Creating an Equity Framework That Supports Underserved Students

John Squires and Maxine T. Roberts

Multiple factors — the COVID-19 pandemic, heightened awareness of issues surrounding racial injustice and an increased focus on workforce preparation — have ushered in a period of rapid responses combined with deeper reflections by educational institutions and systems. Educational organizations may choose to analyze their efforts to change systems and policies, and to improve student outcomes.

The link between college graduation and higher-paying jobs underscores the importance of addressing how reforms — both in K-12 and higher education — are designed and sustained, from creation through implementation. The growing divides across the educational spectrum — in access to early learning opportunities; disparities in academic outcomes that begin in grades K-3; access to advanced coursework including Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, dual enrollment, Career and Technical Education and gifted programs; college enrollment, transfer, degree completion; and ultimately, access to higher-paying jobs — all underscore the need to change systems to promote the talents and success of every student, particularly those who are racially minoritized or poverty-impacted within a state. Enacting a process to establish policy that addresses the needs of these student groups can help create the conditions for each student to succeed.

To build targeted reforms that serve students who are often disproportionately impacted in the educational system, state and education leaders can consider policies and practices for maximizing opportunities and outcomes for each student group in their state. Using an equity framework, as outlined in this series of reports, provides an important foundation from which to start. This framework does not replace widespread reform initiatives, such as standards-based accountability systems that inform

Part 1 of 3

This brief is the first installment in a three-part series on how the use of an equity framework can support success for students who are underserved in educational settings. Subsequent installations focus on the history and use of disaggregated student data and the promising practices that support student success in education policy.

The series can be helpful for policymakers who are committed to identifying the barriers that impede success for students who are underserved in their state and working with their constituents to advance improved educational outcomes for these learners.

school improvement efforts and Guided Pathways in higher education. Instead, it complements large-scale efforts with differentiated supports designed to strengthen outcomes for student groups that are underserved by existing efforts.

Key Terms

Disproportionate Impact

This exists in situations where students' access to fundamental resources and supports are negatively affected by policies and practices that maintain barriers and negatively impact students' academic success.

Equity-focused policy development

Equity-focused policy development places an intentional focus throughout the policy process (development, implementation, review and assessment) on the varying experiences and characteristics that impact students' educational opportunities, such as race/ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, disability status, geographical location and family background. This definition implies that educators, educational leaders and policymakers are aware of the issues and factors that affect students' lives and are intentional in their efforts to address these issues. Implicit in the construct is that the process of achieving comparable outcomes for each student group is ongoing and requires a comprehensive approach involving policies and programs.

