Equity Audits: A Practical Leadership Tool for Developing Equitable and Excellent Schools

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Persistent achievement gaps by race and class in U.S. public schools are educationally and ethically deplorable and, thus, need to be eliminated. Based on their research in schools and districts that have narrowed these gaps, the authors have developed a simplified recontextualization of equity auditing, a concept with a respected history in civil rights, in curriculum auditing, and in some state accountability systems. This recontextualized equity auditing is a leadership tool that can be used to uncover, understand, and change inequities that are internal to schools and districts in three areas—teacher quality, educational programs, and student achievement.

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The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) (U.S. Department of Education, 2003) was signed into law on January 8, 2002, putting into motion what could be described as the most sweeping reform of U.S. federal education policy since the 1960s. At the center of this legislation is a potentially revolutionary premise—the explicit, direct commitment of the federal government that the achievement gaps that have long existed between the academic success of White and middle- and upper-income children and that of children of color and children from low-income homes are unacceptable and must be eliminated. However, given the terrible racial and class histories of this country and the deeply rooted inequality and injustice that continues to exist in the public educational system (see, for example, Ladson-Billings, ...
1997; Valenzuela, 1999), it is not surprising that there is strong suspicion among many—scholars, policy makers, community activists, and practitioners alike—that this potential may be rhetorical at best or a sham at worst (Elmore, 2002; Wilson & Segall, 2003). Nonetheless, this legislation has become law, and its implementation provisions will hold schools, districts, and states accountable for reducing the race and class differences in the academic success of their students.

Despite these numerous critiques of this federal legislation, thousands of schools and districts are already involved in struggling, in many, many different ways, to implement its provisions and to reduce achievement gaps, as is evident from the content of the articles in each new issue of *Education Week*. Accordingly, as we have learned from studies of the implementation of earlier generations of accountability policy and from states, like Texas, that have accountability systems similar to that required by NCLB, equally strong potential exists for both positive and negative effects of such policy on educational equity (Cohen & Hill, 2001; Keating, 2000). In fact, it would not be very speculative, given the complexity of the system and the number of individual sites, to predict that in virtually every state, district, and school, there will be both positive and negative equity effects associated with the implementation of NCLB.

Furthermore, we also know well that the key to positively appropriating the equity potential of such policy mandates often lies in the specific contextual responses of school leaders and the particular uses to which they put the achievement data derived from accountability systems (Donmoyer & Garcia Wagstaff, 1996; Hall, 2002; Nolly, 1997; Skrla & Scheurich, 2001). As Rorrer (2003) explained about the importance of leadership in shaping accountability implementation to facilitate improved equity,

> District leaders ... can be characterized as “street-level bureaucrats” (Cohen & Hill, 2000; Lipsky, 1980) because of their significant role in filtering and implementing accountability policies. These local actors serve as a crucial link between policy intent and policy outcomes. (p. 256)

The work of school leaders, then, is vital in linking accountability policy intent to equity outcomes in local contexts, and these leaders need avenues of influence (Hallinger & Heck, 1998), strategies, and tools with which to successfully accomplish such work (see also Skrla, 2003). The purpose of this article, therefore, is to increase the likelihood of equity-positive leadership responses within the context of increasingly high-stakes accountability policy systems by proposing a new tool, a reconceptualized form of *equity audits,* for school leaders to use in their equity-focused work. Thus, we begin...
with a brief discussion of the current accountability context in which this equity tool has been designed to operate. This is followed by a history of the broader concept of equity auditing from which our specific conception of equity audits is derived. We then outline the components of equity audits, discuss use possibilities, including some we have done, and make some concluding comments.

EQUITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The mechanisms by which the framers of NCLB propose to accomplish the closing of historic achievement gaps rely heavily on increased accountability (U.S. Department of Education, 2002):

The NCLB Act will strengthen Title I accountability by requiring States to implement statewide accountability systems covering all public schools and students. These systems must be based on challenging State standards in reading and mathematics, annual testing for all students in grades 3-8, and annual statewide progress objectives ensuring that all groups of students reach proficiency within 12 years. Assessment results and State progress objectives must be broken out by poverty, race, ethnicity, disability, and limited English proficiency to ensure that no group is left behind. School districts and schools that fail to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) toward statewide proficiency goals will, over time, be subject to improvement, corrective action, and restructuring measures aimed at getting them back on course to meet State standards. (p. 4)

As described in the NCLB executive summary quoted above, required development of state standards, annual testing, disaggregation of data, and adequate yearly progress (AYP in the new NCLB lingo) will force all states to follow the same path that states such as Texas, North Carolina, Virginia, and others have been following for the past 10 years. These are among the states most often cited as exemplars of progress in closing historic achievement gaps, although the very nature of this progress has been strongly contested by many respected scholars and educators (e.g., Anderson, 2001; Haney, 2001; Klein, 2001; Trueba, 2001; Valencia, Valenzuela, Sloan, & Foley, 2001). Nonetheless, despite these serious and extensive critiques (see Elmore, 2002, for a useful summary of the issues), the U.S. Department of Education’s requirement that states must use accountability policy that is directly focused on the disaggregation of student scores by race, class, disability, and language and on a constant decrease over time in achievement gaps as a vehicle to increase educational equity is already being rapidly operationalized in every state.
Furthermore, as we have argued in other venues, the debate about the equity effects of accountability policies has tended to be reductively polarized into two camps with each side simplistically claiming that the effects of accountability policy on education equity are either primarily good or primarily bad (Scheurich, Skrla, & Johnson, 2000; Skrla, 2004). In response to this reductive polarization and simplification, we have repeatedly argued that the relationships between accountability and equity are definitely not as simplistic as often portrayed but are extremely complex, dynamic (changing constantly due to frequent changes in state policies in addition to local mediation through interpretation and implementation), and confusingly interactive with other policy initiatives. We have also pointed out that there is considerable empirical research documenting the whole range of positive to negative effects.

