achievement, improving school structures, recentering and enhancing staff capacity, and strengthening school culture and community” (p. 233). In our current case study, the last two (staff capacity and school culture) can be found, while the others (achievement and school structures) were too early to identify in this case.

During each of the meetings with the council and professional development for the faculty and staff, the leaders planned specific experiences with the intent to surface, challenge and change beliefs as a way to build new practices. This process done in a safe environment framed by the requirements for dialogue was a catalyst to having deeper
conversations about personal and cultural stories. However, the leaders were also realistic that the process of confronting belief systems needs to be a continual process supported by the district. The individual needs to understand that their cultural identity has been influenced by various aspects of their past environment and experiences and this influences their current practices (Khalifa et al., 2016).

The gains made during the course of the study can also be easily lost without taking the time to support a mindset shift with new pedagogies and practices. Therefore, the sustainability of staff, commitment, and critical reflective practices must be maintained after year one.

The team also looked to intentionally build a school culture that is focused on equity. While balancing the long-term deep system work, they also thought about quick wins that foster acceptance and inclusion on all campuses. According to interviews from staff, this included looking at celebrations that highlight and value diversity. One staff member interviewed stated:

But I think one of the things that hinder the inclusivity is not celebrating, not celebrating differences. So, students feel invisible students that are not White feel invisible. And just from talking to some people who've been in the community at the school for a while. It sounds like there have been people in the past, who've tried to do some celebrations who tried to do some things and kind of got squashed away from that and kind of got squashed. So, they all, you know, they kinda got pushed to the side and they were like, okay, well, you know, I tried. But I think for me that, you know, the biggest thing is that there's no recognition or no. You know, of these, of the students who are not White.

This staff member acknowledges there have been some movement in this direction for the school community to offer celebrations. The researchers identified through interviews and focus groups evidence of the contributions approach and ethnic additive approach to curriculum reform (Banks, 1989). While still early in their journey, this highlights a strategy of the leadership to show progress with “technical” wins, while planning for more radical changes. The leadership understands that resisting the status quo includes the process of helping “educators and educational contexts to understand, respond, incorporate, accommodate, and ultimately celebrate the entirety of the children they serve…” (Khalifa et al., 2016, p. 1277).

The resistance to change came in many forms. The researchers witnessed the personal toll the fight against resistance had on the team. There was always the measure of hope and confidence in the process, but it was important they also tapped into their inner resilience and radical thinking. Theoharis (2007) also addressed the toll it took on the leaders and the sense of discouragement that was present in the midst of the work. His framework addressed the resistance in three parts:

1. the resistance principals enact against historic marginalization of particular students,
2. the resistance principals face as a result of their social justice agenda, and
3. the resistance principals develop to sustain their social justice agenda in the face of resistance (Theoharis, 2007, p. 248).

The demands of each of their current roles were still expected while adding the additional pressure of addressing community needs and expectations of equity work. Leaders
focused on creating truly equitable systems must realize that the pressure to conform to the status quo will be immense. But for social justice leaders, the work must be a part of who they are, what they value, and the compass to guide the work. Programs training leaders to work for social justice must also prepare leaders with tools to confront resistance and protect the spirit of the work.

**Institutionalize the Work**

When district personnel began the discussions of hosting an equity audit, the intent was to build this into the culture. As stated earlier, local, and national concerns over race impacted this community. The need to “fix” the problem, was to balance the quick wins with substantive changes that will affect the culture. The district was focused on equity in three specific contexts: equitable academic outcomes, equitable access and inclusion, and equitable treatment of people.

To plan for sustainability, the district would have to institutionalize the process and the products of the council. Interviews from council members and students all shared the fear that the process will not stick. There were mixed reactions to the idea of an equity council.

**Quote from a Council Member**

For me, this is a point of pride that we’re having this equity committee. It doesn't sound like this is something that's been done. The fact that the district recognizes that there's a problem that needs to be addressed. Just the fact that we are making some strides.

**Quote from a Student**

I think that they have a good start that they're starting from the right place and their intentions are well. But sometimes it can seem like there's favoring happening or, you know, there's, or it's like, are you sincere about this? Are you genuine?

Various reasons were given such as the history of the community, the will of the leadership, and the magnitude of the effort. However, students shared that they were encouraged, but not sure about the “genuineness” of the effort. For schools looking to create a participatory equity audit, it is important to think about how to institutionalize the work. Trust is not a yes or no proposition. While many of the interviewed trust the district to do what is right for students, there is still an underlying fear that they cannot trust the notion of true and sustainable change.

