



Getting Better at Getting More Equitable

**Addressing Racial Inequities in Education Using Equity-Driven
Continuous Improvement**

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Introduction

The Need for Equity-Driven Continuous Improvement

Although education is often assumed to be the foundation of equal opportunity in the U.S., race-based disparities continue to pervade the country's education systems. With growing recognition of racial inequities in education, stakeholders are increasingly interested in investigating the conditions that have contributed to inequitable opportunities and outcomes for students of color since the beginning of the U.S. education system, and in identifying opportunities to transform these conditions.

In recent decades, some education leaders have turned to a continuous improvement approach in an effort to understand and address the root causes of inequities in education (Bryk et al., 2015; Gallagher et al., 2019; Hough et al., 2017). Continuous improvement refers to “an ongoing effort over time that leads to higher levels of performance” (Hough et al., 2017, p. 4); it is characterized by the use of a disciplined methodology to diagnose and address problems in education systems by engaging system stakeholders to test incremental changes aimed at achieving improvement. While WestEd's research (Valdez et al., 2020) indicates that continuous improvement methods hold promise for addressing systemic inequities, these methods have not

generally been effectively leveraged to address racial inequities, racism, and other forms of systemic oppression.

Education leaders interviewed for a study exploring the potential for an equity-driven continuous improvement approach attributed the lack of focus on equity in some continuous improvement efforts “to the white male-dominated perspective” of early quality improvement leaders such as W. Edwards Deming, Walter Shewhart, and Joseph Juran (Valdez et al., 2020). Furthermore, some education leaders interviewed for the study described some of the early approaches to applying improvement processes as “rigid and overly structured methods for system improvement, with very linear cause-and-effect assumptions about change.” Such approaches were of particular concern to practitioners who believed that addressing deeply rooted systemic inequities requires a thorough understanding of and keen attention to the explicit, semi-explicit, and implicit conditions of complex systems (Kania et al., 2018). Accordingly, a growing body of work suggests that continuous improvement efforts in education will continue to fall short until they explicitly address racial and other inequities.

Intentionally and meaningfully centering equity in improvement work — rather than siloing equity and improvement as separate areas of work — requires new tools, processes, and approaches. In California, some schools, school districts, and county offices of education (COEs) treat continuous improvement and equity as discrete streams of work that are coordinated by distinct teams and offices (Valdez et al., 2020). Yet some education systems are beginning to bridge this divide by designing improvement approaches that explicitly address systemic inequities.¹

Informed by research, by WestEd staff expertise on equity and improvement, and by feedback from participating COE leaders, this paper summarizes the ways in which a select group of COE leaders are developing continuous improvement practices to address racial inequities — both internally and in the school districts they support — and provides details on the specific organizational conditions and individual capacities that need to be in place to carry out this work. It is intended as a resource for educators and education leaders who are interested in leveraging equity-driven continuous improvement to address racial inequities.

Learning from County Offices of Education in California

The WestEd study team's first research brief on equity-driven continuous improvement (Valdez et al., 2020) surfaced challenges and opportunities for using continuous improvement to address inequities in education but did not focus explicitly on racial inequities. To learn more about how education leaders in California are using equity-driven

continuous improvement to address racial inequities specifically, the WestEd team designed and facilitated a four-part discussion series for COE leaders. Twenty-one leaders representing 13 COEs participated in these learning sessions. The purpose of the series was to share and document conditions, capacities, and practices that contribute to the ability of COEs to implement and support equity-driven continuous improvement to address racial inequities within their organizations and in their work with schools and districts.

The WestEd team focused the learning sessions on COE leaders because of their unique role in the California Statewide System of Support, California's accountability and support system for education. In the Statewide System of Support, COE leaders are charged with providing improvement coaching and guidance to school districts eligible for support based on student performance data from the California School Dashboard. Their central role in this system has positioned COE leaders to serve as thought leaders for equity-driven continuous improvement and to reexamine California's approach to supporting historically underserved students.

The discussion series sought to answer the following questions:

- » What are the key principles of equity-driven continuous improvement?
- » How are COEs utilizing equity-driven continuous improvement to address racial inequities in education systems?
- » What are the organizational conditions and individual capacities (skills and knowledge) necessary in order to successfully implement these strategies?

The first session gave participants an opportunity to develop a common understanding of equity-driven continuous improvement and to explore how they employ it in their respective roles and organizations

¹ Organizations such as the National Equity Project, High Tech High Graduate School of Education, Bank Street College of Education, Stanford d.school, 228 Accelerator, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, and WestEd have all begun work to understand and advance the intersection of equity work and improvement work.

to address racial inequities. The second and third sessions gave participants opportunities first to share equity-driven continuous improvement practices they have used to address racial inequities and then to specifically name the conditions and capacities required in order for COEs and school districts to support these practices. The final session focused

on strategies for utilizing equity-driven continuous improvement to address racial inequities as school districts return to in-person learning as well as strategies for sustaining collective learning across COEs.

This paper presents findings based on the emerging work of the participating COE leaders.