Nonetheless, if the conversation on equity and accountability is actually going to be useful to the pursuit of real equity for children at the destructive end of the achievement gap, the dynamic complexity of these policy systems and their equally complex effects requires, even mandates, that researchers adopt an orientation to dialogue and debate that is careful, reflective, and respectful of different viewpoints, including a willingness to thoughtfully consider data supporting opposing viewpoints (see O’Day, 2002). Accordingly, participants in this conversation must be willing to set aside desires or needs to win the debates and must be willing to relax ideological stances sufficiently to see that these policy systems, their effects, and their multiple implementations at various sites and levels will inevitably yield contradictory and complex research results.

To promote this dialogue and move equity forward, over the past several years, we have participated in several accountability debates in settings such as the annual conventions of the University Council of Educational Administration and the American Educational Research Association and in print in journals such as Phi Delta Kappan, Education and Urban Society, International Journal of Leadership in Education, and Educational Researcher. In all of these venues, we have explicitly and persistently called for a complex understanding of the systems, their effects, and their implementations, while at the same time, we have been very clear about our support for some aspects of accountability policy because of the positive effects on equity we see in several areas, including the following:

- providing a common set of explicit expectations for student achievement for all student groups that is not based on deficit assumptions;
- focusing strong public attention on achievement gaps;
publicly providing accountability data for use by civic, community, and civil rights activists; parent groups; researchers; and the media (i.e., data transparency); and

* focusing district and school leaders on their responsibility for educating equitably all students and holding them accountable for achieving equity and excellence.

However, due to our efforts to maintain openness to criticisms of our work and to other opposing views (see Anderson, 2001; Haney, 2001; Klein, 2001; Schafani, 2001; Trueba, 2001; Valencia et al., 2001), we have ourselves gained a more nuanced understanding of and increased appreciation for the fact that accountability policy alone is not enough to support the broad-scale improvement of educational practices that will be required to close historic achievement gaps in every school in every district across the United States.

For example, as Walt Haney (2001) has compellingly argued, reducing school dropout rates is as critically important to achieving educational equity as is increasing student academic achievement. In addition, as Valencia et al. (2001) pointed out, teacher quality is a highly significant factor that determines the equity of schooling that children receive. Also, Larry Parker (2001) has constructively argued that issues of overrepresentation of children of color in special education and the differential educational progress of African American boys and girls are critical issues that also influence the degree of equity in schooling. Indeed, both the content and focus of this article result partially from the effects of our critics on our views of accountability and equity.

Our view, then, of the relationship between accountability and educational equity has evolved, as we hope it has for all participants in this conversation. Although, to us, accountability remains an extremely powerful and important force in the struggle for education equity, it is but 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, will be required, which Scott (2001) has defined in the following way:

Systemic equity is defined as the transformed ways in which systems and individuals habitually operate to ensure that every learner—in whatever learning environment that learner is found—has 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. (p. 6)
To accomplish this systemic equity, then, will require, in our view, the development of new, practical tools for educators to promote both equity and excellence throughout the entire public educational system.

Accordingly, school leaders and others will need to have access to such practical tools to use in developing a more comprehensive, more insightful understanding of equity and inequity relationships in their current systems. Also, these tools should be designed to be useful to professors in leadership preparation programs for the purpose of helping them develop leaders who have the knowledge and skills needed to create equitable and excellent schools. Consequently, we are proposing and describing here one such tool—equity audits—that has its roots in U.S. educational and civil rights history but that we have redesigned, simplified, and streamlined to be of maximum utility in the current climate of high-stakes accountability and readily available data.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF EQUITY AUDITS

Our idea for using equity audits as a tool to guide schools in working toward equity and excellence is based on an impressive history of equity auditing in three areas: civil rights, curriculum auditing, and state accountability policy systems. The term *equity audit* (also known as a representativity audit) has a deep and significant history in civil rights enforcement in the United States and other nations (for example, Scotland, Great Britain, and Australia) in a variety of arenas, including, but not limited to, education. For example, corporations and governmental entities commonly conduct (or are subject to) employment equity audits, health equity audits, pay equity audits, gender equity audits, and technology equity audits, among others.

In the U.S. educational arena, specifically, equity audits of school districts have been conducted by school districts (either voluntarily or under pressure by civic activists or ordered by the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights) as a way of determining the degree of compliance with a number of civil rights statutes that prohibit discrimination in educational programs and activities receiving federal funding. These statutes include the following (U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 1999):

- Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (prohibiting race, color, and national origin discrimination);
- Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (prohibiting sex discrimination);
- Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (prohibiting disability discrimination);
- Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act...
The Act of 1990 (prohibiting disability discrimination by public entities); and
the Age Discrimination Act of 1975 (prohibiting age discrimination). (p. 1)

These applications of equity audits focused on compliance with federal civil
rights acts have tended to be exhaustive, typically producing voluminous re-
ports on a single district. Such civil rights-based equity audits have been con-
ducted in recent years by educational consultants, such as Harvard’s Robert
Peterkin, and in school districts around the country, including Urbana, Illi-
nois; Ann Arbor, Michigan; Harrison, Colorado; and Albuquerque, New
Mexico.

