

## TRANSFORMATIVE DISTRICT CHANGE REQUIRES AN EQUITY-FOCUSED LOCAL SCHOOL BOARD



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

#### [School Boards Should Listen to Minoritized Voices for the Benefit of the Entire Community](#)

In this *Equity Digest*, we discuss the power of local school boards to impact students’ education experiences, the benefits of an equity-centered school board, critical reflection as a tool for the development of a critical lens, and key questions to ask school board candidates to ensure they represent the best interests of all members of the school community.

Local school boards have a tremendous impact upon their districts in regards to an equitable education for minoritized students. **Minoritized** individuals possess **non-dominant identities**, such as LGBTQ+, women, disabled, non-Christian, non-white, and/or emergent multilingual individuals (Smoley, 1999). A high quality education for minoritized students includes equitable access to opportunities, experiences, and resources that support their success inside and outside the classroom (Moore, Jackson, Skelton, & Thorius, 2019). School boards should work with the community to promote the success of all students (Mountford, 2004); however, many school

boards fall short of collaboration with the community (Lorentzen, 2013). This lack of community collaboration has a direct impact upon minoritized students, reinforcing the lack of understanding of historical narratives, and thus also reinforcing inequitable structures embedded in school system policies and practices (Lorentzen, 2013).



### **Transformative Change Requires a School Board with a Critical Lens**

How can **transformative change** occur in a school community if the governing body doesn't

listen to all members of the community, particularly those who have been historically and continue to be marginalized? The answer is that transformative change toward educational equity can't occur when the school board doesn't incorporate the voices of the minoritized communities. When school boards assume that school is a culturally neutral space where inequities do not exist, then inequitable systems persist, reinforcing the **privilege** of students, families, and educators with dominant identities, while marginalizing others (Radd & Kramer, 2013). Privilege refers to any advantage that is unearned, exclusive, and socially conferred (Johnson, 2006).

Educators can hold a notion of academic success and traditional "smartness" that is based upon dominant culture, values, and norms (Leonardo & Broaderick, as cited in Hernandez-Saca, 2016; McKown & Weistein, 2008). If school boards do not critically examine these and other assumptions of students' capabilities, inequities in the school system persist, as the lived experiences of minoritized individuals are not considered, respected, or reflected in district policies and practices (Lorentzen, 2013). A school board's critical examination of district governance is crucial in starting to address the entrenched inequities resulting in

oppressive schools and classroom systems.

### **Listening to Minoritized Communities is Critical**

Locally elected school boards are comprised of publicly-elected officials, and the public's ability to provide input to these officials is a fundamental right in the United States of America (Underwood, 2017). This right is crucial to the power of minoritized communities to collectively question an inequitable school system, which can include a lack of authentic representation of minoritized identities in school curriculum and staff, discriminatory policies and practices in discipline and dress code, lack of access to advanced placement classes for groups of students with non-dominant identities (Moore, Jackson, Kyser, Skelton, & Thorius, 2016), and more. A school board that dismisses the concerns of minoritized communities impacts its engagement with ALL communities it serves and undermines its own function (Sell, 2006).

### **School Boards Possess Tremendous Power**

The philosophy, attitude, and practices of the local school board directly impact all administrators and staff in the school system, as it is the school board that sets their priorities (Reed, 1982). As such, a dismissive attitude of the school board toward the pressing concerns of minoritized communities can be reflected throughout the district by its personnel (Chavkin & Williams, 1993).

Every school board election is a new opportunity for community members to have their beliefs and values represented in the school board's policy making and decisions (Mizell, 2010). However, it is common that community members often are not familiar with the stances of individuals running for the local school board (Superfine, 2005). Because school board election choices are often on the back of the ballot (Moore, Jackson, Skelton, & Thorius, 2019), commonly little attention is paid to the power of these candidates

to directly impact students' learning, opportunities, and outcomes, not only for their generation, but for generations to come (Mizell, 2010).

## **Why You Should Care**

### **Equity-Focused Professional Development for School Board Members Can Enact Transformative Change Across a District**

#### **School Boards Determine the Holistic Educational Experience**

Local school boards impact all aspects of pk-12 education, including standards; access to diverse and effective teachers, tools, and resources for teaching and learning; nutritious food; transportation; and extracurricular activities (Superfine, 2005). An equity-focused school board ensures that their governance facilitates this access, and thus high academic and social outcomes for all students (Fraser, 2008; Great Lakes Equity Center, 2012).

