

State Equity Leaders Summit: Leveraging ESSA to Support Equity-Focused School Transformation



"To engage in dialogue is one of the simplest ways we can begin as [people], teachers, scholars, and critical thinkers to cross boundaries, the barriers that may or may not be erected by race, gender, class, professional standing, and a host of other differences. "

-bell hooks

Did You Know

The MAP Center Just Hosted its State Equity Leaders Summit?



The Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center’s (MAP Center) [State Equity Leaders Summit](#) (Summit) is an invitation only, professional development experience designed specifically for state education agency (SEA) leaders across the MAP Center’s [13 State Region](#). The purpose of this experience is to engage state leaders in strategic dialogue focused on ensuring equitable education opportunities for all students, and to foster cross-state collaborative partnerships. These learning experiences consist of guided group conversations about specific, research-based topics, common theme synthesis across those topics, and concerted efforts to produce viable take-aways. Additionally, a focused panel discussion with scholars and practitioners, and opportunities to network for the participants, lends itself to a driven and collaborative professional learning experience.

This year’s Summit, [Leveraging ESSA to Support Equity-Focused School Transformation](#), was centered on re/examining the [Every Student Succeeds Act](#) (ESSA)—particularly spotlighting and re-grounding this legislation in its [roots in the midst the Civil Rights Movement](#). The spirit of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, which was reauthorized as ESSA in 2015, was to ensure equal educational opportunities for economically disadvantaged students; this distinction also had implications for remedying the disparities between White students and students of Color (Coomer, Pearce, Dagli, Skelton, Kyser, & King Thorius, 2017). Deeper examination shows us that although this legislation was enacted to encourage educational equality, the results have primarily focused on [student outcomes](#), and disparities have continued to be prevalent. Schools today are more segregated than ever (Tatum, 2017). It was with these concerns in mind that this year’s Summit focused on leveraging ESSA to honor the roots of its original purpose.

Guests of this year’s Summit included 22 state-level leaders from our Region III partners in Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Michigan, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, and South Dakota—with additional guests from Washington, D.C. In four small groups, participants discussed common concerns across the Region related to ESSA initiatives, including: candid conversations around overcoming bureaucratic barriers to equity; the complex process of policy interpretation and implementation to ensure historically marginalized youth have access to quality education; and school

diversity & integration, focused on strategies for growing an effective and diverse educator workforce. Participants received thought partnership towards capacity building and networking with other states addressing similar concerns or implementing similar innovations. The Summit provided a space for SEA leaders to actively participate in constructive conversation—intergroup dialogue—with other scholars and experts towards transformative changes in the school system for all students.



Why It Matters

Focused, Intentional Intergroup Dialogue is Critical Work

Cultivating [critical consciousness and reflection](#) that surface inequitable climates in school districts is central to deconstructing oppressive systems that privilege some while disadvantaging others; essentially, borrowing from the concept of intergroup dialogue can help facilitate shifts in paradigm and praxis.

Intergroup dialogue is a social justice practice that began with efforts to improve (inter)national intergroup relations (Zúñiga, Lopez, & Ford, 2012). Its prescribed intent is to bring together individuals who have differing social identities with histories of conflict (e.g. race, sexual orientation, ability), around a unified topic (Zúñiga, Naagda, & Sevig, 2002). Additionally, it draws upon “intergroup education, and critical, anti-racist, feminist, democratic, and experiential pedagogies” (Zúñiga, Lopez, & Ford, 2012, p. 2); an amalgamation of disciplines which aim to cultivate an autonomous, equitable society. Further, intergroup dialogue promotes complex thinking about diversity, feelings of self-efficacy, and changes in communicative action by way of highly structured activities (Deturk, 2006). Intergroup dialogue facilitates increased trust among stakeholders, and willingness to engage in storytelling (Deturk, 2006). Accordingly, the spirit of intergroup dialogue is to allow individuals from differing perspectives to unite for the common goal of understanding, bridging differences, and engaging in transformative conversation towards equitable change.

During the Summit, MAP Center staff and university scholars from around the country—including current [MAP Center Equity Fellows](#)—facilitated intergroup dialogue between SEA leaders from different states. Discussion topics were based on an analysis of publicly available ESSA plans from each of the thirteen state education agencies within the MAP Center’s region, and two additional resources: [Leading for Equity: Opportunities for State Education Chiefs](#) from the Aspen Institute and the Council of Chief State School Officers; and [Equity and ESSA](#):

[Leveraging Educational Opportunity Through the Every Student Succeeds Act](#) from the Learning Policy Institute. As a result of analyses, four group discussions were centered on the following topics: Access to Equity-Focused, Effective, Diverse Teacher Workforce; Leveraging Equity Policy to Promote Success for Historically Marginalized Students; Indicators of School Quality or Student Success Alongside Academic Data; and Integration and School Diversity. Within these conversations, participants were able to talk through their (mis)understandings, interpretations, and concerns regarding their own educational spaces, through a comradery with other SEA leaders. Having the opportunity to share across state lines and discuss viable strategies for addressing issues that arose, provided a unique and valuable opportunity for the SEA leaders to centralize—and eventually contribute to their operationalizing—toward equitable, systems-focused, solutions.



For Equity Now

Strategizing Beyond Conversation

Solution-based discussions with colleagues are critical towards ensuring accountability; however, we cannot begin to effect change if we allow conversations to fall flat. A preeminent feature of intergroup dialogue is formulating action plans (Zúñiga, Naagda, & Sevig, 2002). Constructing actionable solutions is derived from the culmination of all participants' shared experiences through dialogue, including shared insights and identified commonalities. Through this experience, participants who are genuinely working towards equity are able to identify a common ground to begin building their own—and each other's—capacity to mobilize solutions and build alliances (Zúñiga, Naagda, & Sevig, 2002). The MAP Center's Tier II [learning experiences](#) are designed to not only facilitate open, equity-oriented conversations, but also for participants to walk away with actionable next steps.

During the Summit, after brainstorming solutions, SEA leaders had the opportunity to compare their specific discussion group's ideas with members from other discussion topics. The purpose of this analysis and integration was for participants to share highlights from their specific topic discussions, and examine noticeable intersecting implications for addressing identified tensions or dilemmas and strategy ideas. In this way, SEA leaders' ideas are consolidated into workable pieces. Common themes were concerned with racial diversity and difference representation in the workforce, and working toward equity within both SEA and the teaching populations. Additionally, leveraging technical assistance agencies like the MAP Center and taking advantage of resources designed to uncover biased policies and practices were among some of the highlighted solutions. Further, inter-departmental support between SEAs and local education agencies arose in terms of how SEAs can alleviate unspoken tensions and

disconnection in communication. These conversations served as revelational material to begin recognizing more clearly what ESSA should be, what SEAs' roles are in co-implementing ESSA, and what it could mean if ESSA was executed with its original intent in mind: equitable opportunities for ALL students.

Meet the Authors

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