Differentiated Supports

These are different efforts designed to impact specific student groups or subgroups that existing educational programs and widespread reform initiatives do not adequately serve. They may include a combination of policies and programs that are designed to address barriers, expand opportunities and improve outcomes for the specific subgroups.
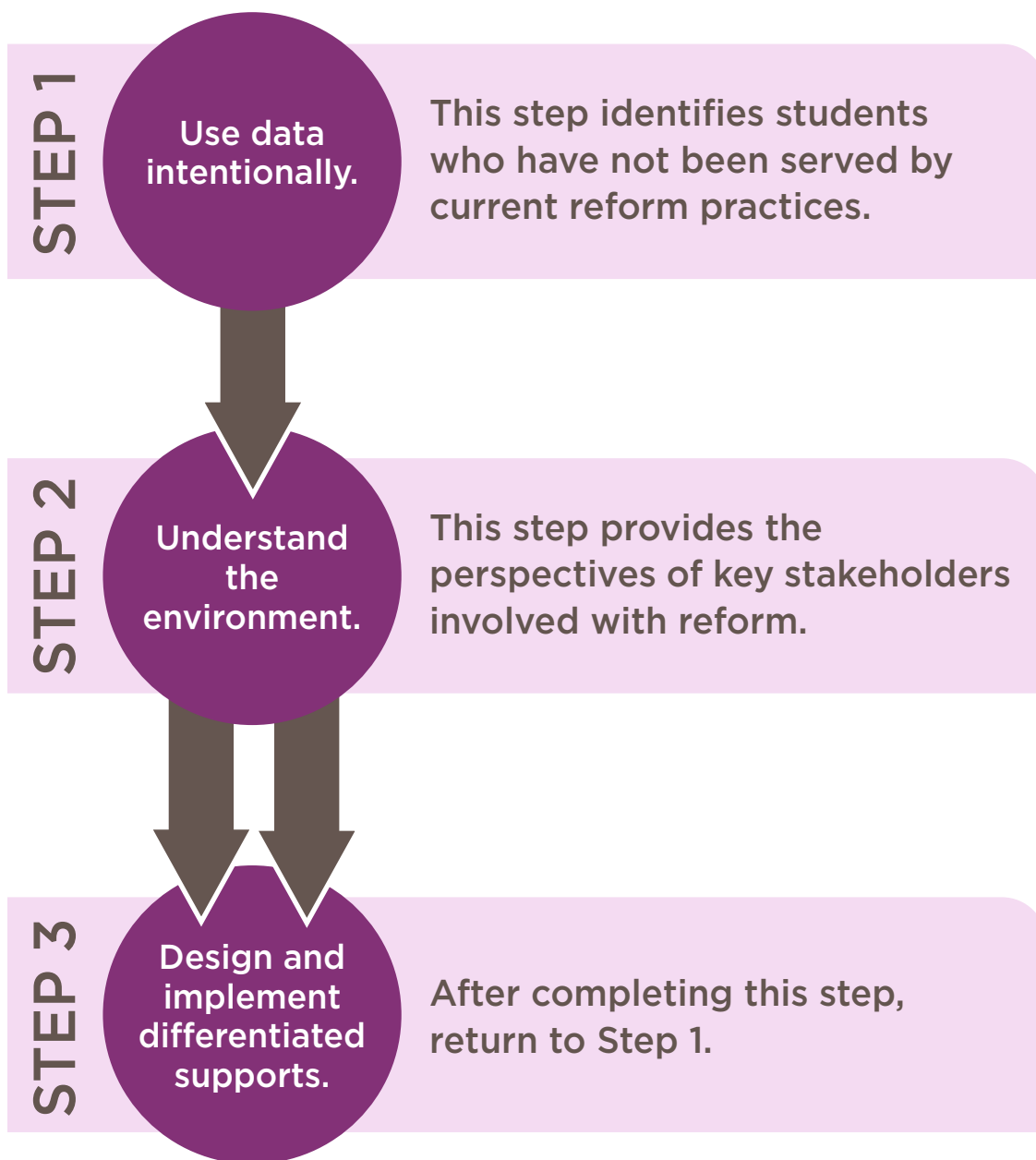
Finely Disaggregated Data

These data consist of the subgroups that are extracted from the traditional student groups being tracked.

Guided Pathways

Guided Pathways is a structure that is designed to improve students' college completion. The pathway is composed of academic and nonacademic supports that help to direct a student's trajectory through college.

The three core principles of this equity framework — (1) using data intentionally, (2) understanding the environment and (3) implementing differentiated supports — are critical for states striving to achieve comparable outcomes across student groups. This Policy Brief outlines each of the principles and examples from states that currently employ similar approaches.

3 Steps to an Equity Framework

STEP 1

Use data intentionally.

This step identifies students who have not been served by current reform practices.

STEP 2

Understand the environment.

This step provides the perspectives of key stakeholders involved with reform.

STEP 3

Design and implement differentiated supports.

After completing this step, return to Step 1.

Use Data Intentionally

Understanding the impact of previous and current reforms entails reviewing data that show the results of those efforts. When gathering these data, there is benefit in identifying the student groups that have not been served by the reform. This action informs stakeholders as they determine the groups that targeted reforms should address.

