Leading for Equity

A Practical Framework for Board Discussion and Action
Cultivating excellence in locally-governed school districts
“Leading for Equity:
A Practical Framework for Board Discussion and Action”
was developed by the Arizona School Boards Association to assist school district governing boards in their work to achieve greater equity within their school systems and, in doing so, ensure personal or social circumstances such as gender, ability, ethnic origin, economic circumstances or family background of students are not obstacles to achieving their educational potential.

Before we proceed with outlining the Leading for Equity Framework, let us first introduce you to what we call the “Essential Components of Equity” which include vision, understanding, engagement, action and accountability. These components (outlined below) are critical to embedding equity throughout your school system and sustaining your equity efforts over time. As districts utilize the Leading for Equity Framework to begin or deepen their equity work, they will also be moving towards the establishment of these components.

The Essential Components of Equity
• **Vision:** A shared and clearly articulated belief of what an equitable system looks or feels like.
• **Understanding:** Purposeful and ongoing opportunities to gain insights and develop awareness and knowledge about the experiences of those impacted by the system.
• **Engagement:** Removing barriers and actively and routinely seeking out representative voices to share in the decision-making process.
• **Action:** Intentional and measurable efforts made to move the system towards the vision.
• **Accountability:** Ongoing, honest and transparent review of progress with feedback from those impacted by the system.

Leading for equity starts with a first step and continues forward, one step after another. The Leading for Equity Framework provides districts multiple pathways on their equity journey. The pathways within the framework can be approached non-sequentially and are intended to provide opportunities that enable boards to enter and engage in leadership for equity based on local needs and readiness. Once visited, these pathways can be revisited again and again to assess for “backslide”, bring new people up to speed or “press restart” if needed should internal or external factors require a system reboot.

Each element in the framework includes a “Getting Started” and “Digging Deeper” section that allows for districts to begin or deepen their equity work. These sections include key questions to consider and guided discussion topics (“Think About”), as well as a call to consider the role of individual board members and the full board in ensuring that greater equity is achieved.

The Leading for Equity Framework is best used in a study or work session, digging into one element at a time, or a facilitated board retreat, during which the district leadership team can work through the full framework or several selected areas.

**Leading for Equity Framework**
• Define Equity within Your Community
• Use Data as a Flashlight
• Practice Cultural Awareness, Humility and Agility
• Embed Equity System-wide
• Demonstrate Your Commitment
Define Equity Within Your Community

Getting Started: What is Equity vs. Equality?

Equity and equality are often used interchangeably, but they’re actually distinct ideas. Equality means every student and school gets the same access and opportunity to reach set goals. Equity recognizes that some students and schools need additional or different supports to help them reach the same benchmarks of success.

Essential Component of Equity: Vision

Think About

• Does our district leadership team (board and superintendent) understand the difference between equity and equality?

• Do teachers and other district staff? Does the community?

• Is there understanding that equity goes beyond race/ethnicity to include poverty, physical/mental health, proximity to resources, gender identity, special education and many other factors?

• Does the district currently practice equality (give every student, every school the same thing) or equity (providing resources based on need)? What are some examples?

• Is there agreement that equity, not equality, is needed to support all students? If not, who needs to come to this agreement?

• Do you have a shared, clearly articulated definition of equity in your district?

I Can... The Board Can...

Example: Suggest a study session to discuss equity versus equality and how it relates to our vision and mission.

Example: Request a survey of staff to determine the level of understanding of equity in education.
Define Equity Within Your Community

Digging Deeper: Envisioning a More Equitable Future

What would equity look and feel like in your community? Once you have established what equity means, you can go deeper by reflecting on what that definition would look like in practice.

Essential Component of Equity: Vision

Think About

- Were equitable practices used in the process of defining equity for your district? Has your district’s definition been effectively communicated throughout all levels of the district?

- What are the fears or concerns around addressing equity? How will you address those?

- What is your reason for pursuing equity?

- How would an equity practice impact students? Teachers and other staff?

- How might families/communities respond if equity was an embedded practice in your district? How might you address push back should it arise?

- What are the ways in which your district currently addresses student needs related to equity?

- What would learning environments look and feel like if equity was embedded?

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Example: Ask for a review of current efforts to define equity and how equity is discussed in terms of the district’s missions/vision/values.