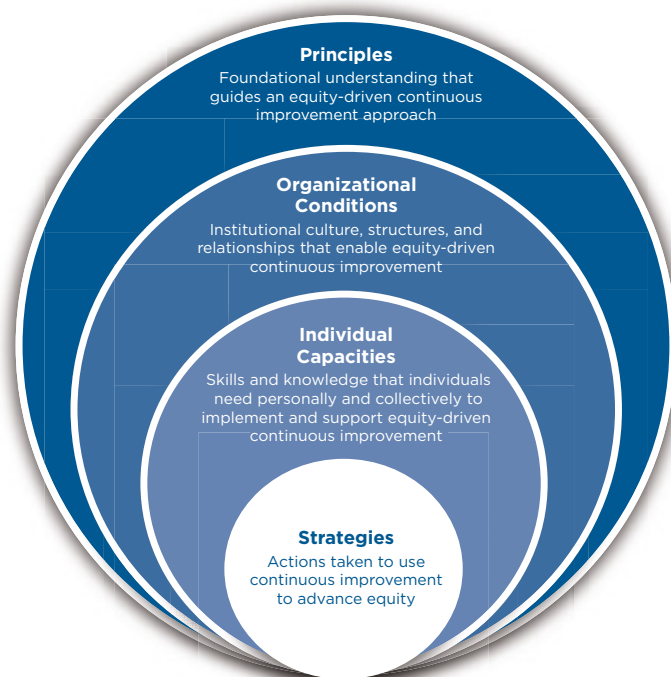
Key Components of Equity-Driven Continuous Improvement

This section outlines the key components of an equity-driven continuous improvement approach, regardless of whether it is used explicitly to address race. In laying out these components, we hope to distinguish between traditional approaches to continuous improvement and continuous improvement work that intentionally addresses inequities. A 2020 report from PACE and WestEd identifies the conditions and capacities required in order to contribute to the success of continuous improvement efforts and to achieve the goals of California’s System of Support for education (Myung et al., 2020). This paper builds on that foundation by identifying organizational conditions and individual capacities necessary for continuous improvement that explicitly addresses racial inequities. Strategies for utilizing an equity-driven continuous improvement approach to address racial inequities are included in pull-out “Promising Practice” boxes throughout the paper.

As illustrated in Figure 1, equity-driven continuous improvement involves four nested components that together foster successful equity-driven continuous improvement practices:

- » Principles (foundational understandings)
- » Organizational Conditions (culture, structures, and relationships)
- » Individual Capacities (individual and collective skills and knowledge)
- » Strategies (actions taken)

Figure 1: Key Components of Equity-Driven Continuous Improvement



Principles for Equity-Driven Continuous Improvement to Address Racial Inequities

One of the key questions that arose from the WestEd team's 2019–20 research was whether continuous improvement, if enacted as intended, is sufficient to address persistent inequities in education systems or if there is a need to define a new approach and focus for improvement work — what we refer to as “equity-driven continuous improvement.” Equity-driven continuous improvement is the use of continuous improvement practices to uncover, understand, and eliminate inequitable opportunities, experiences, and outcomes based on race, ethnicity, language, immigration status, gender, ability, and other identities and experiences. The WestEd team synthesized and categorized the main points from our discussions with COE leaders to highlight common principles that enabled them to specifically address racial inequities in their systems. Four key principles were identified; these are described below.

Equity-Driven Continuous Improvement to Address Racial Inequities is aligned with anti-racist work. To address racial inequities, equity-driven continuous improvement needs to intentionally surface racism that is embedded in education systems through antiracist work. Racism is “the systemic oppression of a racial group to the social, economic and political advantage of another” (Merriam-Webster, 2020) and antiracism is “a process of actively identifying and opposing racism” (Cherry, 2020).

Being antiracist results from a conscious decision to make frequent, consistent, equitable choices daily. These choices require ongoing self-awareness and self-reflection as we move through life. In the absence of making antiracist choices, we (un)consciously uphold aspects of white supremacy, white-dominant culture, and unequal institutions and society. Being racist or antiracist is not about who you are; it is about what you do. (National Museum of African American History and Culture, 2020)

Discussions among the COE leaders revealed that equity-driven continuous improvement aligns in many ways with antiracist efforts. For instance, participants described how their equity-driven continuous improvement efforts have encouraged local education agency (LEA) and COE staff members to examine how systemic racism — or the relationships, policies, practices, programs, and power dynamics that have been influenced by the historical legacy of racism — contributes to students' differential experiences, opportunities, and outcomes. Participants also discussed strategies for learning directly from students about how they experience their school systems.

COE leaders agreed that failing to acknowledge race and to address racism explicitly in continuous improvement efforts consistently causes improvement work to fall short. In place of race-neutral improvement approaches, equity-driven continuous improvement should include protocols and processes that prompt discussions and actions that eliminate policies and alter mindsets that perpetuate inequitable opportunities for students of color. COE leaders shared ideas and suggestions for how to design more equitable student learning experiences and opportunities; they also discussed the need to develop new tools and processes for engaging in improvement work that explicitly focuses on racial inequities.

Equity-Driven Continuous Improvement to Address Racial Inequities requires that system leaders take action to address individual, interpersonal, and institutional racism. In order to create change that contributes effectively to equitable student experiences and outcomes, leaders must first look to themselves. This entails recognizing the urgent need to address racism in education systems and the potential role of leaders in perpetuating racial inequities. As one participant said, leaders must have a “willingness to personally reflect on their beliefs and possible biases [and] . . . be able to think critically about their own beliefs and practices in order to be able to see where some change may need to take place.”

In addition to addressing their own biases, leaders need to dismantle the inequitable policies and practices in their organizations so as to create equitable opportunities, experiences, and outcomes for students of color.