In addition to their use in the civil rights arena, equity audits have also
been used, in a somewhat different way, in conjunction with curriculum
audits. William Poston (1992) and Jacqueline Mitchell, in collaboration with
Poston (1992), described a design for school equity audits that was an adapta-
tion of one standard area in a design for more comprehensive school curricu-
lag audits developed by Fenwick English (1988). Drawing from and ex-
anding on curriculum audit Standard 3, “A School System Demonstrates
InternalConnectivity and RationalEquity in its Program Development and
Implementation,” Poston proposed 15 areas of analysis for use in equity
audits. These areas were administrative and supervisory practices, course
offerings and access, financial and funding resources, individual difference
considerations, materials and facilities, special program and services deliv-
ery, student management practices, class size practices, demographic distri-
bution, grouping practices and instruction, instructional time utilization, pro-
motion and retention practices, staff development and training, support
services provision, and teacher assignment and work load (p. 236). Poston
and Mitchell published one report of the application of this equity audit to
case studies in three school districts in 1992, but we were not able to find
further published research on this method since that time.

A third area in which equity audits have been used is as part of state school
reform and accountability efforts. Over the past decade, several state depart-
ments of education have developed instruments to evaluate equity levels in
school districts in their state, although these instruments have varied widely
in design. Some (Kentucky’s, for example) have been based in part on the
logic of curriculum audits (Kentucky Department of Education, 1999; Steffy,
1993). In contrast, the State of Washington’s Equity Self-Evaluation and
Planning Documentation instrument was developed in 1993 by a task force
and is mainly data based (Washington State Office of the Superintendent of
Public Instruction, 1995). Also, since 1992, the state of Iowa has conducted
on-site equity reviews of 13 to 14 school districts per year. These reviews are
extensive and include interviews as well as reviews of 15 categories of documents, including such items as board policy books, master schedules for teachers and students, and school improvement plans (Iowa Department of Education, 2001).

These three significant streams in the history of equity audits can be used to create a potentially useful tool that can be applied to leverage educational equity in the present climate of federally mandated, high-stakes educational reform. In fact, as states, districts, and individual schools grapple with new NCLB requirements that they assess students, use disaggregated data, and demonstrate AYP in closing achievement gaps, there will be a great need for such tools for school leaders to use to make their schools both equitable and excellent and for leadership professors to use in training new school leaders who will need to be successful in the new high-stakes environment. The problem, though, with existing versions of equity audits (whether based on civil rights, curriculum auditing, or state accountability systems) is that they typically produce enormous amounts of data, which overwhelm decision-making efforts. Although such detailed examinations of macro and micro practices of schools and districts are highly useful in some circumstances, such as documenting the violation of civil rights laws, they also limit the utility of this tool to be used more widely in thousands of contexts. Few people associated with a district or school will have time or motivation to read through a document 200 or 300 pages in length and then use the results well in planning school change.

In contrast, what we propose is a different, more focused, more limited descendent of equity audits. What is needed, in our view, is a way for school leaders and others to have data for their district displayed in a clear and understandable way that reveals the levels of equity and inequity in specific, delimited areas of schooling, which can subsequently be used for planning school change. In addition, with ever increasing amounts of data being generated by state accountability systems, there is a major need for tools that will easily and simply reduce some of the complexity of the data without stripping the data of their utility for increasing equity.

OUR RECONCEPTION OF EQUITY AUDITS

Teachers, administrators, school board members, community members, and policy makers may be aware of inequities in various aspects of their schools, but they rarely have systematically examined these areas and then devised ways to eliminate the inequities. Despite a decade or more of working within a context of increasingly high-stakes accountability, particularly
in states like Texas, that produces growing amounts of comprehensive data about schools and districts, administrators and teachers we work with overwhelmingly do not have a clear, accurate, or useful understanding of the degree of inequity present in their own schools and school districts (for a longer discussion of this topic, see Scheurich & Skrla, 2003). Furthermore, some researchers (e.g., McKenzie, 2001, 2002; Pollock, 2001) have also found that, in typical school settings, teachers and administrators often routinely avoid overt discussions of race as a factor in inequitable school outcomes. In addition, it is also commonplace that when these educators are queried about why children of color and children from low-income homes do not do well in their schools, they cite factors external to schooling as the cause, often blaming children’s parents, their home lives, their communities, and even their genetics (McKenzie, 2001, 2002; Valencia, 1997), with the result that the educators can say that they have no responsibility for the inequitable achievement gaps.

Therefore, for teachers and administrators to have a more productive orientation, one that is not deficit based or focused on issues external to schools, they need to be assisted in recognizing that there are substantial and persistent patterns of inequity internal to schools (i.e., embedded within the many assumptions, beliefs, practices, procedures, and policies of schools themselves). However, we also recognize the complexities and difficulties of getting teachers and administrators to incorporate new perspectives when deficit assumptions about children of color are taken as the norm, as Sleeter (1996) has pointed out in the context of teaching teachers about multicultural education:

> Many educators conceptualize this task as helping teachers “unlearn” negative attitudes about race, develop positive attitudes and a knowledge base about race and various racial groups, and learn multicultural teaching strategies. .... This task is more complex than that. .... They need information about race provided in multicultural teacher education programs into the knowledge they already have (which is often highly biased or even racist), much more than they reconstruct that knowledge. (p. 65)

In response to these daunting challenges, practical tools that make intuitive sense to educators and are easy to apply, while getting beyond old biases, can be highly useful. Thus, our reconception of equity audits is intended to facilitate ease of use and to promote insight into, discussion of, and a substantive response to systemic patterns of inequity in schools and school districts.