To identify the groups that are ill-served, disaggregated data can be organized by student characteristics, such as race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender or disability status, which allows leaders to focus on those groups that are traditionally marginalized. Additionally, it is useful to engage in an ongoing review of disaggregated data at regular intervals.

Then, to maximize the impact of these efforts, systems may consider including finely disaggregated data to increase the number of student groups that are tracked and to represent their data more completely.

Finely Disaggregate Data

The advantages of completely disaggregated data are numerous: State leaders and other stakeholders can easily review outcomes for all pertinent student groups; the outcome differences, if any, are easily calculated and accurately displayed; the student groups' outcomes and improvements can be tracked over time; and transparency is increased for students and stakeholders. As a result, systems and institutions opting for a more complete representation of the data are more likely to promote a culture of continuous improvement and accountability.

While studies frequently break out data by broad student groups such as race, ethnicity, or eligibility for free or subsidized lunch, presentations of data rarely disaggregate those data further. However, to truly measure the impact of educational initiatives, subgroups of the targeted student groups can be considered. For example, a reform effort targeting specific racial/ethnic groups benefits from data collection that disaggregates by gender, thereby allowing analysis of improved outcomes for both males and females in the student group. Similarly, an initiative that focuses on gender should be able to demonstrate that it improves outcomes for each racial/ethnic group, with the expectation that the impact among subgroups is comparable and substantially narrows outcome disparities.

The reporting of finely disaggregated data is helpful, especially considering the close ties between K-12, higher education, training and employment. Reform efforts that omit the analysis of subgroups may be perceived as lacking transparency and accountability. Subsequently, initiatives that fail to address outcome differences within subgroups may be considered incomplete and unsuccessful.

The impact of leaving student subgroups behind can be devastating, as illuminated by data on Black males in Baltimore. In 2013, the unemployment rate for Black men in Baltimore between ages 20 and 24 was 37%, compared with a 10% rate for white men in the same age range. According to the same report, 59% of Black men between the ages of 25 and 54 were working, compared with 79% of white men. Moreover, only 1 in 10 Black men in Baltimore have a college degree, whereas half of the white men over 25 have a college degree.

In addition to reflecting structural injustices that exist in workforce and educational systems, these outcomes serve as reminders that the leaders of any reform effort (K-12 or higher education) implemented in Baltimore might want to examine the corresponding improvement of education outcomes among Black males in particular. However, these data from Baltimore present just one scenario where outcome differences within specific demographic subgroups reveal areas that require attention; similar examples exist throughout the nation, many of them unidentified.

Practices for Finely Disaggregating Data

1. Review historical outcomes data to identify student groups that are not typically served by similar reform efforts (e.g., math/reading scores, rates of retention, graduation, course success, etc).

2. Define criteria at the onset so it is clear which student groups will be included in the analysis.

3. Disaggregate by student groups, including race/ethnicity, disability status, age, gender, Pell status and veteran status.

4. Display disaggregated data — with percentages — for all student groups throughout publications.

5. Communicate the rationale for including specific student groups in publications.

6. Present results for all students alongside the disaggregated data.

7. Include an intersection of two or more groups (e.g., race/ethnicity and gender, Pell status and veteran status).

Expand Student Groups

As the nation strives to achieve an egalitarian educational system — one in which outcomes depend more on the individual than on demographics — tracking the outcomes of more student groups could assist in those efforts. Whenever possible, the addition of relevant student groups who were previously unmentioned in reports will enhance the overall quality of the educational system. Institutions and systems that wish to expand the student groups they track will need to gather the appropriate data and produce additional tables in their publications or on their websites. These changes in data tracking are incumbent upon educational leaders whose goal is the attainment of comparable outcomes for each student group.

