

STATE EDUCATION AGENCIES CAN ENSURE LOCAL EDUCATION AGENCY PURSUIT OF EDUCATIONAL EQUITY



Welcome to Equity Digest! This newsletter is for education stakeholders (e.g. community members, caregivers) who have an interest in supporting educational equity in their school communities. What is educational equity? Educational equity can be defined as beliefs, actions, and policies that enable all students to have access to and participate in quality learning environments and experience successful outcomes. Each Equity Digest explains the concepts and findings of the latest academic research surrounding a particular equity-focused topic. The intent of this periodical is to relay equity concepts and supporting research, “digesting” key findings so you can draw informed conclusions. The Digest also offers ways that you can advance equitable practices in your school community. Enjoy!

Get Informed

[The Impact of State Education Agencies at the Local Level](#)

In this edition of *Equity Digest*, we explore what state education agencies can do to ensure the pursuit of educational equity at the local level, the history of federal education legislation centering equity, and the inspiring possibilities of what states can achieve when critically considering and focusing upon equity in all education initiatives.

Often when we think of ensuring educational equity, we think of classroom- and school-level practices and policies, such as culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies (Paris,

2012), modification of dress codes, equity-focused professional learning (Dagli, Jackson, Skelton, & Thorius, 2017), and similar initiatives. And while initiatives such as these are indeed essential to the pursuit of educational equity at the local level, it is sometimes unclear exactly how state education agencies (SEAs) influence local efforts, as well as unclear exactly how they operate to ensure equity or why SEAs should change to make real impact at the local level (Jackson, Sanborn, Skelton, & Thorius, 2019). Here, we discuss the roles of SEAs and explain why SEAs need to change in policy and practice to bring strength and accountability to the quest for educational equity at the local level.

Why You Should Care

SEAs Can Disrupt and Dismantle Inequities

The Three Roles of State Education Agencies

The basic role of state education agencies is to administer state and federal programs and to implement key policies. The role of State Education Agencies (SEAs) can be divided into three buckets: funding oversight, policy leadership, and stakeholder communications (The Aspen Institute, 2015). Within these three categories of SEA functions, examples of SEA policy include the institution of standards, enforcement of laws and Titles (such as IDEA, Title I and IX, and more), the mandate for professional learning, and the creation of the educational mission and vision for the state (The Aspen Institute, 2015). Next, we explore how SEAs can ensure that equity is centered in the policies and practices of Local Education Agencies (LEAs).



Ensuring Educational Equity through ESSA

SEAs enact federal policy that focus on ensuring educational equity such as the **Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)** and

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), among others. ESSA requires that states develop accountability plans for federal review, and that those plans include goals, practices, and measures that center equity. Some examples of how state plans address inequities include a focus on student performance, particularly addressing inequitable access issues (Coomer, Jackson, Kyser, Skelton, & Thorius, 2017), as well as the equitable distribution of **effective educators** (Great Lakes Equity Center, 2015). An effective educator ensures the success of all students through inclusive and responsive classroom practices. This definition will be helpful later when we discuss an example of an SEA that leveraged ESSA to better

ensure the equitable distribution of effective educators in their state.

ESSA: Imperfect Legislation

ESSA is rooted in civil rights legislation and centers equity in many goals and benchmarks, yet it is far from perfect (Coomer, Pearce, Dagli, Skelton, Kyser, & Thorius, 2017). Issues that were huge in the '50s and '60s, including segregation, systemic racism, ableism, and sexism, are still major issues today. These inequities have manifested in disproportionality in discipline, as well as the widening of the “achievement gap”^{*} across racial, national origin, and along socioeconomic lines (Coomer, Jackson, Kyser, Skelton, & Thorius, 2017; Jackson, Thorius, & Kyser, 2016).

^{*}When discussing the “achievement gap,” we use quotations because we question the premise behind the concept and terminology. The “achievement gap” is founded upon the premise that lower student achievement outcomes are the intrinsic fault of the students’ family cultures (Ladson-Billings, 2007; Louie, 2008). Instead, we believe the “achievement gap” is based upon the malpractices effected upon students of Color, students living in disinvested communities, and students who are disabled--for generations--resulting in the inequities in achievement outcomes across demographic lines (Annamma, Conner, & Ferri, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2007; Coomer, Jackson, Kyser, Skelton, & Thorius, 2017, p. 2).

Despite expanding the data used in accountability system, ESSA still focuses mainly on academic measures (Jackson, Coomer, Dagli, Skelton, Kyser, & Thorius 2017b), with little accounting of the systemic oppression experienced by historically marginalized groups of students^{*} (Jackson, Sanborn, Skelton, & Thorius, 2019).

***Historically marginalized groups of students** are students whose identities do not reflect the dominant culture. These identities include: people of Color, people whose faith traditions are not Christian and Protestant, people who do not follow a religion or faith tradition, people living in economically disinvested communities, people who are disabled, people who identify in as gender non-binary, transgender and other forms of gender expression, and people who identify as LGBTQIA+ and other forms of sexuality.