Example: Request administration create a committee or task force to define equity and set an equity-related vision for the district.
Use Data as a Flashlight

Getting Started: Dig into Data

Being aware of the different groups your district serves and in what proportions is foundational knowledge for equity-focused discussion and decision-making. Also important is data around outcome and access measures for these groups. This is quantitative data that districts often track. However, how the data is presented varies, but is crucial when it comes to equity. While averages may be helpful in some situations, they can hide disparities which, in turn, can impact the district’s ability to meet the needs of some students. Looking at data that has been broken down proportionally by student groups can help you drill down and identify opportunities to improve. Publicly examining data can be scary because there is fear that it will be used to shame and blame. However, data is important for making informed decisions and tracking progress. If school district leaders can model using data as a flashlight to illuminate opportunities and not as a hammer to beat people over the head with, they are more likely to “move the needle” for all students.

Essential Component of Equity: Understanding

Think About

Demographics
• How many students live in poverty? How many qualify for free or reduced-price lunch?
• What is the breakdown of racial and ethnic backgrounds of our students? Our staff? Our community?
• How many are in special education programs? Classified as English Language Learners? Experiencing homelessness?
• How many inexperienced or alternatively certified teachers do you have?
• How many of your teachers/staff live outside the district?
• What are the differences in demographics by school?
• Is there a difference between the demographics of the adult population of our community and the under-18 population?
• How many households in the district have no children in your schools?

Outcomes and Access
• How are students within various groups doing when it comes to proficiency in reading and math? G.P.A.?
• What students are taking ACT/SAT? How are various student groups doing?
• What are the graduation rates for various groups in the district?
• Are certain groups of students frequently tardy or absent?
• What are the discipline patterns by group? Is there a group disproportionately disciplined?
• What students are participating in extracurricular activities?
• What student are taking advanced courses? Dual enrollment? Are participation percentages representative of the student body?

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Example: Request data on the demographics of the community you serve and disaggregated data (data broken up by student groups) on outcome and opportunity measures.

Example: Request an annual overview about student groups district-wide and by school or a study session to review trends.
Use Data as a Flashlight

Digging Deeper: Adding Context to Data

While a review and discussion around quantitative data (counts and percentages) is valuable information, it is only the first step towards understanding, because truly understanding the students, families and community we serve requires context. We must go beyond the numbers and get to the human experience. What is it like to experience poverty? What impact does trauma have? What are the potential challenges posed by living in a remote location or in foster care? This is qualitative data and it is equally as important to equity work because it will better equip us to meet the needs of students.

Essential Component of Equity: Understanding

Think About

• Where do you get information about the communities/student groups you serve?

• What conclusions are drawn based upon the data presented?

• Is the information you receive from the district in line with your experience or observations?

• How are those conclusions verified against the experience of students/families/teachers?

• Are there groups outside the district that could help increase your understanding of underrepresented or marginalized groups?

• What research or resources could help provide insights into the lived experiences of students, families, communities?

I Can...       The Board Can...

Example: Research and read materials that might help me better understand the experience of groups within my district.

Example: Request administration provide training on or solicit representative feedback from various populations served by the district.
Practice Cultural Awareness, Humility and Agility

Getting Started: Assessing Your Current State

Systems are most effective when they respond respectfully and effectively to people of all cultures, languages, classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, gender identities, religions and other diversity factors in a manner that recognizes, affirms and values the worth of individuals, families and communities, and protects and preserves the dignity of each. Public schools and districts are no exception.

Essential Component of Equity: Engagement

Think About

- Are our school environments welcoming to and respectful of all students and families populations we serve? How is this demonstrated?

- Are our curriculum materials culturally relevant to our students?

- Does our teaching staff reflect the cultures and backgrounds of the students and families we serve?

- If not, is professional development about the cultures and backgrounds of students we serve a priority for teaching and non-teaching staff?

- Is our school board reflective of the diversity of our community?

- Do our students report feeling seen and heard by school staff? Are they comfortable with sharing their concerns? Are they confident concerns will be addressed? How is this measured?

- Do we consistently ask our students, families, communities how we can serve them better?

- How does the district/school respond and act on the feedback it receives?

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Example: Encourage and invite diverse members of the community to participate in district-level committees and attend board meetings.

Example: Ask that various cultural be positively represented in curriculum and that training is offered to staff on diversity and inclusion.
Once you have assessed the extent to which your district/school structures and staff are reflective of and responsive to the community you serve, it is time to build capacity and create space for inclusion. How does your district provide guidance and support to administrators, teachers and staff on culturally responsive practices? Where have you intentionally created space to include diverse perspectives? How have you worked to create environments, at the district and school level, that are more reflective of the community you serve?

Essential Component of Equity: Engagement

Think About

- Does the district provide guidance and/or resources for schools on how to identify and embed diverse perspectives into curriculum and learning environments?
- Are district-level committees reflective of the diversity of our community?
- Does the district have a system in place to actively recruit underrepresented or marginalized voices? How are barriers examined and removed to increase participation?
- Does the district have relationships with community partners or organization that could help provide insight and/or resources to better serve underrepresented groups?
- Do students have opportunities for their differences in culture and viewpoint to be cherished and appreciated, rather judged and feared?
- Are policies, budget, communications, curriculum and other key functions of the district intentionally analyzed through an equity lens to identify potential disparities?

