Designing for Equity

After years of education system reforms that, at best, tinker at the system's edges, generations of families and students remain systemically marginalized, underserved, underprepared, and undereducated. COVID-19 has only made starker and more urgent the unfinished work of ensuring that all students receive an excellent education.

It is time to do something different. Rather than hurry back to the familiar, leaders on state boards of education

It takes a whole community to lift up policies and practices that support equity and end those that don't.

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should name and be able to explain how a particular policy or set of policies can drive practices and build systems that upend inequities and foster equity. In that spirit, I offer six equity-focused design principles that my organization, the National Urban League (NUL), applies in its national, state, and local work alongside our 91 affiliates in 36 states and the District of Columbia. State boards can apply them to their work as well.

1. Acknowledge Working and Operational Definitions of Equity

Many local and state education agencies, as well as state boards of education, have adopted equity statements and defined educational equity and excellence. These definitions can be important markers of what educators and policymakers intend for students to know and be able to do and the range of investments, supports, and opportunity that each student can expect as they are educated. Ideally, the definitions were developed alongside stakeholders, coalitions, parents, partners, and students.

In other places, education leaders have failed to come to consensus on the need for a deliberate, substantive focus on equity and a process for clarifying what equity means and how that differs from equality—or even whether equity is a worthy goal or a key part of their mission. Others refuse to engage in equity conversations altogether. In any case, equity definitions are not meant to be static, as stakeholders will want to develop a definition that best represents current conditions, opportunities, and threats and is responsive to new data, indicators, and voices.

This work is always messy and complicated and requires policymakers to remain steadfast in the face of opposition to upending inequity and charting new ways forward toward realizing the promise of public education. Legitimate questions will arise about how the issues are framed, the evidence presented, the diagnosis of the problem, and the range of potential solutions. These take time to work through. Even in the face of fierce opposition, there will be those that proudly and loudly stand with policymakers who take on this critical work.

As state policymakers encounter legitimate critique and build understanding, some stakeholders will question the legitimacy and reach of the process, others will react strongly to what they fear will be lost in a zero-sum game where only some students get to succeed, and others will intentionally miscategorize intent and vision as overreach or stir up problems where none exist.

In such a climate, it is critically important to understand that striving for equity and upending inequity in a state education system are directly tied to the ways that state boards define the problem and consider the policy solutions before them. How will your board promote and defend the idea that all students deserve an equitable, high-quality education? Conversely, how will the board promote the idea that some students deserve less than its best efforts?

NUL defines education equity as an ongoing process of removing historic barriers and creating a system of opportunity by which all children and youth have the necessary resources to reach their full potential. It is a working definition, continually refined and sharpened over time to better guide NUL's work, partnerships, and vision.

Whether or not it has a working definition of equity, every district, state, and community has an *operational* definition of equity—whether acknowledged or not. By that, I mean a definition that is codified in the decisions, policies, investments, and practices that are made daily, in every meeting and hearing, with every policy and budget allocation. Operational definitions of equity are tangible artifacts of equity and inequity found in policy manuals, laws, budgets, and the minutes of public and private meetings.

In the aggregate, these individual decisions and policies are the operational definitions of equity that reveal a system's implicit values, priorities, and vision for students. Who and what ideas are privileged? From whom is opportunity withheld, or how is its distribution aligned to race and gender, preconceived notions of ability, or the neighborhood or region from which students come? Which set of exceptions proves the rule? Are there districts and schools with higher levels of turnover or family mobility and homelessness? The end of eviction moratoria will doubtless bring added instability into students' and even some staff's lives. Are current policies or those under consideration up to this challenge?

Even the most nuanced, beautifully worded working definition of equity still must be tested against the operational definition, for

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that is where aspiration meets substance, poetry negotiates with prose, and the ideal crashes against history, legacy, politics, and practicability. Over 20 years ago, states and districts trumpeted the idea that all children can learn, with little investment in the kinds of things that actually work in education. It became a slogan floating in the ether, unmoored to research, policy, or investment, more an aspiration than a guide for conducting the education of children. Did districts hire differently using this notion as a foundation? Did states then set new standards for teacher certification or additional measures of success tied to a range of indicators, or did the nation double down on the most restrictive, punitive approaches to measuring educator impacts?

The "all children can learn" frame did not require leaders of systems to finish the sentence by stating what they would provide to maximize students' learning and development. Definitions of equity illuminate the explicit and implicit definitions of equity in a state, city, and district and can help policymakers and stakeholders understand what more they can do and do very differently.