There is a plethora of student groups to consider for inclusion in data collection and analysis. Veterans and dependents of active-duty military, English language learners and students identified as disabled are a few examples of additional groups that could be included when reporting data. In the case of veterans, a table comparing outcomes of veterans to nonveterans could suffice, while for students with disabilities, a finely disaggregated approach would be appropriate, comparing data for students with various types of disabilities. Providing this additional information would increase both the transparency and accountability of the schools or institutions to their local or regional community.

Important to note is that there will always be limitations — logistical, economical and practical — to the collection, presentation and sharing of data. Decisions and choices will have to be made, and logistical and time constraints will come into play. Because no presentation of data will ever be perfect, this brief sets forth the following criteria for capturing data as completely as possible.

Understand the Environment

Prior to designing and implementing a targeted support, it is valuable to understand the system students navigate, the factors that impact their progress in the system and how those factors affect individual learners. Qualitative and quantitative data from each of these areas can reveal where barriers exist in the system and provide important information about the specific ways to address the needs of students.

To understand how barriers affect students left behind by current efforts, qualitative data can be elicited through surveys, individual interviews, and focus groups with the students or parents. Quantitative data on student outcomes can be monitored consistently to detect impact — positive or negative — with an eye toward improvement. A school district or institution can increase the prospects of achieving the goals of its reform initiatives for each student group by engaging those not served by reforms. This can illuminate the existing context and cultural barriers in the school district or institution, both past and present. The effort may also be achieved by paying attention to data throughout the reform.

Listed in this section are strategies that, taken together, can promote a thorough examination of the environmental context for groups that are underserved. Systems and institutions that incorporate each of these strategies can be better equipped to implement differentiated supports. The data derived from this process can be organized into a summary report to share with all stakeholders.

Practices for Understanding the Environment

1. Collect and analyze qualitative data (e.g., surveys, interviews and focus groups) and quantitative data from all students in the reform, with particular attention to students left behind by current efforts.

2. Conduct a scan of policies to detect biases regarding the groups identified as underserved.

3. Identify existing hurdles that hinder success for these student groups.

4. Identify practices known to support the success of students not served by current reform efforts..

Design and Implement Differentiated Supports

Data that are finely disaggregated and include information about environmental context can serve as resources for implementing differentiated supports. These data reveal barriers that stall student progress and offer clues about aspects of the system that could be addressed as part of the equity framework. For instance, qualitative data could highlight the types of relational and structural challenges at schools and institutions not addressed by widespread reform efforts that are implemented homogeneously for all student groups. It should be noted that since student populations vary widely among schools and institutions within the same system, differentiated supports will often be implemented at the school or institutional level rather than the system level. In this case, efforts and results should be shared throughout the system to document the overall effectiveness of the initiatives.

Consider the following example, which is based on data found in state and higher education system reports. It is not uncommon for postsecondary completion percentages among student groups to vary widely among institutions within the same system, as illustrated below.

College completion rates by age, gender and Pell eligibility

Institution	All Students	Adults Over 25	Traditional 18 - 24	Male	Female	Pell Eligible	Non-Pell Eligible
College 1	38%	35%	40%	30%	43%	39%	36%
College 2	25%	28%	23%	27%	23%	14%	35%
College 3	42%	31%	49%	40%	43%	39%	45%

Each of the three institutions listed has potential areas of concern: For College 1, the completion difference by gender is 13 percentage points. For College 2, the difference based on Pell eligibility is 21 percentage points. The outcome difference by age group in College 3 is 18 percentage points. Once leaders in a postsecondary system understand the environment, they are equipped to address the disparities through differentiated supports. They may also realize that their efforts need to be differentiated among the various colleges and universities. The system can support local efforts by helping institutions share best practices or by seeking out exemplar initiatives from around the nation.

State leaders can also act on disaggregated student data that reveal groups who are inadequately served by current efforts. More specifically, these leaders can implement policies that reference specific student groups. For example, in **Illinois**, the Developmental Education Reform Act requires the implementation of new assessment and course placement policies, and calls for data to be "disaggregated by developmental education course model, as defined by the Illinois Community College Board, and by gender, race and ethnicity, and federal Pell Grant status." Attention to these student groups in legislative language highlights one way this policy aims to be inclusive of each student group and focuses on specific student groups.

