EDUCATIONAL EQUITY IN GREATER L.A.

An Updated Research Agenda in Service to Practice

Kate E. Kennedy
Taylor Enoch-Stevens
Eupha Jeanne Daramola
Julie A. Marsh
Patricia Burch
Darline Robles

September 2021

USCRossier

School of Education
Center on Education Policy, Equity and Governance

Photo by Allison Shelley for EDUimages, licensed under Creative Commons.

Educational Equity in Greater L.A.
An Updated Research Agenda in Service to Practice

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The academic year of 2020-2021 was rife with challenges for school leaders. To consider research implications in service to practice, the USC Center for Education Policy, Equity, and Governance (CEPEG) convened focus groups of school district leaders, as well as conducted two in-depth case studies of Southern California districts. We examined how district leaders understood the crises of 2020, as well as the biggest equity challenges they faced. In this update to our 2019 research agenda, we propose that the research community partner with districts in real-time; provide suggestions and research that will help leaders navigate political and racial power dynamics; evaluate race-conscious and race-evasive approaches to equity; and pay attention to how one-time federal monies are serving the communities hardest hit, and how equity can be considered in allocation decisions, especially as districts move to address unfinished learning and recovery.

INTRODUCTION

Educational leaders faced unprecedented challenges in the 2020-21 school year. Prior to fall 2020, earlier hurdles that included the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent school closures in March 2020, the murder of George Floyd and the ensuing wide-ranging social movement for Black Lives Matter in June 2020, and state and local health guidance that varied by the month vastly complicated leadership efforts. As the crisis progressed, school leaders worked overtime to create virtual learning conditions, reflect on anti-blackness in school communities, engage in racial equity work, weigh options for re-opening schools in person, keep teachers and community members safe, and implement health and safety measures.

These many challenges were interwoven with equity concerns, some of which had existed before COVID. Based on research conducted with educators prior to COVID, we found that leaders had strong concerns about inadequate funding, the larger social and political conditions outside of schools that contribute to inequality, and biases and beliefs among teachers, staff, and leaders that impede equity efforts. This past year may have exacerbated these equity challenges, or even, perhaps, introduced new ones. For instance, Black, Brown, and lower-income Los Angeles-area communities were disproportionately affected by COVID-19 rates. Similarly, heightened awareness around issues of racism and racial violence impacted schools and districts. These equity challenges bring to light the struggles education leaders face, but also may offer new opportunities for action and change.

With this in mind, we sought to update our research to practice agenda that was created two years ago, before the COVID pandemic. That is, in 2018-2019 the USC Center for Education Policy, Equity, and Governance (CEPEG) conducted a study [https://cepeg.usc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/2019-CEPEG-EducEquity-Report-1-5.pdf] to learn how district leaders in California defined and implemented equitable practices. Given the incredible stresses of this past year, we were interested in how issues related to equity and equity-oriented practices were influencing the work of district leaders in light of current events. We also sought to update our research agenda, to ensure the work of our center (and that of other researchers) is driven by current needs and prioritizes areas with the greatest potential to advance equity in Los Angeles and beyond.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY EQUITY?
According to the National Equity Project [https://www.nationalequityproject.org/education-equity-definition], educational equity means that each child receives what they need to develop to their full academic and social potential.] We recognize, however, that how one interprets this definition and how one conceptualizes equity could vary [https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/701247]. These concepts are part of what we interrogate in our research herein.
In our prior research, we found that L.A.-area educational leaders defined equity as:
• Meeting the needs of particular student populations, especially oppressed groups (e.g., needs of students by race, income, language learner status, disability, sexual orientation, or gender identity) • Equity as addressing "gaps" • Equity as distinct from equality • Equity as an effort to address systemic, structural, and historically long-standing inequities

We recognize that how education leaders consider equity challenges, as well as how ideas of ensuring equity apply to their communities, may have been shaped by the events of this last year. Therefore, our aim in this brief is to provide an updated research agenda, focused on four questions:

1. How did district leaders understand the crises?
2. What are the biggest equity challenges that districts are facing?
3. What strategies are districts using to address equity challenges?
4. How can researchers help district leaders advance equity in the current educational landscape?