Equity-Driven Continuous Improvement to Address Racial Inequities must be implemented in partnership with those who are most affected by the system. Equity-driven continuous improvement should be based on sharing power and decision-making with system stakeholders. Schools and school districts frequently implement change without the expertise of the students, families, educators, and communities that they serve. Equity-driven continuous improvement to address racial inequities centers the knowledge and experiences of stakeholders most affected by the system — particularly Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and other communities of color — by partnering with them in identifying what is contributing to inequities; in generating ideas for change; and in testing, implementing, and monitoring change.

Equity-Driven Continuous Improvement to Address Racial Inequities work cannot be carried out by individuals alone, nor should responsibility for this work fall only to people of color. No single person in a COE, nor in any organization, can be solely responsible for equity-driven continuous improvement work internally or externally. Everyone in the organization should be responsible for equity-driven continuous improvement — the responsibility should not fall only to people of color, who are often either designated or individually inspired to do this work. Without collective efforts, a disproportionate burden is placed on a small group of people and the possibilities for transformational change remain limited.

We expect that these principles should and will continue to be refined by those working on equity-driven continuous improvement in their local contexts. We will also continue to refine these principles as we dig deeper into strategies for using equity-driven continuous improvement to address racial inequities in education and to improve opportunities and outcomes for Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and other underserved students.

Organizational Conditions for Using Equity-Driven Continuous Improvement to Address Racial Inequities

Increasingly, COEs are in a position to help school districts address inequitable student opportunities and outcomes based on race. As one county leader shared, “Two years ago we had to beg [school districts] to do racial equity work. Now there’s a lot of demand.” COEs, like school districts, are systems that must contend with systemic racism. This allows them to do a better job supporting school districts and schools to do the same. Some county offices have started internal equity work, including work to address racial inequities; others are just beginning to explore what this work might look like. While explicit practices such as developing more equitable human resource policies or professional learning practices are critical, there are also organizational conditions — commitment to equity, systemwide approach, trust, shared power, and leadership diversity — that county offices, like other systems, need to have in place in order to engage in equity-driven improvement work directed at racial inequities. This section describes the necessary organizational conditions discussed by COE leaders during the learning sessions.

Leadership that demonstrates commitment and support for utilizing equity-driven continuous improvement to address racial inequities. One key condition discussed by county participants was the commitment and support of leadership at the highest levels for internal and external equity-driven continuous improvement to address racial inequities. Without support and participation from county leadership, who can generate urgency for the need to address systemic inequities and can dedicate resources to this work, it is difficult for COEs to secure time, resources, learning opportunities, and staff participation to support addressing racial inequities either internally or with school districts. As one county leader stated, “It’s important for the superintendent to be behind this work.”

Leadership support is also important so that county staff members feel they can take risks and be innovative; speak honestly about their experiences, including those involving people in positions of power; and be vulnerable in efforts to examine and address racial inequities in education systems. COE staff need to know that the superintendent will support them through potentially difficult conversations about race with COE stakeholders. Participant discussions revealed that county and district leaders sometimes feared losing their jobs for engaging in racial equity work.

Equally important is the level of support from county office leadership for racial equity efforts. This includes how leaders decide to allocate resources for equity-driven continuous improvement to address racial inequities; how they communicate the importance of this work and their support of it; how they demonstrate their support of staff leading racial equity initiatives; and how they themselves demonstrate their willingness to engage in racial equity efforts and to do so with honesty and vulnerability. While reflecting on the conditions needed for COEs to address racial inequities, one county leader shared, “It’s 100 percent dependent on the willingness of our leaders to be vulnerable and brave.” Another county leader referenced the importance of demonstrated commitments from COE boards of education, including commitments to adopt policies and to support equity-driven efforts that address racial inequities.

A systemwide approach to addressing racial inequities. Prioritizing and integrating equity efforts throughout an organization as a continuous improvement approach was another key condition highlighted by discussion participants. As one county leader stated, “Equity is the work, and [we] can’t expect districts to do the work if [we] haven’t done the work ourselves.”

County leaders discussed how systemwide efforts to address racial inequities lead to greater understanding and goodwill across an organization as well as stronger alignment across county office units for supporting school districts. In one county office, each unit has an equity plan. A leader from

this COE shared how their county’s information technology unit was at first confused about why it was being asked to engage in conversations about equity but now has included explicit equity goals in its department work plan and is making connections to how its work contributes to equitable learning experiences and outcomes for students of different racial and ethnic groups. The same COE also launched stakeholder advisory committees and monthly student panels to learn regularly from youth, families, community members, and educators about their experiences in local school systems as well as about how the county office might improve its support of school districts based on this learning. Opportunities for ongoing investigation and reflection about stakeholder experiences and outcomes within systems is necessary for organizations that want to disrupt explicit and implicit racism and bias internally and externally.

Several county leaders emphasized the importance of equity work not being confined to a single unit or team but instead being a responsibility shared across an organization. As one leader stated, “It was intentional to not have a [separate] equity unit until equity work was embedded in every unit [across the COE].” Another leader shared that their office “put together an equity committee with people from different divisions. [The] committee helps identify equity needs in each division, and . . . [discusses] what needs to be done to be equitable and shift the paradigm.”

To learn more about how COEs are implementing a systemic approach to racial equity, see the “Promising Practice” box immediately below for how one COE has tried to address equity through each of its departments as well the following “Promising Practice” box for how a group of COEs is cooperating to address inequities in services for students experiencing homelessness. Another COE has extended its equity work beyond the office itself by partnering with key agencies and community partners across its county to bring greater impact to its equity work. The “Promising Practice” box below features details about how the COE is working collaboratively with other county agencies to focus on inequities.