One manner in which school boards affect the pk-12 experience is to determine the **cultural responsiveness** of curricula—where minoritized identities and histories are respected and represented in the classroom and in curricular materials (Paris, 2012). These culturally responsive practices help ensure a safe and inclusive classroom, school, and district where all identities of students and community members are welcome and valued (McLaren, 1997).

#### **Equity-Focused Professional Development is Essential**

A focus on equity means the school board is engaged in a continuous journey, for there is always equity work to be done. One manner in which a school





board can focus on equity is to engage in equity-centered professional development (Moore et al., 2016) in which the board members build an understanding of

educational equity and what it means to be equity-focused as it pertains to their responsibilities and capabilities as a governing body. Equity-focused professional development includes the internal reflective work of cultivating one’s **critical consciousness**—“the willingness and ability to see how power and privilege are at work to systematically advantage some while simultaneously disadvantaging others” (Radd & Kramer, 2013; Moore, Jackson, Skelton, & Thorius, 2019, p. 4).

School board members examining their own biases and assumptions about certain groups with marginalized identities involves holding **critical conversations** about their internal beliefs and biases, which have direct implications for the myriad ways in which they impact the educational experience (Moore, Jackson, Skelton, & Thorius, 2019). Through equity-focused professional learning, school board members gain an understanding of their responsibility to represent all community members in their governance (Kyser, personal communication, August 14, 2019), focusing on the importance of equity and disrupting the perpetuation of inequitable practices in their operations and reinforcement of discriminatory systems and practices (Superfine, 2005).

Equity-focused professional development challenges school board members to view themselves, as well as board policies and practices, through a **critical lens**, examining and interrogating the ways in which school boards have interacted historically with minoritized communities, current engagement practices and their relationship to those communities, and the reasons for the actions behind these interactions (Skelton, personal

communication, August 14, 2019).

Through shifting to a focus on equity in all that they do, which includes internal and external critical reflection, school boards signal an expectation to staff and the school community that it’s time for transformative change—in district philosophy, practices, and attitudes (Kyser, personal communication, August 14, 2019).

## Moving Forward

### Key Questions to Ask School Board Candidates to Ensure an Equity Focus

Although we many not think of them as such, elected school board members are politicians (Sell, 2006). Like any other politician, they are publicly-elected and therefore subject to close public examination and held accountable for their actions by the communities they represent (Kerr, 1964). Therefore, when the public is prepared to ask school board candidates about their stances on equity issues, they can better judge if these candidates will have an equity focus when serving on the school board.

The following are some questions that school community stakeholders can ask candidates in order to assess a candidate’s stance on equity (adapted from CABE, 2019; Moore, Jackson, Skelton, & Thorius, 2019).

1. What kind of relationship will you have with the local community, especially minoritized parents and families, and how do you plan to cultivate those relationships? How can you ensure that equity is considered in those relationships?
2. How will you measure the achievement of the school board’s goals and objectives? How will you ensure that minoritized communities are considered when forming these goals and how will you assess their impact upon minoritized communities?

3. How should and how will the board prioritize issues? How will you ensure that minoritized communities are considered when setting these priorities? How will you ensure that input is received from these communities and that their perspectives are considered when setting priorities?
4. How do you plan to make the board accessible to all members of the community, with particular attention to minoritized communities (i.e. communities of Color, religious communities, disability communities)? How do you plan to (better) cultivate relationships with these communities?
5. How would you emphasize equity and inclusion on the school board? In the district? How would you ensure a safe and inclusive district for all individuals regardless of identity, from whole district to the classroom?
6. What is your stance on the role of school board members in advocacy? What issues are important to you? How have you and how do you plan to express your advocacy?
7. What are the community-based leadership responsibilities of the school board? How do you plan to lead the school board and the district in the pursuit of equity and inclusion?
8. What are some pressing issues in education and for the school board? What are your stances on these issues?
9. What board responsibilities do you prioritize? How would you ensure that the board prioritizes these responsibilities? How would you ensure that these responsibilities are prioritized in terms of the needs of minoritized communities?
10. Why are you running for the school board?



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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. The Equity by Design briefs 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

Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center is committed to the sharing of information regarding issues of equity in education. The contents of this practitioner brief were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education (Grant S004D110021). However, these contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement

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