METHODS

This research brief is based on research conducted during the 2020-2021 academic year and builds on and updates a brief created in 2019. To create a current research agenda, we interviewed district leaders through focus groups, in partnership with the USC Rossier Dean's Superintendents Advisory Group. All members of this group were invited to participate (remotely). The focus groups were facilitated by our CEPEG center staff. We held three focus groups in December 2020, lasting approximately 40 minutes each. Transcripts from the focus groups were professionally transcribed. To supplement focus group data, in 2020, we also scanned school district web sites and social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter), examining how school districts communicated about COVID closures, disruptions, and related services.

In order to add context and depth to our focus group and internet data, we also drew on in-depth case studies of two Greater L.A. school districts as well as a set of interviews with California state leaders (data collected for an ongoing study of COVID response in 2020-21 with Policy Analysis for California Education). In all, we spoke with 63 participants: 28 district leaders, three school board members, four school leaders, two teachers' association representatives, four classified association leaders, two county leaders, eight community organization leaders, and 13 state level leaders (e.g., state association of superintendents). Interviews lasted about an hour, were conducted using Zoom teleconference technology, recorded, and professionally transcribed. Our research team analyzed these data separately and collectively, meeting to discuss themes and findings.

Key Findings

1. HOW DID DISTRICT LEADERS UNDERSTAND THE CRISES?

Education leaders interpreted and led through the crises in varied ways, shaped by local discussions and the availability of guidance and resources. Participants reflected on the need to consider multiple perspectives when

making policy decisions and how they often felt ill advised when steering their school communities through pandemic conditions.

A. CONCEPTIONS OF EQUITY SHAPED CRISIS RESPONSE

One theme that emerged from our conversations is that stakeholders differed in how they perceived the best way to approach equitable schooling during the pandemic. One participant spoke of the challenges regarding bringing certain student groups back for in-person learning:

> ... The protocols for us have allowed us to bring English learners, foster youth, homeless, and other students having difficulties to come on campus and practicing civic protocols. But it's a struggle...[So] we're going to take the stricter approach and the safer approach...because the counter argument to that is that [we] don't care about the safety of the most underserved kids. And [we're] using them as an experiment...So there's this whole equity piece happening here, and you have to weigh both sides.

This reflection illustrates a dilemma between two conceptions of equity: liberal, which holds that students with the greatest need require the most attention (i.e. in-person instruction) and transformational, which holds that historically marginalized student groups often face systemic inequalities and returning to school too soon could further perpetuate that inequality by putting their health at risk. According to this participant, some community members' perceptions are partially rooted in deeper understandings of historical neglect and mishandling of marginalized populations, which could result in underserved students being used as "experiments" to test in-person learning options. Ultimately, education leaders leaned toward the transformational view when deciding whether to bring students back to campus.

B. LEADERS FELT ILL ADVISED TO LEAD THROUGH THE CURRENT CRISIS

Leaders acknowledged that they were largely unable to draw on their previous experiences navigating other crises (e.g., wildfires, active shooter drills) when approaching the current crisis. There was wide agreement that knowledge established for other types of crises was not adequate to address the conditions brought on by the pandemic, leaving leaders at all levels trying their best to build meaningful education experiences with little guidance and support. According to one district leader, this lack of preparation significantly affected lower performing students:

> I started teaching in 1970, and if they had a pandemic class, I must have slept through it. One of the things that we're seeing on the leadership side of this is there's nothing to fall back on. We have no experience with anything like this. And so, we're making it up as we go along. The problem with that is our lowest kids are being left behind with that. Because like I said, we don't know. I mean, I have trained in budgets and I've gone through dips and stuff many, many times and financial things. But nothing, nothing like this. We have no bag of tricks to fall back on, which is really hard. And there's no cohesive national plan. There's nothing. So, our resources are what's available. You grab this, you try it.