Promising Practice: Riverside COE Addresses Equity Across All of Its Departments

Riverside COE shared how it is integrating continuous improvement with equity, frequently focused on addressing racial inequities, in each of the teams in its Educational Services Department:

- » The Assessment, Accountability, and Continuous Improvement Unit has been coaching school teams to utilize state and local data to identify equity gaps and inform actions to address the gaps in district- and school-level plans.
- » The School of Education has developed an equity-driven mission in its preparation of new teachers and administrators.
- » The College and Career Readiness Unit has initiated projects to examine demographic disparities in grading practices and the success of high school students.
- » The Educational Technology Unit has incorporated equity into its professional development offerings, such as the use of equity-themed keynote addresses in their Google Camps.
- » The Pupil and Administrative Services Unit has supported school employees in creating a safe and welcoming environment for all learners.
- » The Instructional Services Unit has provided professional development and coaching to teachers in utilizing culturally responsive teaching and universal design for learning pedagogy to create equitable classroom learning environments.
- » The Equity and Access Unit has offered professional development support and coaching for districts and county offices that build the capacity of staff to systematize racial and educational equity and that use culturally responsive practices as a methodology to address systemic equity issues.

These lines of work indicate a countywide commitment to equity-driven continuous improvement in Riverside's support of its schools.

Promising Practice: Bay Area Geographic Lead Consortium Offers Services for Students Experiencing Homelessness

Over the last two years and during the COVID-19 pandemic, the members of the Bay Area Geographic Leads Consortium (composed of Alameda, Contra Costa, San Mateo, Santa Clara, and Solano COEs) have learned together how best to support districts in improving outcomes for students experiencing homelessness (WestEd, 2021). In each of these five counties, around 2 percent of students were identified as homeless before the outbreak of COVID-19, which likely increased these numbers. Across California, 9 percent of homeless students are African American and 70 percent are Latinx, according to 2018-19 census data (Jones, 2020).

Each of the five COEs have worked with districts identified for Differentiated Assistance (DA) based on outcomes for students who experience homelessness. For example, Alameda COE used process maps with district liaisons to explicate and improve how districts were identifying students experiencing homelessness and connecting them to resources. In addition, the COE coordinated with districts to provide food, personal protective items, and Wi-Fi hotspots; intensified its support of districts; and made its messaging to districts more consistent and aligned.

Through the Geographic Lead Consortium, these five COEs shared promising strategies with each other and tested these strategies with their own districts. Through these efforts, the five COEs have successfully reduced by 19 the number of districts that now meet criteria for DA based on outcomes for students who experience homelessness.

Another COE has extended its equity work beyond the office itself by partnering with key agencies and community partners across its county to bring greater impact to its equity work. The “Promising Practice” box below features details about how the COE is working collaboratively with other county agencies to focus on inequities.

Promising Practice: Shasta COE Partners with Community Agencies to More Fully Support Students' Needs

The Shasta County Office of Education (SCOE) has sought to work with county agencies and community partners to support students with needs that are beyond what a school or district can provide.

Site administrators can refer students struggling with attendance to an online portal that provides a referral process to support students with needed resources. Last fall, SCOE leaders noticed that a high percentage of students being referred were Native American. As a result, SCOE reached out to the Local Indians for Education (LIFE) Center to get help talking with families because the LIFE Center is trusted by the community and can therefore better connect students with resources.

SCOE has also begun to collect data on students referred to its community partners to ensure student needs are being met. These data are also shared with district superintendents, Student Attendance and Review Teams, county agencies, and community partners to inform ongoing efforts to support students identified for early intervention.

Relational trust among colleagues and across an organization.

COE leaders frequently acknowledged that trust and relationships are foundational for all equity-driven continuous improvement and particularly for addressing systemic racism. Building relationships within and across county office units to undertake equity-centered continuous improvement was seen as essential to generating ideas, sharing challenges, exchanging information, and aligning support to school districts. Perhaps more important, however, was building trust with colleagues. With relational trust, people are more likely to demonstrate vulnerability, interest, and willingness to participate in change efforts (Bryk and Schneider, 2002; Eppinga et al., 2018). As one county leader shared, “Trust is the foundation to this work [and is] foundational to working on implicit bias.”

In addition to building relationships and trust internally, county leaders discussed the importance of cultivating trusting relationships with school district leaders and stakeholders in order to support them to address racial inequities within their systems. One county leader shared,

Conversations [with district leaders] show that districts want to do the work but don't know where to start. [They] feel overwhelmed. People are afraid to have the conversations and do the work. [They feel] threatened about losing their jobs. [This] gave us [an] understanding of how to support [school district leaders] and what approach to take.

Relational trust can be established through practices such as transparent and consistent communication; regular opportunities for providing feedback; shared decision-making; humble, vulnerable, and inquiry-based leadership; and individual and small-group connection activities. The “Promising Practice” box below highlights how using a small-group learning approach to equity-driven continuous improvement can help build the relational trust necessary to advance racial equity in education.

Promising Practice: Intensive Small-Group Conversations About Race Hold Potential to Advance Racially Equitable Practices

Through a discussion series with a small but committed group of COE leaders, we observed that conversations about advancing equity-driven continuous improvement got deeper, more personal, and more meaningful to participants with each session. In one session, participants stressed that, in their own work, opportunities to be part of a small, reflective cohort focused on advancing racially equitable practices were more effective than trainings conducted in large groups in advancing organizational change. This finding supports research on professional learning that indicates it is most effective when sustained over time (Reitzug, 2002) and that one-off implicit bias trainings fail to show benefits that last longer than a day or two (Lai et al., 2016).