Accordingly, we suggest beginning with a manageable set of key indicators that, together, form a straightforward, delimited audit of equity. After careful consideration, then, of the types of indicators available (from equity
audits and from state accountability systems), we have come up with a set of 12 indicators grouped into three categories for our equity audits. We have labeled these three dimensions as teacher quality equity, programmatic equity, and achievement equity. These three can even be conceptualized as a simple formula, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Teacher Quality Equity

There is growing consensus among researchers and practitioners that high quality teachers are key determinants of students' opportunities to be academically successful (Darling-Hammond, 1999; Ferguson, 1998). Determining what teacher quality is and how to measure it, of course, is a complicated issue (see Rowan, Correnti, & Miller, 2002). The State of Tennessee, for example, has chosen to define it as “value added”—the contribution each teacher makes to students’ standardized test performance based on each student’s prior achievement. The Tennessee model has attracted considerable attention due, in part, to research using this model that has shown startling and cumulative negative effects on children who have the least effective teachers for successive elementary grades (Prince, 2002; Sanders & Rivers, 1996). Students who had the least effective teachers for 3 years were shown by Sanders and Rivers (1996) to score 50 percentile points lower on achievement tests than did students who had 3 years of the most effective teachers. However, the Tennessee model has also received considerable critique on methodological grounds (Bock & Wolfe, 1996) and on the basis of its extremely narrow definition of teacher quality (one based entirely on gain scores on standardized tests). Consequently, other states have not yet followed Tennessee’s path.

Other indicators that serve as proxies for evidence of teacher quality, such as experience and training, are the ones that are more commonly used (Rowan et al., 2002). Whatever the definition, though, there is ample evidence that access to quality teachers is not typically distributed on an equitable basis to all schools within a district, nor to all students within individual schools, particularly high schools. Students of color and students from low-income homes most often have less experienced teachers, teachers with less education and training, and more teachers teaching without certification and/or outside their areas of expertise (Ingersoll, 1999; Linkford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2002).

For a district, then, evidence of teacher quality equity or inequity would result from an examination of the distribution throughout the schools in the district of teacher quality or, for a single school, an examination of the distribution of teacher quality within the school. In other words, which students
are getting the most teacher quality, however defined, and which are getting the least? If this quality is distributed inequitably, as in, for example, the children of color get the lowest teacher quality and the White middle-class children get the highest teacher quality, then we cannot expect equity in achievement outcomes. If the latter is true in a school or district, the result is a systemic distribution of teacher quality that will likely yield inequity in achievement.

To operationalize teacher quality, then, for examination for inequities like those we have pointed out above, we have chosen four variables for which data are commonly available from state and local sources and for which there is some research evidence (although mixed) of effects on student achievement (see Rowan et al., 2002): (a) teacher education (bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degrees; number or percentage holding a particular degree), (b) teacher experience (number of years as a teacher), (c) teacher mobility (number or percentage of teachers leaving or not leaving a campus on an annual basis), and (d) teachers without certification or assigned outside area of teaching expertise (i.e., language arts teacher teaching a math course). Accordingly, at the district level, the central question would be, What is the degree to which these indicators are distributed equitably or inequitably among the campuses within the district? In other words, do the schools serving primarily low-income students have the same percentage of teachers holding master’s degrees or higher, the same percentage of experienced teachers, the same teacher mobility rate, and the same percentage of uncertified teachers and teachers teaching outside their areas of expertise as do schools serving primarily children from middle- and upper-income homes?

We realize, of course, that the leadership in some districts or schools may argue that, because “senior” teachers (senior by experience, degree, or status) often choose the highest level classes within a school or the “best” schools, the school leadership cannot have any control over these four variables. However, we have seen too many schools and districts successfully change these seniority assumptions to accept that this kind of change is not possible for any school or district. Also, we understand that district leadership often argues that the district cannot do anything about the fact that the teaching staff of schools populated principally by White middle-class children are more
highly educated, have more experience, are less mobile, and have more teachers who are certified or teaching within their area of expertise. Once again, though, there are simply too many districts that have successfully taken on this issue and rearranged their districtwide distribution of teacher quality to let this objection stand.

To apply, then, one conception of equity audits, Mitchell and Poston (1992) suggested that campuses that differed from district averages by more than 20% were indications of inequity. Alternately, we suggest, depending on the size of the school district, that a higher standard—perhaps 10% deviation from the district average—would ensure greater equity. However, it is certainly possible to think about this in a more complex fashion. For instance, a district might use a sliding scale that would for 2 years make a 20% inequity the standard, which would then be followed in the 3rd year by a 10% standard. Whatever the decision, the point is to examine equity within the distribution of teacher quality in a district and then work with appropriate stakeholders to make the distribution of teacher quality equitable.

For example, let's take a district of 50,000 students (see Figure 2). A district this size will have numerous elementary schools, probably 50 to 60. Suppose we look at three of the schools serving families with the lowest incomes and three serving families from the middle class. If we examine the distribution of teachers by teacher education level, are the teachers at the higher socioeconomic status (SES) schools significantly more educated than those at the lower SES schools?

In Figure 2, the middle-class schools have 50% of their teachers with master's degrees or above, whereas the low-income schools have only 20%. Also, is there more mobility of teachers in the low-income schools? In our example, there is 30% mobility at the lower SES schools, and 5% at the higher SES schools. Are there more teachers teaching outside their areas of expertise or without certification at the low-income schools? In the example, there are 10% not certified at the lower SES schools, whereas at the middle-class schools, there are 2% uncertified. Are the teachers at the high-income schools generally more experienced than those at the low-income schools? In the example, at the middle-class schools, there is an average of 15 years of experience, whereas at the low-income schools, the average is only 7 years. Although these particular figures were created for the purpose of illustration, they are based on our experience in working with schools and districts (large and small; rural, suburban, and urban) in which these kinds of differences are typical. Especially in larger districts, there is considerable teacher quality inequity that is taken for granted and thus never pointed out as a cause of the achievement gaps in a district (Lankford et al., 2002; Prince, 2002; Rowan et al., 2002). Our point, though, is that a district will have little hope of truly
reducing its achievement gaps if it does not address the inequitable distribution of teacher quality.

