

National Association of State Boards of Education

Building the Capacity of State Boards to Lead for Equity and Excellence

By Kimberly Charis

Since the Supreme Court ruled that the 14th Amendment requires states to desegregate public schools and that diverse learning environments are a compelling state interest,¹ state boards have been developing policies to deliver quality education to all students and overseeing implementation. However, decades later, schools are still racially segregated and the quality of instruction is uneven, which particularly hurts students from less affluent communities where schools are typically underresourced.

As Linda Darling-Hammond explains it: “Through decades of separate and unequal schooling that continue to the present, the right to learn in ways that develop both competence and community has been a myth rather than a reality for many Americans.”²

Many policymakers believe that racism is morally wrong, yet a colorblind approach to equity has kept them largely silent about the relationship between race and academic achievement. The failure to address the persistent patterns by which certain student groups predictably and disproportionately occupy the highest and the lowest achievement categories in reading, math, and science has helped to sustain, and in some cases, widen the achievement gap.³ In order to lead for equity, policymakers must be willing to openly and honestly examine the impact of race on teaching and learning.

The changing U.S. demographic and increasing diversity of student populations should interest state boards in becoming more culturally proficient in their practice. Whether they are reviewing teacher preparation

programs, setting rigorous academic standards, or examining exclusionary discipline practices, state boards are in a position of leadership that sets the stage for addressing disparities and inequities in education. Consequently, if schools are moving away from or toward greater equity largely depends on the state board’s collective capacity to lead in this area.

EQUITY AND THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

In the education policy realm, advancing equity starts with a belief in the educability of all students and a commitment to providing each one with quality instruction in a supportive learning environment. Equity in education will not guarantee that all students succeed, but it does require a commitment to provide every student with the opportunities they need to realize their full potential regardless of race, gender, or socioeconomic status. Achievement gaps are used to measure progress toward equity: That is, are academic proficiency gaps between the highest and lowest performing student groups narrowing or widening?

Many factors help sustain or widen the achievement gap. Family and community factors such as student motivation, parent and family engagement, and socioeconomic status play an important role in academic proficiency. Some scholars even suggest that socioeconomic status is a leading cause. Although wealth and poverty significantly affect learning and achievement, the gap between student racial and ethnic groups persists among students in the same economic strata.⁴

Educational factors associated with the achievement gap are also easily identifiable: teacher preparation, quality of instruction, school climate and discipline, and aca-

democratic curriculum. According to Education Trust’s former president Kati Haycock, most educators would rather focus on factors outside their control when they think about the achievement gap and the reasons for it.⁵ Perhaps the same is true for policymakers. Haycock notes that conversations about student achievement tend to focus on socioeconomic status, family engagement, parents’ educational background, and students’ motivation and ignore what is within the system’s power to change.

Policymakers and educators alike must take responsibility when schools fail to effectively educate every student to their potential. For example, do teacher preparation programs expose educators to cultures of students dissimilar to their own? Where are the most inexperienced and unlicensed educators, and what is the racial and ethnic demographic of students in those schools? Are schools teaching culturally responsive curriculum to all students? Do discipline policies promote practices that support student learning and improve school climate?⁶

An individual’s cultural lens largely determines perception of the primary reasons for the achievement gap. A cultural lens, in turn, is shaped by a person’s racial beliefs and attitudes, which are rooted in personal and professional racial identity and experiences. What educators and policymakers observe and come to understand about equity through their own lenses also determines the level of responsibility they will take for addressing issues driving the achievement gap.

WHAT DO STATE BOARDS NEED TO LEAD?

What does a state board leading for equity look like? And how do state boards know when they are doing equity work? In the second edition of his book, *Courageous Conversations about Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools*, Glenn Singleton posits three requisites for systemic equity transformation: passion, practice, and persistence.

Passion. State boards leading for equity must have passion—a high level of connectedness that each individual member brings to their work. As a foundation of equity leadership, members' passion must be “strong enough to overcome institutional inertia, resistance to change, and resilience in maintaining the status quo.”⁵ Passion inspires leaders for equity to discuss strategies for closing the achievement gap, to consider the role of race and culture on academic achievement, and to examine how their own racial identities might shape the lens through which they view and tackle issues of equity.