Given the time it takes to establish trust, to create and reinforce collaborative norms, and to define a common language, using intensive small-group conversations over time can be more effective than large-group settings in advancing reflective conversations and unearthing effective practices for equity-driven continuous improvement to address racial inequities.

Shared power and decision-making with system stakeholders. While stakeholder engagement is an expectation of California school districts, it is less common for COEs, particularly when it comes to generating ideas for change and making decisions about county priorities. Drawing on the tenets of continuous improvement, a user-centered approach to change is paramount for enabling COEs to address racial inequities internally and externally. In school districts, students, families, educators, and community members participate in shared decision-making through a range of venues, including school site councils, LCAP advisory committees, school boards, student governing bodies, and participatory action research initiatives. Many COEs, however, only experience direct engagement with stakeholders through the support they provide to school districts — and this engagement is primarily about district-based change rather than county-based change.

Some COEs are beginning engage students, families, educators, and community members in county-level improvement efforts, as a strategy to address systemic racism. By shifting the power dynamics around whose voices are included in decision-making and by learning directly from stakeholders who are experiencing the system, county offices and school districts alike can generate more meaningful, lasting change that improves experiences, opportunities, and outcomes for historically underrepresented and underserved individuals and communities. The “Promising Practice” boxes below provide two examples of how one COE has engaged the community and incorporated students voices in its equity-driven continuous improvement work to address racial inequities.

Promising Practice: San Diego COE Engaged Families and the Community to Inform Creation of their Equity Department

During the development of the Equity Department at SDCOE, staff hosted a series of World Cafés to hear the voices of the community, including parents, secondary and college students, community organizations, district staff, and COE staff. Sessions were held at the COE; two districts provided the physical space to hold the cafés in their region of the county. The goal was to learn what the community wanted in a COE Equity Department, to discuss partnership opportunities, and to talk through the tensions and dilemmas that might emerge as the COE moved forward with creating the department. Through these engagements, SDCOE was able to learn directly from its stakeholders about priorities for system improvements, a key element of equity-driven continuous improvement.

Promising Practice: San Diego COE Directly Engages Students to Learn About Their Experiences of Racism

San Diego County Office of Education (SDCOE) directly engages students in order to learn from their experiences of racism, thereby strengthening the equity-driven continuous improvement work of both the county and the LEAs it supports.

SDCOE is carrying out various efforts to center the experiences of students and bring to light their lived experiences of racism in the county's schools. For instance, through the Differentiated Assistance process, SDCOE asks districts to shadow and conduct empathy interviews with students from the racial groups it is seeking to better support. In addition, SDCOE highlights and then asks districts to discuss stories that students share over social media and experiences of racism in their schools. SDCOE has started facilitating monthly student panels to learn directly from students about how they are experiencing racism in the school systems in the county. In addition, it has launched a number of youth, family, and community advisory groups to help guide the work of the county office, including Black, Latinx, and Native American advisory groups.

Recruiting and retaining leaders of color.

Discussion participants stressed the importance of recruiting and retaining employees of color within COEs and in school districts and schools. While racial equity work requires participation from all county and district employees, several county leaders agreed that having leaders who reflect and share the experiences of students of color is fundamental to disrupting racial inequities and generating meaningful, lasting change in education systems. Accordingly, some COEs are taking

a careful look at their human resource policies, practices, and outcomes. One leader shared that their county office began conducting a root-cause analysis of why it lacks diversity in staffing. Another county leader discussed how their county office is reviewing workforce data and engaging staff in making sense of that data.

Equally important to recruiting is retaining leaders of color through leadership and career advancement opportunities as well as through fully valuing

the experiential knowledge and expertise that leaders of color bring to the table. These could include opportunities to lead or partner in equity work (with full support, acknowledgment, and resources) while taking care neither to limit opportunities to this area nor to expect leaders of color to do the work alone. As one leader expressed, “Leadership is lonely. Equity work is even lonelier. Staying professional and helping others can be emotionally draining and having space to support people doing the work is helpful.”

Participants discussed how employees of color often have less decision-making and positional power in COEs, making it difficult for employees of color to feel safe taking risks at work. Providing opportunities for leaders of color to engage in decision-making roles can help more people across an organization feel they can safely engage in equity work around systemic racism.

Creating opportunities and expectations for professional learning to explicitly address implicit bias and structural racism. Opportunities for professional learning were frequently mentioned as an essential condition for county offices to strengthen their ability to facilitate equity-driven continuous improvement internally and with school districts. Specifically, participants noted the importance of professional learning opportunities that allowed COE leaders to engage in shared learning within and across both units and COEs about the history and impact of race and racism in the U.S. Participants also mentioned the importance of opportunities to learn and think about how to address implicit bias as well as individual, interpersonal, and institutional racism in education systems. While some county offices are facilitating these learning efforts internally, others are relying on outside technical assistance providers to support COE capacity building. One leader referred to partnering with organizations like The Education Trust-West and the National Equity Project (NEP) to help their county office build capacity for internal and external racial equity work. They also emphasized the importance of engaging partners “with [the] same mindset and language around systems change and equity work.” For some

county offices, professional learning about systemic racism and racial inequities is confined to specific units or teams, making it difficult to build systemwide capacity.

