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## K-12 Equity Directors: Configuring the Role for Impact

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## K-12 Equity Directors: Configuring the Role for Impact



### Era of the K-12 Equity Director

School districts across the United States continue to grapple with systemic educational inequities that are reinforced through anti-Blackness, white supremacy, and racist practices. The inequities keep high quality educational opportunities beyond the reach of our country's Black, Latinx, Indigenous, immigrant, and the many ethnically and linguistically diverse students that comprise our population. To address the problems that stem from persistent educational inequity districts are increasingly hiring new administrators into roles called *equity directors*.<sup>i</sup> The hiring of equity directors signals a new direction in how districts aim to confront persistent educational inequities.

***Equity Directors.*** Although we don't have an exact account of how many there are across the United States, an increasing number of K-12 district level administrators fill the proliferating role of equity director<sup>ii</sup>. They go by numerous names. In some districts they are directors of diversity and inclusion. In some they are chief equity

officers. To consider the vast range of titles we refer to them all as equity directors<sup>iii</sup>.

The position is typically filled by experienced teachers or administrators with a clear vision of what equity looks like in educational settings. They usually hold at least a Master's degree and often are pursuing or already hold a doctoral degree in education or a closely related field. They are disproportionately people of color. They are most likely to be women.

Despite their different titles, educational backgrounds, race and gender identities, their goals are similar: support the design and implementation of district-wide equity reforms that will make educational experiences and outcomes more equitable and just for racially, ethnically, and linguistically marginalized students.

In fulfilling this role, equity directors are tasked with solving many entrenched problems. Reduce discipline disparities. Oversee the implementation of restorative approaches. Promote and implement curriculum reform to increase representation and relevance for Black, Latinx, Asian, and Native students. De-track classes. Reduce over-identification and placement of students identified for special learning needs. Increase racial representation in Advanced Placement courses. Design and implement cultural competence and anti-racism professional development. Engage disaffected families and community stakeholders. Support the development of board policies to promote all things equity related.

Districts hire equity directors to achieve transformative goals that districts have not succeeded in accomplishing for many years. Although equity directors have existed in higher education settings for many years, the

newness of the position in preK-12 schools means that equity directors often build the ship as they sail it.<sup>iv</sup> Equity directors face challenges defining, carrying out, and measuring the success of their work. Routine questions that equity directors in our study asked included:

*Where should I start? What resources do I need? How do I know if we are achieving progress? Is this work adequately supported and configured to achieve progress?*

Districts who hire equity directors must ask similar questions because leading for equity is complex and difficult work. Although leadership for equity is not new, the role that equity directors play in advancing equity in K-12 districts is relatively uncharted. The clearer districts can be about what they want equity directors to accomplish, the better they will be at helping equity directors succeed in achieving the district's equity goals. In what follows we outline some common ways the roles are designed and offer considerations that will help districts configure roles to best support the leaders that fill them.



## **Equity Director Positions & Role Configurations**

For any equity director position, a board and district administration must extend equity

directors forms of formal power and authority to carry out the charges of their work. The various forms of power and authority that districts extend are shaped by what we refer to as the role configuration. Role configuration refers to the structure and positioning of the role that makes different forms of organizational power and authority available to the person in the role. As is the case with any workplace position, the configuration of the role can both extend and create vulnerabilities for the person who inherits it.

Equity directors' ability to carry out their work varies based in part on the affordances and constraints of the roles they enact within the position. In particular, equity directors' positions are configured in ways that give them access to four forms of power and authority:

- a. Supervisory responsibility and authority,
- b. Influence on superintendent and board relations,
- c. Financial resources and budgetary discretion, and
- d. Influence on district professional development related to curricular and instructional matters.

The extent to which equity director positions afford these opportunities to actively participate in and influence these roles shapes the overall nature of the equity director position. We categorize equity director positions into four configurations: equity seeding, equity collaboration, equity management and compliance, and equity development and innovation.<sup>v</sup> Each is

differently structured to create opportunities and vulnerabilities.



***Equity Seeding Configurations.*** Equity directors who work in seeding configurations write policies, create equity documents, provide district and community stakeholders with presentations, educational resources, data, and access to student, family, and community perspectives that make the case for why equity is important. They often play a role in designing and delivering professional development for employees, often with the support of external consultant groups. Despite cabinet membership/access, the configuration often does not afford directors power or influence to do more than present information.