2. WHAT ARE THE BIGGEST EQUITY CHALLENGES THAT DISTRICTS ARE FACING?

A. INTERRUPTING AND ACCELERATING EQUITY WORK

Leaders reported that the pandemic accelerated, but also interrupted equity work. For some communities, the political atmosphere—that is, partisan discussions of the pandemic in national politics—around racial injustice in particular - acted as an impediment to equity work. One district leader reported using teacher capacity-building as

a "soft" entry point to heighten their understanding of racial equity and diversity, which spurred "controversy" from the "extremely conservative" portion of her community even to the point of she being personally attacked. In response, another district leader spoke of her own challenges in her community:

> When we were talking about soft entry, in cities like ours, there is no soft entry point because everything is being analyzed and paranoia is so high that if I have a culturally relevant and responsive educational group with five subcommittees and anyone in the community can join—so it's not an exclusive club of the leftist liberals or whatever they want to call us on any given day—there's such suspicion around what the agenda will be. And that is harmful to the progress we're trying to make, because even engaging in conversations around belief systems brings out the best in some and the worst in another.

When commenting on these "soft entry" points for discussing racial injustice, another participant noted how education leaders need to manage not just the students' education, but also the communities and political leanings "behind" each student:

> So particularly with our community being behind the children and the zoom, whether it's the virtual background the teacher is using that they like or don't like, to the books that are being read, or how educators comment on certain things, even if it is within the social studies or history setting. It's not some random math lesson about Biden and Trump. Everything seemed to be political within this period of time. And often it rested on the inequities that we should have addressed a long time ago, but really are so evident now in so many different places.

One participant spoke of how her district had a five-year technology plan that was expedited to be completed within one month:

> I think it accelerated the equity work, whether we're talking about the digital divide and the five-year plan to have a device in every child's hand versus having it within a month. The priorities allowed us to shift it and magnify the equity work I think, without reservations.

A leader from another district echoed this perspective, saying that pandemic conditions ushered in a sense of urgency that would not have otherwise existed:

> [The pandemic] really magnified the equity challenges we have in our school district and gave us a chance to really use the pandemic as an opportunity to accelerate the work, versus wait for everyone at the pace that they're most comfortable to move their belief system and mindset. It sort of helped us focus more because it was so evident and could not be missed in many different ways, connecting to distance learning or inability of support at home or all the artifacts that we were able to collect within a very short period of time, brought us together in a more focused way.

In sum, district leaders noted how pandemic conditions concerned more than health, safety, and learning, ushering in a more politicized atmosphere regarding advancing racial equity work. In some ways, equity-oriented policies have been accelerated, and in other ways, these initiatives have been met with pushback.

B. PHYSICAL NEEDS

At the beginning of the pandemic, when schools closed down in March 2020, the immediate equity needs revolved around physical needs of their students and community members. In a short time, districts pivoted their meal programs to provide lunch, breakfast, and dinner using pick-up locations. In some instances, districts delivered food to families in need. The pandemic laid bare the already existing inequities in Los Angeles. One L.A. area leader shared:

> The nutrition insecurity that became so evident, we've been serving meals for decades, but the reality of the numbers increasing and increasing and the number of individuals wanting to come and then are

feeding our families over the weekends, it just speaks to the hidden poverty in our communities that really became evident. [The pandemic] empowered our families to be more honest about what they were experiencing and more vocal about the needs they have, at least in my setting.

C. VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS AND TECHNOLOGY ACCESS

With schools closed, districts used existing resources and innovative tactics to keep children learning even while at home. While some districts remained virtual for most of the 2020-2021 school year, others returned in a hybrid fashion. Still more brought back in person children who needed help the most, using a "pod" or "hub" model so that children who were most at risk could continue learning outside of the home. Leaders shared deep equity concerns related to virtual learning environments and access to technology. One superintendent told us:

In our district, we've been back to in-person classes on a hybrid model where half the kids in, half the kids at home streaming in. But even in that hybrid model, our more affluent neighborhoods are coming back to in-person at a much higher rate than in our Title I neighborhoods. There's a lot more fear of infection and honestly, the infection rates are higher in our densely populated neighborhoods.