It is not enough, however, to examine teacher quality across districts. These same kinds of patterns often exist within schools. For instance, are the advanced placement and the gifted and talented classes at the higher grades taught by the more educated, more experienced, more stable teachers, whereas the main classes or lower track classes are taught by the least educated, least experienced, more mobile teachers? Or, is the highest teacher quality being used for high school seniors but the lowest for high school freshmen? If this is occurring, this means that those struggling as they begin high school will get the weakest teachers, which may, in turn, drive up dropout rates for those students on the academic margins. Again, we have frequently found, especially in larger schools and in high schools, that there are the same kinds of taken-for-granted teacher quality assignments that no one points out as one possible cause of achievement gaps. Consequently, equity audits need to be done not only across districts but also within schools to determine whether there is an equitable distribution of teacher quality.

Programmatic Equity

Equally as important as teacher quality is the quality of the programs in which students are placed (or from which they are excluded). Although
educators would often like to pretend otherwise, there are large variations of quality among different placements and programs within schools and school districts (see, for example, Schoenfield, 2002, for an excellent discussion of differences in quality of math programs). The potential indicators for an equity audit in this category are numerous, but we've identified four key areas that research has consistently shown to be significant sites of inequity. These four are (a) special education, (b) gifted and talented education (G/T), (c) bilingual education, and (d) student discipline. Overenrollment of students of color and students from low-income homes to special education, especially the most severe categories of disability, has long been recognized as an area of gross inequity within our school systems (Artiles, 1998; Loza & Orfield, 2002; MacMillan & Reschly, 1998). In addition, high-stakes accountability systems in the past have placed more pressure on educators to identify students for special education in order to exempt them from testing, although NCLB contains provisions to guard against this (Texas Center for Educational Research, 2000; Townsend, 2002). Special education is, therefore, an essential indicator in the programmatic equity category.

The problem of overrepresentation by race and SES in special education is mirrored in reverse in programs for the education of gifted and talented students (Ford & Harmon, 2001). Students of color and students from low-income homes are grossly underrepresented in the ranks of the students identified as gifted and talented, even though it is widely understood that intelligence and talent are distributed fairly equally by race, ethnicity, or SES. In addition, rates of G/T identification vary greatly among school districts, with some serving less than 5% of children in a district and others serving upwards of 12%. Regardless of the rate, however, the indicator for the equity audit is whether all student groups are represented in reasonably proportionate percentages (i.e., if 15% of students in a district are African American students, these same students ought to be close to 15% of G/T students). A typical example is illustrated in Figure 3. These data are taken from an urban district with which we are familiar.

The district has about 50,000 students with 4,650 in G/T courses districtwide, or 9.3% of their student population. About 73.0% of this district's entire student population, or 36,500, come from low-income families. However, there are only 734 students from these low-income families in G/T courses in this district. This means that although 73% of the district's students come from low-income families, only 15.8% of G/T students come from low-income homes. As a result, students from low-income families are considerably underrepresented (about one fifth of what would be proportional) in G/T classes. This is an inequity pattern in this district and, thus, is a substantial hindrance to the removal of achievement gaps.
Figure 3. Programmatic Equity in Gifted and Talented

A third indicator for the programmatic equity category is the academic progress of students served through bilingual education. As growing numbers of culturally and linguistically diverse students enroll in our schools, it becomes ever more important to assess the quality of bilingual instruction they receive. Unfortunately, in the past, bilingual programs have all too often been language-oriented ghettos where students were segregated and neither became proficient in English nor progressed academically in their first language (Moll, 1992). In response, Texas, as one state, has recently begun including on its accountability reports for each school and district information about the progress of English language learners on the state test of reading proficiency in English. This indicator (or other, similar indicators that other states will likely develop in response to NCLB requirements that English language learners be included in assessment and accountability) will monitor whether or not bilingual students are being well served as opposed to simply being warehoused.

Although our fourth category, discipline, may seem an odd fit with the other three, students who are routinely and consistently caught up within a discipline system are commonly removed from their regular classes and thus denied equal access to learning. Indeed, for some students (particularly African American and Latino boys), the disciplinary system in their school or district becomes their de facto instructional program because that is where they spend the majority of their time. The data in Figure 4 are drawn from actual percentages for the 2001 to 2002 school year in a small-town high school of 1,300 students.
African American males received discipline (all categories from minor to severe have been combined) at a rate that is nearly three times their proportional representation in the student population. For Latino males, the rate is more than four times their proportional representation. Clearly, this high school has an inequitable situation with respect to discipline, as is the case with many schools nationwide (Bowman, 2003; Gregory, 1995; Skiba, Michael, & Nardo, 2003). As a result, African American males and Latino males will spend much less time in the classroom learning, thus making it much more difficult to erase achievement gaps for these students.

In addressing each of these four programmatic inequity areas, we are fully aware that many educators argue that the causes of inequities in each of these areas have little to nothing to do with schooling and are, thus, not under the control of educators. In contrast, our point in all four areas is that the system of the school and the attitudes, assumptions, and practices of its educators are all largely in the control of the educators, which means that systems can be designed and attitudes, assumptions, and practices can be changed so as to create equitable and excellent schools. In addition, we have seen too many schools and districts that have developed systemic solutions that have substantially reduced or eliminated inequities in all these areas to be willing to settle for the judgment that programmatic inequities cannot be controlled by educators.