2. Understand the Role of Narrative Change

Narrative and language shifts are at the root of innovation and reform because they signify not just a change in how education leaders talk about an issue but different thinking as well: how they conceive of a problem or opportunity, analyze data and indicators, work, invest, and ultimately expand the aperture so a new vision can emerge.

However, changes in language and narrative not accompanied by shifts in policy, investment, or outcomes strip the words of their power. Over the past 24 months, policymakers and stakeholders alike have fretted over using the "right" phrasing on equity without similarly engaging the hard work of reform, innovation, and implementation. Such rhetorical shifts may enable leaders to appear thoughtful but require only mimicry rather than action and celebrate symbolism over systemic change in the service of students and families.

For instance, NUL and others have insisted on a shift from "learning loss" in favor of "instructional loss" as a framing for the challenge ahead. I see this shift as more than rhetorical, as it represents an understanding that learning and development took place for students even as that learning extended beyond strict definitions of academics and seat time.

Because of school building closures due to the pandemic, there are estimates that project massive instructional loss for vulnerable populations, including students of color, students from low-income families, students with disabilities, and English learners. Yet students did continue learning under COVID-19, even if formal instruction stopped for a time or was limited in fundamental ways. How do educators build upon what students did learn about themselves, the world, civic engagement, leadership, their interests, and passions? Such an asset-based approach does not presume that students' brains remained frozen in time, unengaged and empty absent their presence in a school building.

An asset-based approach does not ignore the need to materially and meaningfully address what students know and are able to do but instead starts by recognizing growth and potential across multiple dimensions and indicators or looks at existing indicators quite differently.[1] For example, staff at Attendance Works have long argued that educators and policymakers should define and capture data on chronic absence so that stakeholders can improve conditions for learning.[2] What are the conditions in a school, community, and district that invite students in, and what are the conditions that undermine regular attendance?[3] How might state boards establish common definitions of chronic absence and student engagement that promote prevention and intervention and support districts and schools in identifying factors that contribute to students missing school?

Similarly, emphasizing acceleration, not remediation, is the right framing for education practice and policy.[4] It calls for educators and state leaders to consider expanded strategies, practices, and investment. Rather than doubling down on skill drills, with extra math and reading in isolation from other content, educators ought to more deeply engage students, opening up the curriculum and thinking differently about pedagogy.[5] Remediation assumes that students cannot master new skills without fully understanding all the prior elements of a subject. Acceleration presents an alternative focused on providing students with what they need to be successful in today's lessons so they

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are on track to meet tomorrow's challenges and opportunities squarely.[6]

3. Reconsider Time and Resources

Another example of authentic narrative change would be to speak about time differently. Given that the funding under the federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER II and III) bills can be obligated into 2024, why not consider what a state, district, and school can accomplish over that horizon rather than focusing on summer, quarters, semesters, and academic years?

There is already great pressure to use ESSER funds in one-time bursts rather than as a part of long-term planning, which makes great fiscal sense. However, is it possible to consider foundational investments to spur and drive long-term change? If so, districts and schools would invest the one-time allocations to build the infrastructure and policy environment that will support reform and innovation for the long run.

States and districts could, for example, work with out-of-schooltime providers, business, and industry to design career and technical education content and experiences that let all students explore pathways both for academic credit and toward industry certification and to build critical relationships with a wider array of adults. States can invest in pipelines that support a more diverse educator workforce or develop a shared approach to professional development and training for all child- and youth-serving agencies, including but not limited to schools. They can re-envision the supports offered to those who are asked to "turn schools around" as well as those that need to be prepared to lead with an equity lens.

The partnerships and coalitions necessary to plan for, engage, and implement deep, meaningful reform can be supported over the next three years to alter how state and local education agencies invest over the next three decades. Together, they can use near-term federal resources to alter the trajectory of a generation of students.

There is great flexibility associated with these funds. Rather than retreat to a familiar stance, states and districts should take advantage of that flexibility to include more stakeholders and partners in developing more expansive visions for the education and support of students.

4. Plan, Strategize, Act, Reflect

In its work in states and districts, NUL asks every education leader, policymaker, and stakeholder to use March 2020 as a line of demarcation for analysis: What policies, practices, investments, and frames will you intentionally abandon and which do you intend to prioritize in fall 2021 and beyond?