***Equity Collaboration Configurations.*** Equity directors who work in collaboration configurations work with other district employees to support a wide range of equity initiatives, such as parental engagement, principal and teacher professional development, and special programming. Equity collaborators often describe themselves as the “go-to” for all things equity-related. They are often troubleshooters who are called for support on an as-needed basis. As such they often have important interpersonal rather than positional influence throughout the district. Directors

working in collaboration configurations do not work directly with superintendents, usually have small or no budget, no program oversight or supervisory responsibilities.

***Equity Management & Compliance Configurations.*** Equity directors who work in management and compliance configurations oversee a portfolio of mostly pre-existing district programs and initiatives. Their roles help them take a range of existing equity-related efforts and consolidate them to create district-wide coherence and equity accountability systems. Usually equity directors who work in this role configuration report to a department head but may have routine access to the superintendent. The role requires that equity directors have a supervisory role over a small staff – usually fewer than 10 and control a modest to large budget, which is often already allocated to pre-existing hires, programs, and efforts.

***Equity Innovation & Development Configurations.*** Equity directors who work in innovation and development configurations create and develop equity initiatives, programs, and professional learning opportunities. This role configuration also gives equity directors latitude to experiment, test initiatives, and establish partnerships with community agencies and organizations. Development and innovation role configurations afford equity directors with opportunities to thought-partner with superintendents and chiefs, oversee a substantial budget (some that they raise through seeking partnerships), as well as hire and supervise a team of employees (e.g. department heads). At times, people in this role oversee an entire division, such as an equity office, and have the title of chief equity officer or superintendent of equity.



## Why Configurations Matter

The choices that districts make about what they want equity directors to do, how they organize their roles, and what metrics they establish for success are critical considerations. If for example, a district expects for an equity director's work to shape the district-wide instructional practice, the district must position that director to influence curriculum and instruction. If a district expects for an equity director's work to interface with parents and external stakeholders, that is important to know.

At face value, the importance of configuring equity director positions to fulfill certain roles appears obvious. But we found that most equity directors' roles did not allow them to carry out aspects of their work that they and the district deemed important equity priorities. Equity directors who worked in what we would consider primarily

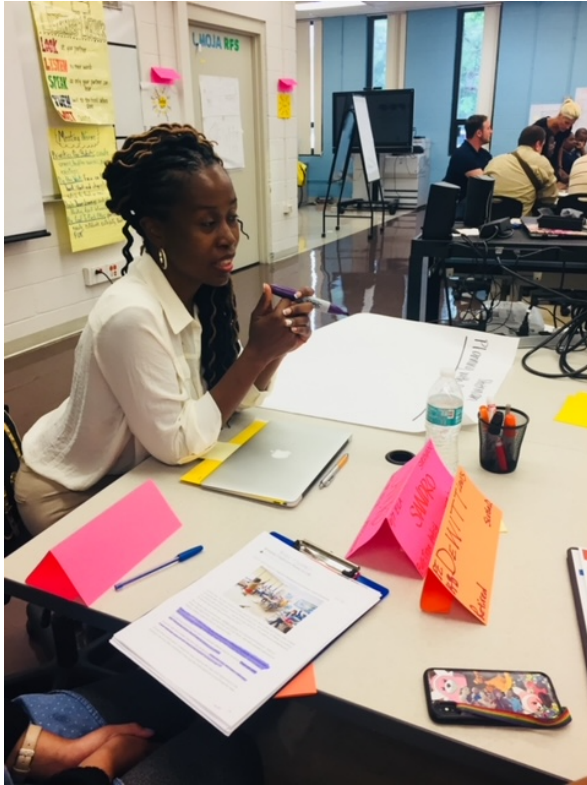
innovation configurations expressed alienation from curriculum and instructional matters. Equity directors who worked in primarily collaboration configurations expressed that their work was often ineffective because it required managing-up to supervisors who "didn't get it." Like those in seeding configurations, a simple lack of approval from a superior could bring their efforts to an immediate halt. Often it did, especially when their equity efforts waded into controversial and uncomfortable territory.

Of course, it is possible for an equity director to influence multiple areas of the district. Some equity director roles were configured to meet multiple needs. They had the resources and position to play moderate or substantial roles in supervision, superintendent and board relations, resource allocation, or instructional improvement. Yet, given their role configurations, none could meet the myriad demands required of them.

See the Appendix for a table that reviews the types of equity director roles and responsibilities that we noted. The descriptions in this table are not exhaustive; however, they reflect the general patterns we identified from analysis of participants interviews and document reviews.