I Can... The Board Can...

Example: Research community organizations or groups who might be able to provide cultural context and insights for the district.

Example: Set an expectation that cultural relevancy and representative stakeholder feedback be included in district decision-making practices.
Embedding Equity System-Wide

Getting Started: Identify Priorities and Resources

It has been said, a dream without a plan is just a wish. If you dream of a more equitable educational system for your students, a plan must be created. Words and good intentions will not create the changes needed to correct inequities. In the beginning, the plan may be simply to take inventory of what it is you want to change and what resources you have or need to do so.

Essential Component of Equity: Action

Think About

• Based on data, where are the biggest gaps in positive outcomes?

• Based on data, which groups appear to be struggling most academically? Behaviorally?

• Who is missing from the table when it comes to making decisions that impact students?

• Does our use of resources (people, time, dollars) align with what we see as our needs?

• What community partners do we have that can help us?

• Who are internal champions (administrators, teachers, staff) that could help lead or facilitate change?

I Can...       The Board Can...

Example: Suggest a study session to discuss, assess and prioritize issues facing the district through an equity lens.

Example: Establish a committee or task force to assess challenges, identify discrepancies and recommend priorities.
Once you have determined what issues you want to address, the next step is to create a detailed plan of action and implement it. This requires specific, measurable goals that include benchmarks of success to track your progress. Your plan should also outline who is responsible for various actions, what resources are needed and time frames for completion.

**Essential Component of Equity: Action**

**Think About**

- What is it that you want to achieve? What would be an indicator of success?

- How will success be measured? Is there a tool that already exists that can provide this information? Could one be created?

- If the district falls short of stated goals, is there a feeling of persistence or a desire to quit?

- Who will be responsible for implementing the action steps listed in your plan? Did they participate in the development of goals and measures? If not, how do you create a shared purpose around the plan?

- What is attainable in the time-frame outlined? Is it possible to achieve the goal in the time allotted or should a shorter-term goal be set first?

- Have we allocated the resources (people, time, funds) necessary to address the goals?

- Will the plan be implemented district-wide or will it be rolled out school by school?

**I Can...**

*Example: Request a review of the district’s strategic plan and the process for creating and addressing goals.*

**The Board Can...**

*Example: Provide input and direction to the superintendent regarding the development of equity goals or equity measures within current goals.*
Demonstrating Your Commitment

Getting Started: Track and Report Progress

Accountability is about doing what you say you will do. It requires an honest look at your progress. To do this, districts must track their efforts and report on outcomes. This process of review, along with the ability to acknowledge where things are working and where they are not, is how districts demonstrate their commitment to continuous improvement at all levels.

Essential Component of Equity: Accountability

Think About

- Are your equity goals clearly stated and documented in ways that are accessible to all?
- Is there a system in place to collect and track data on goal progress?
- How often does the board review progress on stated goals or priorities?
- Are equity goals/priorities embedded throughout the district (district office to campus and everywhere in between)?
- Are your board reports consistent across departments and clearly tied to providing updates on goals?
- Do board agendas reflect the goals/priorities of the board?
- Does the board focus on progress towards goals or do non-priorities, personal agendas or squeaky wheels draw the board’s focus away?

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<td>Example: Request reports and study sessions that outline progress on goals.</td>
<td>Example: Review the budget to assess how it aligns with goals and discussed priorities.</td>
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Demonstrating Your Commitment

Digging Deeper: Transparency, Communication and Feedback

Remembering that equity work is work we do with our community, not “to” or “for” our community, it is important that we demonstrate openness and ongoing commitment to two-way communication. Establishing protocols for how your equity plan will be communicated to internal and external stakeholders and creating intentional space to receive feedback helps the district bring people along with them on the path towards equity.

Essential Component of Equity: Accountability

Think About
- How is your commitment to equity shared throughout your community (staff, students, parents, neighborhood)?
- Where can people access school and district equity action plans or initiatives?
- How is progress and the impact of equity work shared with internal and external stakeholders?
- What established practices exist to gather representative feedback from stakeholders?
- Is it easy for all stakeholders to access information and provide feedback on the district’s equity work?
- Does the superintendent’s evaluation tool reflect the importance of this work?

I Can...       The Board Can...

Example: Request a review of the district’s process for communicating information internally and externally to various stakeholders.

Example: Establish communication protocols for its interactions with the superintendent and community and provide guidance and expectations around district communication protocols.
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