Practice. Once state boards have summoned the will, they need skills to confront systemic inequities. Practice is the second most important quality needed for systemic equity transformation. State boards that are committed to developing policymaking practices that lead to equitable systems will engage in meaningful opportunities to enhance their knowledge and skills. For such leaders, it is a moral imperative and a professional responsibility to do everything in their power to ensure educational equity. They refuse to blame underserved students or families when the system falls short of its promise to deliver a quality education to every student, and they are not afraid to examine the role of race on teaching and learning.

Persistence. State boards leading for equity are persistent. They combine urgency and patience in equal measure in order to face challenges and opposition. Under the No Child Left Behind Act, the federal government explicitly required and attempted to hold schools accountable for “closing the achievement gap between high- and low-performing children, especially the achievement gaps between white students and students of color or indigenous students, and between economically disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers.”

Under the Every Student Succeeds Act, states are responsible for setting the standards and metrics by which district and schools are to fulfill this mandate. The act of making policy, monitoring implementation, and evaluating outcomes is work that requires the sustained commitment of state boards.

State boards that are inspired with passion and committed to developing their practice with patience and perseverance can help improve educational outcomes for all students, narrow the achievement gaps, and eliminate the racial disproportionality of high and low achievement.

THE LEADING FOR EQUITY AND EXCELLENCE PROJECT

State boards engaged in the business of policymaking with the intent to lead for equity transformation must be willing to discuss race and other diversity issues that affect the achievement gap. Nearly all state board members who responded to a recent NASBE survey said they believed their state board should take the lead in promoting equity in education policy, yet most had not received any recent training in how to do this work.

NASBE's Leading for Equity and Excellence Project (LEEP) is designed to equip state boards in their efforts to ensure that every student has equal access to high-quality educational resources and opportunities. Through LEEP, state boards can deepen their understanding of the impact of race, equity, and equality on academic achievement through facilitated conversations that are courageous, respectful, and transformative. State boards that participate in LEEP professional development and training activities will learn how to apply a racial, equity, and equality lens to policymaking that supports structural and systemic changes needed to help all students achieve at higher levels and close the achievement gap.

Kimberly Charis is NASBE's director of school climate, discipline, and equity, and as the leader of LEEP, she conducts training for state policymakers. She can be reached at kimberly.charis@nasbe.org.

NOTES

1 *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954); *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978).

2 Linda Darling-Hammond, *The Right to Learn: A Blueprint for Creating Schools That Work* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1997).

3 Glenn E. Singleton, *Courageous Conversations about Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools*, Second Edition (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2015).

4 College Board, “College-Bound Seniors 2010 and 2011,

Total Group Profile Report—Ethnicity” (table 11), as displayed in Singleton, *Courageous Conversations*.

5 Kati Haycock, “Closing the Achievement Gap,” *Educational Leadership* 58, no. 6 (Alexandria, VA: ASCD, March 2001).

6 In her book, *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*, MacArthur Award-winning author Lisa Delpit discusses ways that teachers can be more culturally proficient in the classroom, while overcoming the challenges of stereotypes, implicit bias, and cultural assumption that impede effective teaching and learning strategies (New York: The New Press, 2006). In *Excellence through Equity: Five Principles of Courageous Leadership to Guide Achievement for Every Student*, co-authors Alan Blankstein and Pedro Noguera provide examples of educators, districts, communities, and states that have successfully advanced an equity agenda. *Excellence through Equity* serves as a resource and framework on how to courageously lead for equity through policy and practice (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2015). Tracey L. Shollenberger, in “Racial Disparities in School Suspension and Subsequent Outcomes: Evidence from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth,” develops ideas about the disparate impact of exclusionary discipline and the implications for education policy. *Closing the School Discipline Gap*, edited by Daniel J. Losen (New York: Teacher's College, Columbia University, 2015).

7 Singleton, *Courageous Conversations*.