This leader echoed others in noticing how virtual learning environments were inequitable by neighborhood and income level.

Another leader emphasized how they ensured equity of access to technology, saying that:

That's very challenging, so knowing that we had to drop off several items. We had students that just cannot come to school to pick up items. So, it's not because we don't have the particular device available, but they just have no way to access that device, so we have then had to go out to homes to drop off items and things like that. So, I think access is definitely a focus for us right now, and that's kind of a recurring area that we're continuing to address.

D. SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

A prominent theme from our research was the need to attend to social-emotional supports for students, staff and communities. Connected to this issue was a growing need for mental health services. Many of our research participants shared that they had already been working on increasing the number of mental health professionals in their districts, but that the pandemic created an even greater need. This need is ongoing and continues to be a leadership priority, as one superintendent described it: "I think the mental health concerns are significant for our students and will last much longer than the pandemic and are particularly magnified for students who are going to have the same support systems in place."

As the pandemic continued, the need for therapists and mental health professionals increased, with demand often outpacing supply. This tied into equity concerns, with school districts sometimes stepping in as mental health resource centers. A school leader explained it like this:

I would say that we have seen a significant increased demand for the needs of our students in terms of social-emotional support and mental health. Our school primarily serves a very low socioeconomic population, so there's also some concerns there as far as their access to be able to receive some of these support services even within the community… Currently, we have three therapists that are on-site that are providing these services, and we're just seeing that they are being inundated with the number of referrals that are coming in. Obviously, we are trying to source outside consultants and community services that are either free or they're for low-income families, but we're also seeing that there's quite a waitlist for that as well.

E. LEARNING ENGAGEMENT

While districts were able to get devices to students so they could continue to participate in virtual or hybrid learning throughout the pandemic, student grades fell and engagement was of concern - even in places where

parents reported they were happy with the level of instruction. District leaders talked about "D and F" lists as being much longer than usual. Grading and assessment issues were connected to learning online. One county deputy superintendent described the scope of the challenge:

> I think the teachers are trying to figure out how to assess and how to grade in this space. And instead of … giving some grace and understanding that kids have specific needs, they're being punitive in terms of the grades. And I'll give you a really clear example, some of the teachers we're finding are knocking kids' grades down because they haven't turned on their zoom camera and they are saying that they're not fully engaged. And so, their grades are suffering because of that.

F. LEARNING LOSS

Learning loss (or "unfinished learning," as one leader called it) was another pressing concern for educators. Leaders suggested that while some students have been able to maintain their standing and learn at home, others, including the most vulnerable students, have lost academic learning time, contributing to opportunity gaps. A district leader shared his concerns:

> I think the biggest challenge is the learning loss that's going on. I don't think it's just access. We started measuring the learning loss and it is probably two or three times as great in our Title I schools as it is in our not Title I schools. The distance learning is hard and the kids who need the in-person learning the most are getting the least of it, and so those things are exacerbated. And then it's going to take a while to get everybody who needs to be caught up, caught up. Especially that reading and math that we're so worried about.

G. SCHOOL STAFF HEALTH AND SAFETY

District leaders also struggled to balance adult safety with the needs of students during the pandemic. District leaders described that doing what was best for students, such as bringing them back from a virtual learning environment into the schools for in-person learning, required trade-offs and negotiations with teachers' unions. These were not easy decisions to make. One superintendent told us that:

> Bringing 10% of our students back on our campuses was not an easy lift because our employees were not necessarily excited about returning to work... Huge challenge right now of, whenever we make a decision, we make it based on what's best for students, that is not always appreciated by the adults.

As illustrated by the quote above, the tension of keeping teachers safe while meeting kids' needs presented a challenge to accomplishing equity goals. District leaders felt that lower-income students without resources at home to help with learning would get further behind during the pandemic.