**Written Comments from a Council Meeting**

- That this will become a checklist and the only thing accomplished is that we checked all the boxes, but no change has come.
- My fear is that people will divide instead of coming together.
- Fear that we will do all this hard work and then it does not come to fruition or make any meaningful changes for students
- Hope to develop an effective ACTION PLAN
- Hope for the learning that is possible, among students and the community, when all voices are heard.
- Students notice and feel positive change. This makes a difference.
In order to combat this fear from the school and greater community, the agendas and planning reiterated the systemic nature of the problem. The first indication that this process was different from previous attempts was the leadership guiding a deep understanding of the data from an equity lens. The virtual and in-person meetings also addressed the why behind the data and what questions they raise for council members, guiding a dialogue that was directed toward inclusion, access, equity, and results.

However, this belief in the process and the ability to outlast resistance to change are necessary to build support for the future initiatives the council will implement and test. At the final meeting of the year, the council was tasked with addressing root causes and proposing solutions to address the identified needs. The stated parameters shared with council members were:

- It describes an achievement that is measurable, observable, or demonstrable.
- It is accomplishable in a year or less. (Recommendations beyond that were noted and would be revisited during strategic planning.)
- It is assignable to one person for implementation, provided that person has the resources (human, financial) to accomplish the result.
- It makes a significant contribution to the strategy (and, therefore, the mission and objectives).
- It is NOT a “plan to plan”
- The statement should “stand by itself” to an ordinary person and not be dependent on the action steps to be understood.
- The contribution to the task is worth the time, effort, and resources necessary to implement the result (that is, the benefits outweigh the costs).
- The statement begins with an action verb (no double verbs)

Based on these recommendations the members of the council had to agree. If there was not agreement, then the council would resume discussions. This was put into place to ensure buy-in from every member, as the recommendations would go to the board and district leadership to be acted upon. They also stated that the council would resume in the school year. During the course of the 10 months, additional interest was shown in being a part of the process.

Conclusions

The process is closely aligned to the research that addresses the development of an audit designed to address oppressive systems (Khalifa et al., 2016) and leverage the community as an asset (Green, 2017). By engaging in this process, the district team realized the importance of valuing the community and staff at their readiness level. The council and the team were willing to lead critical and uncomfortable discussions about race, bias, identity, and how it manifests in the classroom. But they spent time creating an environment and using structured protocols where these conversations could happen in a safe and supportive environment. Leaning into trust and relationships while guiding discussions on students supported the process.

Opportunities for future research would include follow-up studies to see if the process can realize actions that impact the data. This must be a long-term process, as the initial steps outlined in this article were the development of the process. During the following year, the
practices need to follow the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycle for improvement. In addition, since this case was a smaller district, researchers can also follow the process with larger districts to see how the process will work in those contexts.

The traditional equity audit itself is going through a reform process. The process began with Skrla et al. (2004, 2009) reimagining the traditional audit with a focus on equity. However, researchers also supported the notion of using audits to disrupt and dismantle oppressive practices and systems (Khalifa et al., 2016) and involve the community to ultimately have power through the audit process (Green, 2017). Translating theory to practice can be more difficult when school leaders cannot rely on their personal training and experience to solve the problem. The process, successes, and pitfalls outlined in this article can be used for other districts looking to make sustainable and socially just changes for families and the community. This particular case is ongoing, which is by design, knowing that disrupting systems and adapting cultural stories to the current narrative is a continuous process. Sustainable change has to be a bottom-out process that values and incorporates the needs of the community. As Fullan (2002) states, “The goal is not to innovate the most. Innovating selectively with coherence is better. Having the best ideas is not enough. Leaders help others assess and find collective meaning and commitment to new ways” (p. 17).

Sarason (1997) states, “No complicated social institution can be changed only from within” (p. 338). Therefore, it is vital that preparation programs begin to prepare future school leaders how to navigate the systems in schools and in the community. This will require learning tools for critical reflection and radical thinking to address issues not even imagined yet. More specifically, Theoharis (2007) proposed that leaders should be:

1. “learning to believe the dream is possible” (Scheurich & Skrla, 2003, p. 9),
2. model[ing] equity and justice in practice,
3. deepening…knowledge of self, and

For those leaders focused on school reform in a way the disrupts and dismantles oppressive systems, a community-engaged approach can address technical issues of the district. But more importantly, it is a process to root out and deal with those deeper issues in a safe space so a new cultural story can be created and adapted to the current needs of the community.
References