Achievement Equity

Unquestionably, achievement inequities or gaps here received the most attention from researchers, educators, policy analysts, and the public, with discussions of test score gaps or achievement gaps becoming commonplace and debates about causes and solutions occurring in a wide variety of venues. Our purpose, then, of including achievement equity as a category in equity audits is to maintain this critical public focus on equity outcomes and also to expand the traditional attention on state achievement test results to include other evidence of student achievement and attainment, including high school completion, completion of college-prep curriculum, and higher level assessments such as the SAT, ACT, and Advanced Placement (AP) exams. As we've learned from our research with school districts that have made significant progress toward equity (Skrka & Scheurich, 2001; Skrka, Scheurich, & Johnson, 2000, 2001; Skrka, Scheurich, Johnson, & Koschoreck, 2001a, 2001b), equitable achievement on relatively low-level state assessments is generally not sufficient in indicating true achievement equity when large gaps remain on other, more challenging indicators of student performance. In response to this need for a broader definition of achievement equity, the four
indicators we propose for this category include (a) state achievement test results, (b) dropout rates, (c) high school graduation tracks, and (d) SAT/ACT/AP results.

All 50 states now have some form of state achievement test and soon will be required by NCLB to disseminate performance results disaggregated by family income level, student race, disability, and English proficiency, although not by gender. Also, as results on these tests are now the primary evaluation measure of school performance, these test results need to be a basic indicator included in equity audits. Beyond performance on these state tests, however, are other areas that need significant scrutiny for evidence of levels of equity within schools and districts. Dropout rates (or, alternatively, school completion rates) are one key indicator that increasingly has come to the forefront of discussions of educational equity and accountability (see Haney, 2001). Huge, unacceptably high percentages of students of color (particularly males) and students form low-income homes drop out or are pushed out of school before high school graduation, so this, too, needs to be a key indicator in equity audits.

A third area for consideration in the achievement category of equity audits is high school graduation tracks. All students who graduate typically do not pursue equally rigorous curricula, with most states having some form of a tiered system that offers basic, advanced, and/or college preparatory
curricula. Whereas the percentage of students completing high school under each plan may vary widely from district to district, the central question addressed by this indicator is whether there is proportional representation of student groups by race and SES in each graduation track within each district. For example, how can we expect to close the achievement gaps between children of color and White children if the percentage of children of color in the college prep track is much, much lower than the percentage of White children (see Oakes, 1986; Sizer, 1997; Wheelock, 1993)?

The fourth indicator in the achievement equity category is performance on the SAT, the ACT, and/or AP examinations. As with other indicators we have discussed, students of color and students from low-income homes typically score much lower on these advanced measures than do White students and students from middle- and upper-income homes or do not even take SAT and ACT tests or AP classes (College Board, 1998). In addition, even when students of color or those from low-income homes do enroll in AP classes, they may not actually take the examinations or they may receive inflated grades in their classes but score poorly on the exams. Figure 5, for example, shows data from a 78,000-student urban district for student performance on AP exams.

The demographics of this district’s students are 16% African American, 48% Latino, and 34% White. It is clear in this example that much smaller percentages of students of color are taking these examinations and that the students of color are scoring at or above the criterion for college credit (typically, a score of 3 or higher on a 1 to 5 scale) at lower rates than are White students. However, although leaving such AP percentages with these sizeable differences by race will limit the ability of this district to achieve equity and excellence, our studies (e.g., Skrla et al., 2000) of various districts have shown that districts can address these inequities and have success at significantly decreasing the gaps in this area, just as they have in other achievement areas.

APPLICATIONS OF EQUITY AUDITS

Up to this point, what we have discussed is the broad array of different kinds of equity audits, and we have illustrated how they can be applied to three particular areas: teacher quality, programs, and achievement. Although we know there are many other areas of potential application that may have significant importance in particular contexts, we have tried to frame some specific variables, where data are widely available, to get anyone started in each of the three areas. In addition, we have shown some easily understood ways to communicate the inequities through charting some figures we had
from our own work or some created for illustration. Thus, we would expect at this point that virtually any researcher, professor, educator, college student, or layperson could take the equity audits that we have shown and discussed here and apply them to her or his own school or district.

In addition, though, we do want to suggest a process for using equity audits and some brief examples of our use of equity audits with different stakeholder groups. The process that we describe for operationalizing equity audits is a simple one that has been used in many areas of organizational change and applications of action research. In fact, this method for using equity audits could easily be incorporated into existing campus and/or district planning and decision-making processes, such as the site-based processes required in many states.

The first step is to put together a committee of relevant stakeholders, such as a group of teachers or a group representative of both educators and parents. What needs to be looked for here is individual stakeholders who will collaborate in carrying out the process. It is important to identify individuals who are respected by the groups they represent and who are also people of good will who would be open to dialog and work focused on equity. Let's say, for instance, that what is at issue is the distribution of teacher quality in a district. Who, then, should be included? We would suggest influential teachers, especially representatives of teacher unions or other such groups; district and campus leaders; and representatives from parent and advocacy groups, such
as Parent Teacher Association (PTA), Parent Teacher Organization (PTO), National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF), and so on.

Next, the numbers and percentages in a few areas, such as the distribution of teachers by experience, education, mobility, and certification, should be presented to this committee. Furthermore, we would suggest presenting these numbers so that each committee member actually sees colored pencils, crayons, or markers and lays out the numbers or percentages on some graph paper that has been prepared for their use. For example, in Figure 2, 50% of the teachers at the middle-class schools had at least master’s degrees, whereas only 20% at the low-income schools had the same. So, we are suggesting that the committee members be given these percentages and then that each member be asked to fill in a graph that illustrates these percentages. Our experience has been that although this takes a little time, actually drawing the percentages on graphs gives people a much better sense of the differences that need to be addressed.