The needs that emerged from spring 2020 to spring May 2021, when our research concluded, were layered, complex, and great. Equity was an overarching concern, touching all aspects of education leadership. The needs arose in phases, beginning with immediate physical needs, including hunger, with technology access and virtual learning opportunities following, and then a longer, more challenging phase of social-emotional and mental health needs. Leaders also shared concerns related to learning loss and teacher health and safety.

3. WHAT STRATEGIES ARE DISTRCITS USING TO ADDRESS EQUITY CHALLENGES?

Overall leaders were committed to advancing equity even amid a national health crisis. Despite the commitment, participants suggested that COVID-19 slowed or limited the equity work within their districts. Further, based on our research in 2018-2019 we initially suggested five priorities for research and practice to advance equity in the L.A. area and beyond. In the research presented above, we found that the equity strategies leaders employed during COVID-19 mirrored some of the priorities we suggested in our earlier report.

A. COMMITMENT FOR AND CHALLENGES WITH EQUITY WORK

Multiple leaders suggested that equity work is a long process that must persist beyond the duration of a pandemic. School district leaders discussed the need to deepen equity work, continuing on the equity journey within their communities. They believed equity work was complicated, multifaceted work. One assistant superintendent said: "We want to do [equity work] effectively and we want to do it well. But it's such a unique living, breathing thing, that the journey is unique. And I think that's the challenge." Part of continuing equity work is defining what equity is, noted one principal, as well as working in collaboration with others.

However, despite their commitment, leaders indicated that COVID-19 presented challenges to equity work. A district leader described their equity journey, identifying how COVID-19 slowed down their efforts:

> If not for the pandemic, we would be much farther along. The commitment is there from the superintendent, the board, all the way through the teachers and the administrative teams.

Participants noted that it is hard to discuss race and racial equity concerns in a virtual setting. Some also felt strongly that racism permeates all aspects of school culture and therefore educators needed to address the entire school culture in response. Leaders emphasized that each district's road to more equitable practices was unique due to the individual contexts of each community. Therefore, there is not a one-size fit all approach. However, despite the "challenge," the leaders shared strategies they utilized to address issues of inequity within their communities.

B. BUILDING CAPACITY FOR EQUITY WORK

In our original report, we suggested that to further equity leaders needed to invest in the human, financial, social, and political capacity to engage in and sustain equity work overtime. Data from this study suggests that leaders focused on building human and political capacity for equity work within their districts; a focus on capacity building remained critical, as our previous research suggested. One set of strategies centered on training administrators, teachers, and staff. Leaders articulated that it is important to educate stakeholders before tackling equity issues. When discussing racial equity work within her districts, one leader stated: "We need to provide [educators] foundational information and knowledge that they can build off of." Some districts worked in partnership with other organizations such as the NAACP and the California Teachers Association to provide the information. Other districts created book clubs. One district organized equity workshops for classified staff. According to the superintendent, one session focused on "cultural proficiency, understanding your race, understanding how others may perceive things differently than others."

Further, superintendents suggested that it was essential that all leaders within the organization are invested in and bought into the importance of equity work. For example, one superintendent discussed how she presented her district's racial equity plan to her school board. She argued that having the board's support was critical for the work. Another superintendent discussed how he trained principals to have equity conversations at the school

level. The superintendent explained: "The way to tackle [issues], you have those conversations, courageous conversations with your principals and [they] have them with their leadership teams." A participant suggested that it is helpful when the superintendent knows that the principals "have their back" regarding equity work in a complex political environment.

C. USING DATA TO EXAMINE WHAT POLICIES ARE EFFECTIVE AND FOR WHOM

Our original report suggested that leaders and researchers examine the impacts of education policies, programs, and interventions on under-served student populations. In this study, leaders shared that data played an essential role in advancing this aim. First, data highlight areas of inequity that require districts' attention. Second, sharing data on racial equity initiatives already in use may help to spread the practices. For instance, one leader wanted

to see the data supporting effective racial equity strategies:

> People are saying that, 'Oh, this is an effective strategy.' Why is it effective? What's the research behind that? What's the data that it is effective? [I need to] see if maybe that's something that I would like to also implement on my campus.