It may seem attractive to view the 2019–20 and 2020–21 school years as aberrations requiring specific responses that can be discarded as schools "return to normal" or "adapt to the new normal," but that kind of simplicity is inherently dangerous. Instead, state leaders should ask which policies and practices can advance equity and better educational outcomes and which stand squarely in the way of state goals and vision, no matter how long-standing or how widely accepted "the way we do things" has become. What needs to be invented or refined to better support students and educators now and over time?

For example, too many schools and school systems launched remote and hybrid education with existing attendance and truancy policies in place, with little to no consideration for the changed context. On the one hand, many educators and education leaders punished students for their inability to reliably access the internet while, on the other hand, school systems were asking families and students for patience as they struggled to provide them with devices and new instructional platforms. Students were suspended or reprimanded for not turning on their cameras while they struggled to find a quiet place or avoided the discomfort of giving their classmates and teachers an intimate view of their home environments.

Educators and state leaders already suspected that seat time is not a good measure of attendance, engagement, or learning. So why would time logged in during COVID-19 be a measure of these things? How else might state leaders reshape and measure student learning, development, and engagement? Stakeholders, leaders, and policymakers should engage in a process in which they can abandon investments, policies, and practices that never served students well and bring forward those that build an excellent, equitable education.

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5. Foster and Support an Education Ecosystem

NUL advocates for collaborations and partnerships built around a definition of education that values teaching, learning, and development wherever and whenever they take place. This definition thus does not limit thinking about education as solely what a school or district can accomplish. A school is but one setting, albeit a critical one. As a part of NUL's Equity and Excellence Project, partners in its Readiness Projects ask not just what teachers or schools can accomplish but what an education ecosystem can accomplish.

Schools do not have communities; communities have schools. By that, NUL means that schools are but one of the educational and developmental spaces that allow a community to function well. Such an understanding might, for example, propel a state board to call for each district to create an opportunity map that shows where students spend their time outside of schools.[7] Besides time at home, what investments in learning and development do students and families make when they are not in schools? Who does each school district consider as partners? How has each community knit together pathways of opportunity for young people via local children's cabinets or out-of-schooltime intermediaries?[8]

Ecosystems require the ongoing presence and meaningful collaboration of a range of stakeholders, educators, and practitioners in order to provide an equitable and excellent education. It also requires a rich understanding of all of those who contribute to student thriving and well-being. Including students, families, educators, policymakers, advocates, child- and youth-serving agencies, faith leaders, public health, business and industry, and higher education builds agency, voice, and connectedness to education.

6. Intentionally Build Forward Together

At the National Urban League and the Urban League Movement, we believe our impact on educational equity and excellence can be fully realized if we all take the time to engage students, families, community leaders, and education stakeholders in a meaningful, sustained manner that forces us all to be thoughtful about how children and youth learn and to attend to their learning and development holistically.

NUL partners such as the School Superintendent's Association (AASA) have developed design principles that speak specifically to what might be possible if we build toward equity, excellence, collaboration, and a more expansive ecosystem.

NUL's intention is to work now alongside stakeholders, policymakers, families, and young people themselves to produce better student outcomes over the next few school years. While simple promises to "partner" might inevitably result in some things being better, truly building forward together means taking serious steps to think and talk differently about goals and approaches; see and hear differently from young people, families, and front-line staff; and to act and react differently, not just at partner tables but behind closed doors when making decisions about how to allocate staff or resources. ∎

[1] See, e.g., "Conditions for Learning Survey," webpage (Washington, DC: AIR), https://www.air.org/project/conditions-learning-survey.

[2] Hedy N. Chang et al., "Using Chronic Absence Data to Improve Conditions for Learning," (Attendance Works, September 2019).

[3] Lauren Bauer, "What Are the Factors That Affect Learning at Your School?" *Up Front* blog (Washington, DC, Brookings, September 10, 2019), https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2019/09/10/what-are-the-factors-that-affect-learning-at-your-school/.

[4] David Steiner and Daniel Weisberg, "When Students Go Back to School, Too Many Will Start the Year Behind. Here's How to Catch Them Up—in Real Time," *the 74* (April 26, 2020).

[5] Bailey Cato Czupryk, "Remediation Won't Help Students Catch Up. Here's What Will," *TNTP Blog* (April 30, 2020), https://tntp.org/blog/post/remediation-wont-help-students-catch-up-heres-what-will.

[6] Suzy Pepper Rollins, *Learning in the Fast Lane* (Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2014).

[7] See http://www.communityyouthmapping.com/.

[8] See, e.g., The Expanded learning and Afterschool Project, "Toolkit for Expanding Learning," webpage, https://www.expandinglearning.org/toolkit/partners/every-hour-counts.

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