The third step we suggest is for the committee to have an open discussion of these teacher quality gaps. Experts could be brought in to offer analysis and advice. Educators from other districts that have had success in reducing teacher quality gaps could be brought in for this step. Whoever is brought in to add to the discussion for this step needs to be a good facilitator. For example, issues of racism may be brought up at this point. Whatever comes up, though, needs to be addressed so that everyone perceives that they can say what they think and be heard by the other members of the committee, while at the same time, the process must not be allowed to get stuck at some negative, unproductive point that would prevent moving on to positive change. Also, it is especially important at this step, or at any step, that the district leadership not become defensive or try to repress or derail discussion of difficult issues. A good facilitator will know how to provide support for discussion of difficult issues and still move the group forward in a positive way (see Sleeter, 1996, for an excellent discussion of how individuals and groups learn about racial and justice issues).

Our fourth step is that once there has been a good, open discussion of the problem, the group needs to move toward potential solutions. Again, experts or leadership from other districts may be helpful here; similarly, a good facilitator will be useful in this phase. The point is to come up with some positive solutions; to talk about the strengths, weaknesses, and costs of each; and then to decide to commit to one or more of these solutions. The fifth step is the implementation of the solution or solutions by the district. The sixth is to monitor results and then report them to the committee. If the solutions are
successful, celebrate; if the solutions are not successful, return to either step three or four and work forward again.

Here, then, are these same steps in a brief list:

Step 1: Create a committee of relevant stakeholders.
Step 2: Present the data to the committee and have everyone graph the data.
Step 3: Discuss the meaning of the data, possible use of experts, led by a facilitator.
Step 4: Discuss potential solutions, possible use of experts, led by a facilitator.
Step 5: Implement solution(s).
Step 6: Monitor and evaluate results.
Step 7: Celebrate if successful; if not successful, return to step 3 and repeat the process.

Our own experience with presenting our conception of equity audits and the process to use with them has occurred in three venues: presentations to school board members, presentations to school principals, and presentations to students in a principalship preparation program. In the first instance, presentations to school board members, we defined equity audits for 30 to 50 board members at a time, provided our three-category framework, and discussed some specific examples with actual data from schools or districts. In general, one of the strengths of equity audits, their simplicity, was easily evident, and the audience quickly understood the idea. However, although some school board members who already knew there were major inequities in their districts thought equity audits were an excellent way to get educators and the public to see the inequities and address them, there were a few board members who expressed discomfort or even hostility at the very idea of examining such inequities. This negative response was what we had mentioned before, and thus, anyone using equity audits must be prepared to work with such responses.

We had a similar experience when we presented some equity audit data to the principals in a district that has long been struggling with persistent inequities. We used data from their own district that made the inequities within their schools very obvious. Some of the principals, like the board members, were significantly upset by the implications. For example, one principal who had significant overrepresentation of students of color in special education, although we did not present her school’s data, became outspokenly defensive. Others just did not like the public presentation of the inequities in the district. In contrast, other principals said it was about time that the inequities were openly noted and discussed. However, one important part of equity audits was highly successful with all the principals. Our way of presenting the data, as we have done above, was easily understandable to everyone, which is one of our main goals—to make the inequities clearly visible and easily understandable so that it is possible to move forward to solutions that
yield more equity. Nonetheless, that some in the audience did not like the results is an issue that must always be dealt with in doing equity audits. Many educators, parents, and others simply do not want to face or address the race and SES inequities within our public schools, but this must be done if achievement gaps are to be erased. It is simply not possible to inequitably distribute teacher quality and track students into or out of programs, like AP or special education, and reasonably expect to achieve equity in achievement or even to achieve progress toward equitable achievement, as is now required in all states.

The third group we have used equity audits with was a group of students in a principal preparation program. The concept of equity audits was presented along with examples to the students, and then the students were given actual data to chart and discuss in small groups of 7 to 10. This was done over 3 hours in one morning of an 8-week summer semester, the semester in which the students start the principalship program. The students easily and quickly grasped the idea of equity audits and had no trouble applying it to their sample data. Then, throughout the rest of the summer, the students repeatedly used the concept and applied it to actual data on actual schools.

That they grasped the concept and ways to apply it was clearly evident in their capstone project. All the students were in teams, and each team had to take an actual school, study it, collect data on it, and then prepare both a written report and a presentation that included what they found and what recommendations they had for solving any problems they found. In all the reports and presentations, equity audits played a key role for the students to illustrate the inequities they found in their respective schools, even though the use of these audits was not required. Furthermore, they all used charts to present their data in the same way that equity audits were demonstrated to them. In other words, the concept of equity audits traveled well and easily with these students. It became a key way that they approached understanding their schools and understanding the inequities in their schools. Indeed, in all three of the venues we have described here, the concept traveled well and easily. Even for those made uncomfortable by the results, they quickly grasped the idea of equity audits, even though they did not like focusing on the inequities, or the implications of the inequities.

CONCLUSION

The pressure is finally on all schools and districts to produce year-to-year increases in equity in our public education system. In response, although many have blamed causes external to schooling for the achievement gaps,
there unquestionably are inequities within our public schools, such as inequitable distributions of teacher quality or inequitable distributions of students in programs such as special education or AP courses, that must be addressed if the achievement gaps are to be removed. Given, then, all the readily available data on schools and districts, we are committed to designing practical, easy to understand tools for using these data to increase educational equity. Our goal here, thus, has been to describe and discuss equity auditing, which is one example of a simple, easy to understand tool for examining inequities within our schools and districts. We also presented applications of equity auditing to actual data and provided a simple process for understanding and addressing the resultant data in a school or district.