Some leaders described having limited opportunities to engage in shared learning across COEs. Some statewide webinars (e.g., a series of trainings by NEP for COEs and other education leaders) and conferences have provided space for county leaders to learn together about racism in education systems. However, opportunities for regular, ongoing learning remain scarce. One leader shared,

I don't think we've done the work of looking at our own biases. It's important to look inward and we need assistance with that and support with that. Until we have an understanding of what our own frame of reference is and how we can work with others effectively, we won't get anywhere. It strikes me that some of the counties are further along. We are not.

Another leader shared, “There is a need to create an equity leadership group to talk about the issues discussed in the [COE discussion series] breakout sessions.”

Providing adequate resources to support equity-driven continuous improvement to address racial inequities in education systems. Resources are the assets of organizations — financial, material, intellectual, informational, technological, and personnel — that are necessary to ensure equitable access and inclusion, treatment, supports, and technology for all their stakeholders. Determining the resources necessary to adequately support equity-driven continuous improvement to address systemic racial inequities includes taking into account the level and type of resources required to implement and sustain this equity work over time.

As some county leaders noted, equity work is frequently underfunded and undervalued. System leaders are regularly asked to design and implement racial equity initiatives with scant resources, placing heavy burdens on leaders to work beyond their hours to do what is needed and reducing

the potential for the work to generate meaningful change (Valdez et al., 2020). Increasingly, however, more COEs and school districts are dedicating additional resources to establish the conditions and capacities necessary to address systemic racism. Antiracist work is also gaining more traction. One county office, for example, funded antiracist training for teacher teams and required school administrators to attend alongside their teams.

Many of the leaders involved in the learning sessions are working to develop conditions of adequate resources within their COEs and are also helping the school districts they support to do the same.

Individual Capacities for Using Equity-Driven Continuous Improvement to Address Racial Inequities

Participating COE leaders surfaced several capacities that they believe to be necessary in using equity-driven continuous improvement to address racial inequities and racism. These included capacities that leaders and their staff needed to develop internally as well as capacities that would enable them to support schools and districts effectively in order to engage in equity-centered continuous improvement.

Internal capacities included but were not limited to: an understanding of systemic inequities and its impacts; the ability to engage in “mirror work” or self-reflection practices; and the building of facilitation skills and conversational capacity. In many county offices, only a few individuals currently have the knowledge and capacity to lead equity-centered work. One county leader expressed the need to bring in external support because there was “not enough capacity among staff to do the work right now, especially because [they] wanted training to happen quickly.” Another county leader described the need to do “internal work as a model” before rolling out equity work to districts. Accordingly, there was strong agreement among participants that internal capacity building was necessary before they could adequately address external needs.

This section describes several individual capacities for advancing equity-driven continuous improvement to address racial inequities. These capacities were informed by discussions with COE leaders during the learning sessions in combination with the knowledge and practice experience of WestEd authors as well as research on equity and improvement in education.

Knowing the origins of systemic racial inequities and their impacts.

Several county leaders identified the need for those engaging in equity-centered work around systemic inequities to have a collective understanding of the fundamental elements of educational equity, including what it is and why there is an urgent need to focus on it. There was also acknowledgment, as one county leader noted, of the need for awareness of the “historical and systemic structures and beliefs that have created inequities.” Understanding the impacts of historical and current legal decisions, policies, and societal practices helps individuals in a learning organization to understand the deep systemic nature of inequity in schools as well as to recognize systemic inequities and disparities as they occur in education and other settings.

One county office leader shared how their COE has included equity learning at all of its monthly Superintendents’ meetings and Instructional Leadership Network meetings with district Assistant Superintendents of Instruction. The COE also holds an annual Equity Symposium and follow-up equity training series focused on transforming learning into action. In addition to understanding local, national and global histories of inequities and the direct impact they have on education systems and practices, it is also important to build collective knowledge around the body of research related to equity in education systems.

Using data for equity-driven improvement.

Building data capacity to improve equity involves increasing the knowledge and skills of educators throughout the system to use evidence to drive decision-making rather than relying upon assumptions and beliefs. Equity-driven continuous improvement is intended to result in measurable positive

outcomes for all students. To that end, improvement work is designed to eliminate opportunity gaps and disproportionality in student achievement. System leaders need to have the ability to identify appropriate measures, collect and identify data, and pinpoint gaps in their data systems. Although there is no clear, agreed upon definition of data literacy, research indicates that “the knowledge and skills involved in being literate in the use of data are interconnected with the knowledge and skills involved in being an effective teacher and administrator” (Mandinach & Gummer, 2012).

In Getting better at getting more equitable: Opportunities and barriers for using continuous improvement to advance educational equity (Valdez et al., 2020), one of the barriers to equity-driven improvement that surfaced was a lack of access to data necessary to inform continuous improvement work. This included a lack of complete data, access only to data that are presented in ways that are hard to understand, data that is not disaggregated by all student groups, and a lack of the right kind of data — “nuanced information about the places in the system where

inequities arise” (Valdez et al., 2020). Equity-driven continuous improvement needs both quantitative and qualitative data. For example, the “Promising Practice” box below describes how one county office has used equity audits designed by the National Center for Urban School Transformation — which employ research-proven observation and reporting methodologies to provide data for schools — to inform its equity-driven continuous improvement work with districts.