Consequently, directors stepped outside of their configurations to take on roles they deemed important. Role configurations are not static. And most often, equity directors themselves changed them. For example, one directors' role was initially configured for collaboration. She realized a need for coherence across district initiatives. So she worked to reconfigure the role for management and compliance. When

directors work to increase their influence and authority in areas they consider important for carrying out their work, they play a role in shaping the future of the field.



## Considerations for Districts

It is critically important that districts establish and support equity directors' roles by creating the right configurations for their wants and needs. A configuration that is misaligned with district needs and priorities runs the risk of hiring an equity director as a symbolic powerless gesture. A well-configured role, one that empowers the equity with roles, resources, and authority to effect change in an area the district prioritizes has the potential to catalyze substantive systemic change that benefits students. Figuring this out should not be the sole responsibility of the equity director. A district would benefit from asking questions like these when designing and hiring for Equity:

- What, specifically is this person being hired to do? Over what period of time?
- What are appropriate indicators of progress given the district's current realities?
- Does the position provide adequate resources (human, financial, material, time) to ensure the director will make progress on agreed upon indicators?<sup>vii</sup>
- Does the district have the wherewithal to confront the internal oppressive practices that an equity director's work will unveil?

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In the best case scenario, districts will hire directors who have the authority to hire multiple equity officials to carry out the district equity work within and across multiple configurations. Placing committed and competent equity leaders throughout the organization to manage up, across, and down its organizational hierarchy, streamlining individuals' responsibilities, and affording them adequate resources should be an equity priority for any school district that is serious about reducing the inherent vulnerabilities of the role.

Moreover, significant consideration should be given to who is hired to do the job and why. Our research to date reveals that the burden of equity work is often placed on people of color, and women more often than men. Careful attention should be paid to the psychological vulnerability that people of color and women endure in their efforts to enact equity change. This too, is a matter of equity.

## APPENDIX

<b>Roles involve...</b>	<b>Supervisory Responsibility &amp; Authority</b>	<b>Superintendent Access &amp; Board Influence</b>	<b>Resource and Budgetary Authority</b>	<b>Curricular &amp; Instructional Influence</b>
Seeding	Minimal	Moderate	Minimal	Minimal
Collaboration	Minimal	Moderate	Minimal	Moderate
Management	Moderate	Substantial	Moderate	Minimal
Innovation	Substantial	Substantial	Substantial	Minimal

<sup>i</sup> Mattheis, Allison. 2017. “Central District Office Leadership for Diversity and Equity: Constraints and Opportunities for Policy Intermediaries.” *Journal of School Leadership*, 27 (4), 521–552.

<sup>ii</sup> See Williams, Damon., and Wade-Golden, Katrina. 2007. “The chief diversity officer.” *Cupra HR Journal*, 58 (1), 38-44.; and Leon, Raul A. 2014. “The Chief Diversity Officer: An examination of CDO models and strategies.” *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 7 (2), 77-91.

<sup>iii</sup> The name of the role varies based on how a school district situates the role and is sometimes combined with other roles. For example, they may be called equity director, chief equity officer, diversity officer, equity and engagement director, or equity specialist, to name a few.

<sup>iv</sup> See Gose, Ben. 2006. The rise of the chief diversity officer. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 53 (6), 55-60.

<sup>v</sup> The descriptions are not exhaustive; however, they reflect the general patterns we identified from analysis of participants interviews and document reviews.

<sup>vi</sup> Halverson, Thomas J., & Plecki, Margaret L. 2015. “Exploring the Politics of Differential Resource Allocations Implications for Policy Design and Leadership Practice.” *Leadership & Policy in Schools*, 14 (1), 42–66. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2014.983129>



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**About the Racial Equity Leadership in Education Research Project.** This brief draws from qualitative interviews we conducted with 13 practicing equity directors from districts across the United States. Since 2016, we have been studying equity directors - who they are, what they do and how- the districts that employ them, and the constraints and affordances of their roles. This series of research briefs informs community and district-based stakeholders about this emerging district leadership role.

**About Center for Urban Education Leadership.** Under the direction of Shelby Cosner, the Center for Urban Education Leadership (CUEL) engages in research, development, dissemination, and policy advocacy to disrupt the systemic inequality that affects the lives of PK-12 urban students and to improve the educational outcomes and life opportunities of PK-12 urban school students locally and throughout the world. It accomplishes these outcomes by applying center expertise in the areas of educational leadership, organizational development, equity/social justice, and continuous improvement/improvement science. The CUEL is housed in UIC's College of Education in Chicago, IL.