SEAs Can Disrupt Systemic Oppression

Systemic oppression is when policies, practices, and structures result in a person or group of people receiving unequal treatment and are denied access to resources and opportunities, based on their membership in a specific identity group. This plays out in schools when education policies, educator practices and school curricula create barriers to learning for students, resulting in unequal access and benefits of public education. This denied access to resources and learning opportunities lead to the inequities in academic performance of which historically marginalized students and families are often blamed (Coomer, Jackson, Kyser, Skelton, & Thorius, 2017). SEAs focused on disrupting systemic oppression can break through these structural barriers.

Here, we assert the importance and urgency of a partnership between SEAs and LEAs to promote educational equity, as well as provide an example of how a state education agency in the Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center’s (MAP Center) region used ESSA to support LEAs in engaging in transformative change toward equity^{*} (Coomer, 2017).

*When we say **transformative change** toward educational equity, we are talking about persistent systemic change that disrupts and dismantles historical legacies of status quo assumptions, beliefs, and practices about individual characteristics and cultural identities that marginalize and disenfranchise people and groups of people with non-dominant (non-status quo) identities (Fraser, 1997, 2008; Waitoller & Artiles, 2010; Waitoller & Kozleski, 2013).

SEAs Can Dismantle Structural Barriers to Learning



In leveraging ESSA and other federal legislation to further equity at the local level, SEAs must be intentional about supporting LEAs to break down structural barriers to learning

opportunities and minimize educator bias (Blair, 2002 and Rudman, 2004, as cited in Staats & Patton, 2013).

This transformative change requires that SEAs put in place structures that promote and support equitable policy making and practices within state agencies and among local school corporations and districts. For example, through ESSA, SEAs have the opportunity to move away from a sole focus on standardized testing to more equitable measures of success and access (Cook-Harvey, Darling-Hammond, Lam, Mercer & Roc, 2016; Jackson, Sanborn, Skelton, & Thorius, 2019), thus encouraging LEAs to rethink school success. SEAs can use the teacher quality requirement in ESSA, for example, to confront major structural barriers to learning, such as access to effective culturally responsive educators for each and every student. Centering equity in this requirement involves questioning what teacher quality is when thinking about learning opportunities for historically marginalized students. SEAs must ask critical questions such as: do the teacher demographics reflect student demographics?

Does the definition of educator effectiveness center the teaching and learning of a diverse student population? How can the SEA address barriers to diversity in the teacher talent pool (Jackson, Sanborn, Skelton, & Thorius, 2019)?

Authentic teacher diversity is so important because it has been shown that students of Color perform better when their demographics are reflected in the teacher staff. Additionally, research has indicated that school systems with more diverse teachers demonstrate a higher commitment to invest in equity work (Bireda & Chait, 2011; Partee, 2014; Warner & Duncan, 2019). SEAs that stress teacher diversity as well as improving the cultural competence of teachers are working to dismantle barriers to learning for historically marginalized groups of students and improve teaching and learning for all students (Jackson, Sanborn, Skelton, & Thorius, 2019).

Moving Forward

A State Education Agency That's Getting It Right

One SEA in the MAP Center's region leveraged ESSA in order to address two key issues: the lack of racial diversity in the teacher workforce and the capacity of educators to teach diverse students. To address these issues, the SEA sought to increase the percentage of teachers of Color in the state, as well as increase the capacity of all teachers in the state to provide culturally responsive instruction (Jackson, Sanborn, Skelton, & Thorius, 2019). This SEA applied a critical lens to the Teacher Quality language of ESSA. In order to achieve their goals, the SEA created a grant application process through which they asked LEAs to detail how they would use Teacher Quality funds to ensure increased racial diversity of their teachers. The Agency worked with the MAP Center to create a grant application review rubric which would analyze: 1) which LEAs centered equity in their district plans; 2) how well LEAs planned

to recruit and effectively retain teachers of Color; 3) how the LEA planned to increase the capacity of all teachers in the district to implement culturally responsive classroom practices. Using this rubric, the SEA assessed how LEAs would enforce the SEA's critical interpretation of the Teacher Quality component of ESSA. The actions of this SEA reflect how state departments of education can critically analyze federal legislation to redress structural barriers for educators of Color as well as (re)define what it means to be an effective educator.

As ESSA is charged to ensure an "equal opportunity for all students" (U.S. Department of Education, n.d., A New Education section, para. 1) it is the responsibility of SEAs to support the pursuit of educational equity by LEAs in their local contexts (Jackson, Sanborn, Skelton, & Thorius, 2019).



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About the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center

The mission of the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center is to ensure equity in student access to and participation in high quality, research-based education by expanding states' and school systems' capacity to provide robust, effective opportunities to learn for all students, regardless of and responsive to race, sex, and national origin, and to reduce disparities in educational outcomes among and between groups. This series is intended to provide vital background information and action steps to support educators and other equity advocates as they work to create positive educational environments for all children. For more information, visit <http://www.greatlakesequity.org>.

Disclaimer

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