Qualitative data allows leaders to see the disconnects between what they believe about the system and the reality of how the system operates — and whom it advantages and disadvantages. When included as part of improvement work, insights from qualitative data can create an urgency for action by surfacing previously unrecognized issues. In addition to qualitative measures, COE leaders discussed how they support districts to use data to identify root causes of inequities in their systems. The “Promising Practice” boxes below show how two COEs have supported districts in using the Differentiated Assistance process to better address racial inequities.

Promising Practice: Kern County Developed Equity Audits to Enhance Their Continuous Improvement Process

The Kern County Superintendent of Schools worked with the National Center for Urban School Transformation to develop equity audits as part of the Continuous Improvement Process (CIP) that the county facilitates with school districts. Kern’s CIP facilitators engage in data analysis to identify performance gaps between student groups and ask district teams to conduct empathy interviews with students to gain their perspectives on opportunities for school improvement.

The addition of equity audits to the CIP has provided an opportunity for staff to go deeper into equity issues by shadowing specific student groups. Shadowing involves immersing oneself in the student experience by observing an individual student throughout their school day and documenting the resulting observations. This method of gathering data provides staff the opportunity to see how the educational system is being experienced by students in identified student groups as well as how such students are treated. Once data are collected, local equity-driven community organizations provide feedback to the district team as it determines its problem of practice, conducts its root-cause analysis, and develops its action plan.

Promising Practice: Santa Clara COE Incorporated Equity Pauses and Student Simulations to Strengthen Its Differentiated Assistance Support

Santa Clara County Office of Education (SCCOE) uses certain facilitation strategies, including equity pauses and student simulations, to ensure that LEAs are considering the perspectives of students across different identities and experiences, including race and ethnicity.

The “equity pause,” coined by EquityXDesign, is an opportunity for LEA participants working with the SCCOE through Differentiated Assistance (DA) to reflect on their work thus far and the ways in which their work does or does not address the needs of students who are historically and currently underserved by education systems. Equity pauses represent intentional breaks during which participants (who might otherwise be moving through rigid and overly structured methods for continuous improvement) can consider how their work to date does or does not consider the perspectives of students.

As part of their DA process, facilitators in SCCOE also conduct student simulations, during which LEAs are asked to examine their system from the perspective of a student from the racial or ethnic group they are aiming to support. This facilitated process centers students and allows participants to understand how the system revolves around the student from the user’s perspective.

Promising Practice: Alameda COE Works with Districts to Improve Attendance, Engagement, and Graduation for Young People Experiencing Inequitable Learning Conditions, Opportunities, and Outcomes

During the 2020–21 school year, Alameda COE has strengthened its continued support of districts in Differentiated Assistance (DA) focused on the reengagement of particular student groups. While the DA process provides a natural opportunity to use continuous improvement to address inequities, Alameda COE works with districts to be very specific regarding how they are supporting students of color, students experiencing homelessness, youth in foster care, and/or English language learners. For example, the COE has worked with districts to improve how they track attendance during remote instruction, engage particularly vulnerable students returning to the classroom, and identify students not on track to graduate. Through these efforts, Alameda COE has used a continuous improvement approach to hone in on detailed processes that need to be improved, specifically for students most in need of support.

As county office leaders reflected on the capacity building needed to implement equity-driven continuous improvement, one shared that the “lack of data-literacy skills [and] experience at both the district and school levels is a struggle.” Another noted the importance of the “ability to identify racial inequities and disparities within our structures and practices.” COEs need to build their capacity to identify, collect, and analyze data that

expose disproportionality and inequities based on race. Part of building this capacity is learning what questions to ask and which data to analyze. Support for data sense-making conversations — including how to facilitate these conversations and the use of data discussion protocols — is also critical for keeping the focus on changes the school system can make, rather than blaming students or their families for inequitable outcomes.

To support these sense-making conversations, San Diego COE has created a protocol that attempts to interrupt deficit language and unproductive discourse that holds racial inequities in place. For example, the protocol suggests that if a district leader uses the phrase “those students,” the county leader could respond with, “I heard you say ‘those students.’ It seems like there may be something you are not saying. . . . How are you thinking about the students you are referring to?” By using the tool, county leaders can interrupt and confront discourse that is counterproductive to equity-driven continuous improvement work.

Engaging in “mirror work.” In addition to collective learning, the ability to engage in meaningful and honest individual self-reflection — also referred to as “mirror work” — is necessary to support the development of growth mindsets and the willingness to learn and change. Racial equity work is an interruption of the status quo. Interrupting and changing system practices requires continued exploration of our own unconscious biases and actions that may be holding systemic inequities in place. Mirror work includes interrogating individual bias and the assumptions that personal beliefs and experiences bring to each person’s work. One county described how it “has been doing internal work among [its] leadership team to call out internal biases” and how its superintendent is involved in having conversations around inequity and bias. Although this is deeply personal work, county offices can build capacity by providing access to and support for individual reflection. County leaders described a number of different approaches to mirror work such as book studies and training by external experts to support them “to think critically about their own beliefs and practices.”

Facilitating conversations about race and inequity.

In order to perform this work internally and externally, county leaders need a particular set of facilitation skills that integrate a high degree of cultural competency — that is, the ability to communicate effectively with people across cultures. In addition to needing to be familiar with andragogy — adult teaching practices — equity-focused facilitators need to be able

to gauge the readiness of an audience and meet them where they are. “Honoring where people are in the journey, knowing when and how to push,” was a capacity that one county felt needed attention. Facilitators need to be able to shift and adapt to recognize and interrupt deficit language and unproductive discourse as well as to hold a space in which productive struggle and emotion are expected and necessary aspects of learning. In addition, facilitators need to understand the roles of teachers and leaders to be able to help identify levers for change and make the content relevant to participants.