In a section regarding institutional plans and reporting requirements, the policy states these reports "shall provide details about the expected improvements in educational outcomes for Black students as result of the proposed reforms." Hence, when policies and programs are implemented by states, the monitoring of outcomes and creation of differentiated supports will occur at the institutional level. While this example is relevant for higher education, an analogous scenario in K-12 would be the implementation of policy to provide differentiated supports following an examination of graduation rates showing disparate outcomes for specific student groups.

Characteristics of Differentiated Supports

1. Designed to reach student groups underserved by current programs.

2. Implemented to serve specific student groups.

3. Based on a comprehensive review of data — qualitative and quantitative — and an understanding of contextual factors for the identified student groups.

4. Involves all appropriate stakeholders in the implementation.

5. Continuously monitored to detect impact.

Professional Development and Communication

As systems use an equity framework to improve how they serve students, legislation and policies to enact professional development that supports their efforts are important. Several states implemented policies that support or establish on-the-ground professional development activities.

Colorado created a pilot program to provide professional development in distributive and collaborative leadership skills for principals to improve educator retention, school climate and culture, and student outcomes.

Georgia created the Governor's School Leadership Academy in 2018 to offer services and support to new and existing school leaders who need additional assistance for school improvement. The program hosts cohort meetings to build best practices, to enable data-driven decision-making and cultural competency, and to offer coaching opportunities for participants.

In 2020, **Virginia** established a policy requiring the department of education and the Commonwealth's director of diversity, equity and inclusion to appoint members to the Culturally Relevant and Inclusive Education Practices Advisory Committee; it also includes certain requirements for the composition of the committee. This advisory committee is required to provide recommendations on standards, anti-bias education that is age appropriate, and meaningful professional development related to culturally relevant and inclusive education practices.

These professional development opportunities create a pathway for educators and leaders to engage in programs to improve their skills and cultivate their ability to craft differentiated supports. For instance, encouraging the use of data-driven decision-making as one step in professional development and explaining its purpose can prompt district, school and institutional leaders to employ finely disaggregated data as they create differentiated supports. Advisory committees can serve as appropriate avenues of communication between local- and state-level entities and can create a culture of continuous improvement as developments are made in the reporting of outcomes, as efforts are undertaken to understand contextual factors impacting these students and as differentiated supports are implemented.

Final Thoughts

Education leaders and policymakers can use an equity framework to ensure their initiatives address the needs of students who have traditionally been underserved in education settings. By carefully disaggregating data, leaders can begin to reveal specific needs of student groups that would normally go unnoticed in aggregate data. Leaders can then investigate further to understand the environment that has given rise to those needs, including barriers to success. That information can help leaders design differentiated supports for students whom education reforms would otherwise overlook.

This brief is the first installment in a three-part series. Don't miss Part 2 and Part 3.

About the Authors

John Squires

John Squires is the executive director of advancement and planning at Cleveland State Community College in Cleveland, Tennessee. Previously, he served as the director of college and career readiness at the Southern Regional Education Board, working with states to increase student preparedness in literacy and mathematics. John has coauthored papers for New Directions in Institutional Research and IES What Works Clearinghouse, and his work has been recognized by the American Association of Community Colleges.

Maxine T. Roberts

As director of Strong Start to Finish, Maxine works with state leaders, researchers and technical assistance partners to address inequities in developmental education for students who are racially minoritized, from lower-income communities and returning adults. Prior to joining Education Commission of the States, Maxine directed after-school and college-preparatory programs, worked with community college faculty to improve their course outcomes in developmental education, and studied the factors that foster success for students of color in community college developmental math courses. Contact Maxine at mroberts@strongstart.org.