To effectively utilize data, one school district hired an external research firm to help them unpack their student achievement data during the pandemic.

Overall, leaders expressed a commitment to equity work despite the challenges of COVID-19. Leaders' equity strategies aligned well with the priorities we outlined in 2019. In sum, the priorities identified in research agenda remain relevant, but also, as indicated below, need updating.

4. HOW CAN RESEARCHERS HELP DISTRICT LEADERS ADVANCE EQUITY IN THE CURRENT EDUCATIONAL LANDSCAPE?

In light of the past year, we found it necessary to update the research priorities that emerged from our 2019 report. In our initial report, we identified five priorities for future research. In many ways, the educational and social conditions of 2020 and 2021 have reiterated the need for research in these areas. The pandemic initiated a collective urgency around equity-oriented, race-conscious policy solutions. Still, using educational leader input through focus groups, we have updated these priorities to reflect feedback as they continue to navigate the current educational landscape. We include the initial priorities below, with the **updates in bold**.

Research Priorities

Build capacity for equity work: Research is needed that can provide practitioners and policy makers with the information they need to build the human, financial, social, and political capacity to engage in and sustain equity work over time. **Also, partner with districts in real-time, so that districts can benefit from research-based insights in a timely fashion.** For example, short-cycle research-practice partnerships that meet every 4-6 weeks might help build research-based capacity for on-the-ground equity work.

Examine underlying beliefs about equity and the mindsets needed to move beyond symbolic, surface-level change. **Since examining and re-working belief systems can be a lengthy process, also provide tangible, research-based suggestions for practices that administrators, teachers, and staff can adopt quickly**.

Interrogate dynamics of power within and across communities and educational systems. **Be attuned to how, in times of crisis, political and racial power dynamics shape educational experiences.** This might include collaborative reviews, with researchers, of school board rhetoric, social media communications, or new curricular policies.

Investigate race-conscious and race-evasive approaches to equity and their implications for educators and students. **Specifically, provide guidance on what adult behaviors to be aware of, to either curtail or promote, so that racially minoritized students are receiving a meaningful educational experience.** Evaluate which policies, programs, and practices are most effective, for whom, and why. **In these evaluations, attend to the particularities of local context. Provide enough detail to help leaders determine whether a program or practice would be a good fit for their community.**

Address pandemic-specific, equity research priorities. Researchers should pay attention to how one-time federal funding is serving the communities hardest hit and how equity was considered in allocation decisions. Evaluate how governance decisions are aligned with community input and the ways in which parent and student voice

are honored. Examine the long-term effects of eroding trust in schools among particular communities. Assess efforts to address unfinished learning.

We believe studies addressing these topics offer great hope for advancing equity in the L.A. area and beyond.

Additional Resources

We are grateful to everyone who participated in these dialogues
for sharing your insights with us.

This project was made possible through the generosity of the
California Community Foundation.

Photo by Allison Shelley for [EDUimages](#), licensed under [Creative Commons](#).

The mission of the Center on Education Policy, Equity and Governance is to conduct rigorous, practice- relevant research that advances educational equity for California K-12 students—with an emphasis on greater Los Angeles—and to create partnerships that ensure education policies, practices, and governance structures are guided by evidence and careful analysis.

We recognize that stakeholders' definitions of equity vary, both among CEPEG affiliates and in the education field more broadly. Our equity work at CEPEG is united by goals of addressing unjust social stratification and challenging oppressive educational beliefs, practices, and structures to advance academic achievement and social-emotional development across social groups (for example by race/ethnicity, gender, and social class).

USCRossier

School of Education
Center on Education Policy,
Equity and Governance

cepeg.usc.edu ▪ @usc_cepeg