We see this tool both as a descendant of an important history of educational equity audits and as a focused instrument that has the potential to be highly useful in the U.S. educational climate of high-stakes accountability. We’ve identified a dozen key indicators grouped into three categories—teacher quality equity, programmatic equity, and achievement equity—that, together, can provide an initial audit of systemic inequities or inequities within a school or district. Nonetheless, we do not see our identified areas as the only ones; there are certainly many more areas to which equity audits can be applied. Still, in our effort to provide significant, useful, and easy starting points, we have chosen some areas to focus on for which the data are readily known and available and for which there is ample evidence of inequities in most schools and districts.

Yet, equity auditing is only one new tool for decreasing inequities in schooling. In truth, the struggle for educational equity, without sacrificing excellence, for literally all children has been underway in U.S. schools for many decades and will likely continue for many years to come. There are, however, individual schools, districts, and states in which substantial progress has been made, and we have learned much as researchers from our work in some of these schools and districts (e.g., Garcia Wastaff, 2000; Nolly, 1997; Skrle & Scheurich, 2001; Skrle et al., 2000). Consequently, it was studying and thinking about these schools and districts and ways to spread their success to others that was the basis for our conception of equity audits, in addition to critiques made of our earlier scholarship on accountability.

Our recommendation is that others do the same, both specifically and generally. On the specific side, we recommend that educators in schools and districts start using equity audits to increase equity within our systems. We also recommend that professors in leadership preparation programs teach their students about this tool and ways to use it. Finally, we even hope consultants start using it in their own work. Our experience is that educators learn it quickly, even intuitively, and then easily make use of it. On the more general
side, we advocate that educators, professors of educational leadership, and consultants start designing other practical, easy to understand and use tools for increasing equity in schooling. For example, a graduate of one of our leadership programs has identified what she calls “equity traps,” which is a concept for identifying ways of thinking, like deficit thinking, that are barriers to increasing equity in schooling (see McKenzie, 2002). We hope others come up with still more possibilities that get shared freely nationally.

Whatever ideas and tools we come up with, what is driving this work is of inarguable critical importance. Achievement gaps by race, ethnicity, home language or culture, SES, or other variables are not just an educational problem; they are a problem for our entire society. They are, in our view, a threat to society, a tear in the fabric of democracy, and totally unacceptable. In addition, there are too many schools and districts that have made significant improvements in all areas of inequities for anyone to argue any longer that it cannot be done. As Ron Edmonds (1979) suggested some time ago, it is not a question of whether it can be done but whether we have the will, the commitment to do it. In fact, Robert Moses (see Moses & Cobb, 2002), the respected Mississippi civil rights activist, has argued that educational inequities are a civil rights issue. We completely agree, and we see our work in this area as civil rights work. Accordingly, our conclusion, as we hope was apparent here throughout, is that the achievement gaps can be erased, that we can design practical and easy to use tools for accomplishing this, and that, ultimately, equity in public schooling can become the taken-for-granted standard in U.S. public education. What is left, then, is for all of us to make this choice and to accomplish the great dream of equity in our public educational system.

NOTES

1. Vigorous critiques of NCLB have arisen across numerous fronts and have included issues such as utility and comparability of test data across states; the wide range of preparations to implement various provisions of the act among different schools, districts, and states; the lack of timeliness and clarity in implementation guidance from the U.S. Department of Education; disparate effects of the act’s provisions on low-income, minority, English language learners, and disabled students; an almost certain backlash as large numbers of schools receive failing grades; and inadequate funding for implementation among many others (see Elmore, 2002; Linn, Baker, &Betehomer, 2002; Wilson & Segall, 2003).

2. This project is one of several related projects funded by a grant from the Ford Foundation to Leaders for Social Justice (LSJ), a group of educational administration professors committed to advancing educational equity and social justice within our field and within U.S. public schools. Catherine Marshall, professor of educational leadership at the University of North Carolina, is principal investigator of this grant and has taken the lead in organizing and maintaining LSJ. Without her commitment and efforts, none of this would have occurred.
3. The Tennessee Department of Education Web site provides the following explanation of their value-added system: “Value-Added Analysis compares the gains each student makes from year to year to the gains made by a normative sample for that same subject between those same grades. Thus, if the normal gain from 4th to 5th grade in math was 15 points, a 5th grade teacher’s students who averaged a 15-point gain for the year would score ‘100,’ or 100% of normal gains. A teacher whose students averaged an 18-point gain would score ‘120,’ and so forth.” (Tennessee Department of Education, 2002, p. 3).

4. Caution is in order in interpreting data for this indicator. As Blesh and Valenzuela (2003) point out, learning English should not be the only legitimate outcome of bilingual programs. Equally important are program goals such as proficiency and literacy in students’ home languages and valuing and preserving students’ home cultures.

5. Funds to support outside facilitation of the equity audit process that we have described and the availability of appropriate expertise are significant issues for many districts, but these are especially serious challenges for small and/or rural districts. Principals and superintendents in these districts who are committed to addressing inequity may well be able to develop the expertise needed to lead the process in-house. Low-cost or free assistance may be available from state education agencies or intermediate agency arms, such as regional education service centers or boards of county education supervisors. A third possibility may be for pairs or teams of school or district leaders to engage as “critical friends” for one another by facilitating the equity audit process in each other’s schools.

6. Negativity and resistance to evaluation data and findings rooted in local politics is a common phenomenon and has been explored extensively in the evaluation literature. See Thompson (1992) for a useful summary of the issues in this area.

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