Building conversational capacity. Relational trust and safety are conditions that are required for engaging in difficult conversations around equity (Myung et al., 2019). Building relational trust requires conversational capacity: “a team’s [or organization’s] ability to have open, balanced, non-defensive dialogue about difficult subjects” (Weber, 2013). Participants shared a variety of ways in which they are working to create a space in which it is safe to have equity-driven and anti-racist conversations. Some strategies for encouraging open and honest dialogues include setting up community agreements, developing empathy skills, and providing structures for listening to multiple perspectives. COEs sometimes need to bring in external contractors or attend external training to begin this work. One county shared that training for all of its staff in Speed of Trust and Cognitive Coaching was helpful “to create safe environments for all participants to be able to have challenging and sometimes uncomfortable conversations.” Creating safe environments is particularly important as county leaders engage in difficult conversations about student performance with the school districts they support. County leaders have worked to develop trust with the districts they serve so that they can more effectively facilitate conversations around equity-driven improvement and addressing racist mindsets and racially inequitable structures.

Conversational capacity also refers to power dynamics regarding communication within an organization. For example, is it safe for someone

to question current organizational practices and surface inequities? Developing policies and frameworks around equity are a beginning, but county

offices also need to invest in leadership training to support implementation of equitable practices that foster a culture of trust and safety.

The Work Ahead

Throughout the four-part discussion series, COE participants described the kinds of shifts in conditions and capacities required to advance equity-driven continuous improvement to address racial inequities. While they offered a large number of promising practices and were hopeful about the potential for equity-driven continuous improvement to generate real change with regard to racial inequities, participants also raised a variety of challenges, both within COEs and within LEAs, that need to be acknowledged and addressed.

Internal to the COE, participants shared that many COE staff do not feel prepared to lead conversations around race and inequity with LEAs. Although some COEs have addressed this problem by hiring outside organizations such as the National Equity Project or The Education Trust-West, COE leaders recognized that it can be challenging to know where to start to create change internally.

Assessing readiness to change and responding to those not yet prepared to examine their own practices and biases is an ongoing challenge in shifting mindsets and discourse about race within COEs and LEAs. Participants shared that COE and LEA staff are often in different places in their journeys of learning about the ways in which systemic racism affects disparities in outcomes for different racial groups, making it difficult to provide organization-wide or team-based technical assistance that meets the needs of all participants.

Participants also shared that some staff within COEs and LEAs are not always ready or willing to advance racial equity work because of their own implicit biases and dispositions. In some cases, the lack of readiness is for political reasons. Elected officials may have a fear of not being reelected if

the work is not popular with some of the communities they serve. Some stakeholders (e.g., staff, community members, and board members) may believe that improving outcomes for a group of students who have been historically underserved requires taking resources from students who are experiencing success in school. Some staff may blame students and families for low performance, sometimes using coded language to describe what they see as the primary source of problems. Others may react to implicit bias training or explicit conversations about race with extreme defensiveness or a fear of being vulnerable or judged by others. These biases are likely reinforced by imbalances between the ethnic diversity of LEA staff and leadership and that of the students they serve.

Relatedly, participants shared that it can often be challenging to work with LEAs that are not ready to engage in change to disrupt racial inequities or that may not yet recognize the inequities in their systems. COE support can be misinterpreted as a way to pass responsibility for the examination of inequities to another organization. Equity-driven continuous improvement requires a deep commitment to change and significant investment on the part of the COE and LEA to ensure the sustainability of transformation efforts. Some LEAs have asked COEs to provide one-off implicit bias training, while many COEs recognize that longer and more significant partnerships are often required to support LEAs in their improvement.

In order to create long-lasting partnerships with LEAs, COEs stressed the importance of establishing authentic and trusting relationships with district leaders and staff, which can be difficult in part because of the large number of districts requesting support and also due to the high staff

turnover in LEAs. As one COE said, “The transitory nature of some positions in some districts is challenging — the ‘treatment’ is to continually offer ongoing tiered training.” The limited capacity of COE staff to meet the needs of all of their districts can complicate efforts at systemwide change. COEs stressed that they receive more requests for support with equity-driven improvement than they have the staff, time, or resources to provide to LEAs, and that this creates a difficult choice to either limit the number of districts they support or limit the depth of the support they can provide to any one district.

The above challenges, including both how to manage internal efforts to change and how to support LEA staff and leaders who are not yet ready to change, represent areas that must be explored more deeply, with additional research and expertise required in order to ensure that COEs have opportunities to grow and strengthen the capacities and conditions required for equity-driven continuous improvement to address racial inequities.

Conclusion

Our first paper on the intersection of continuous improvement and equity work identified many of the challenges facing a field eager to leverage disciplined improvement methods to address inequities in education (Valdez et al., 2020). While many of these challenges persist, this paper explores the conditions and capacities required in COEs to integrate these two, often separate, lines of work. In focusing specifically on how equity-driven continuous improvement can be applied to the challenges of systemic racism,

many COEs shared how they are developing these conditions and capacities as well as promising practices that can be used to ensure their support of LEAs improves the educational experiences and outcomes of students of color. No COE leader would claim that their work in this area is done. Yet the work that they shared offers insight into how organizations supporting education systems can work both internally and externally to develop the means to address racial inequities using equity-driven continuous improvement.

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