



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE EQUITY-INFORMED SCHOOL CLIMATE ASSESSMENT (EISCA) of Manchester Public Schools (MPS)

A Collaboration between RE-Center,
Race & Equity in Education and
Manchester Public Schools



RE-CENTER
RACE & EQUITY IN EDUCATION
— FORMERLY THE DISCOVERY CENTER —

PREFACE: A GROUNDING



Dear Reader,

Over the 2017-2018 school year, RE-Center, *Race & Equity in Education* (RE-Center) evaluators gathered input from students, staff, and families from Manchester Public Schools (MPS) as part of conducting the Equity-Informed School Climate¹ Assessment (EISCA) of the district. The experiences, responses, and perspectives of these stakeholders have been synthesized in the following pages. This preface highlights key points to remember while reading this assessment.

Visionary Leadership

In deciding to conduct this assessment, MPS leadership has taken an important step in committing to institutionalizing equity in its schools. Throughout the assessment, district leaders engaged in a collaborative process with RE-Center evaluators to uncover institutional inequities impacting students, staff, and families from marginalized groups. The initiative MPS leaders have shown in collaborating on this assessment should be acknowledged and celebrated.

An Opportunity for Insight

This assessment was devised to report on the experiences of people who belong to currently and historically marginalized groups, including students, staff, and families of color; students, staff, and families who are women, transgender, or gender non-conforming; students, staff, and families with currently and historically marginalized sexual orientations; students and families from low-income backgrounds; students, staff, and families with disabilities; students, staff, and families who are not native English-speakers; students, staff, and families who are not Christian; and students, staff, and families whose identities belong at the intersections² of these groups.

All supporting details to this Executive Summary can be found in the full [Equity Informed School Climate Assessment \(EISCA\) Report](#).

Some of the responses that evaluators recorded may be different from the personal experiences of readers, and, because of this difference, these narratives may be difficult to believe and accept. Readers should consider the information within this report as an opportunity to understand perspectives that may have previously been invisible to them. This new information can be used by the MPS community to create an engaging, safe, and accessible school climate that values all stakeholders.

A First Step Toward Action

The process of identifying inequities is a necessary first step toward institutionalizing equity in the education system. MPS has the potential to change inequitable policies, practices, and patterns and to develop the knowledge, awareness, and skills necessary to create a more equitable school environment for all stakeholders. This assessment is not a solution but a starting point, intended to provide information and recommendations to be used by the MPS community in developing a strategic action plan to achieve equity in its schools.

It is important to note that even though this report is focused on Manchester Public Schools, the challenges described herein are not unique to MPS. Other school districts in Connecticut and across the country have similar issues, with similar root causes of inequity.³

Accessibility and Language

There has been an attempt to use straightforward and clear language in this report. Throughout the report, both quantitative data and descriptive language synthesizing qualitative data are used to convey the results of the assessment. Using both quantitative and qualitative information to evaluate the state of school climate in the district was an important part of conducting this equity-informed assessment, as quantitative information alone cannot capture the nuanced reality of an educational environment.⁴ Other concepts will be defined throughout the report, and there is a Glossary of Terms in Appendix A with definitions that readers can reference as needed.



RE-Center, *Race & Equity in Education* (formerly The Discovery Center) works in collaboration with school districts that are seeking to institutionalize equity in all facets of their operations and within district culture.

Acknowledgments

It is important to realize that many of the stories in this report are personal and were difficult for members of the MPS community to share. RE-Center would like to thank and honor the numerous students, staff, and families in the MPS community who shared their stories for this assessment and used their individual experiences as a way to highlight inequities and offer solutions to improve the school district.

RE-Center would like to thank the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund for support of this project. We would like to thank EdChange for consultation and project design support, in particular, Paul Gorski, Ph.D., Gisella Zuniga and Duhita Mahatmya.

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INTRODUCTION

Imagine there is a car accident on I-84 involving 20 cars. First responders arrive at the scene ready to help the individuals who are hurt. It is vital that each person involved in the accident receives the care they need to survive and heal their injuries.

EQUALITY

Imagine the first responders giving each person an ice pack and two bandages. This is equality—everyone involved in the accident receives the same thing.

EQUITY

But is this distribution of resources fair?

Does everyone receive what they need?

Equity means allocating resources to meet the needs of an individual, group, or community.

What is Equity in Education?

Equity in education exists when students from marginalized groups reap the same social and educational benefits as their peers. Achieving an equitable educational environment requires institutions to transform their policies, practices, and cultural patterns to re-distribute access and opportunity to those who belong to currently and historically marginalized groups.

In education, equity:

- + Requires eliminating disparities in access and opportunity and directly confronting inequity;⁵
- + Refers to what is fair and not necessarily equal,⁶ and encompasses a wide variety of educational models, programs, and strategies that may be considered fair;⁷
- + Prioritizes examining how policies and practices impact the experiences of people from marginalized groups;
- + Addresses “structural and systemic conditions, processes, and barriers that exacerbate societal inequities”⁸ existing within school systems, thus interrupting the replication of systems of oppression; and
- + Should lead to equality as an outcome.⁹

This report summarizes where the assessment found inequities in the district and highlights areas where work is already being done to create a more equitable school environment. The concept of equity is already woven into the fabric of Manchester Public Schools (MPS) and has been adopted as part of the vision for what MPS can and should be. The mission of MPS asserts, “Through an active partnership with students, school personnel, families and community, the Manchester Public Schools will create safe, inclusive schools where equity is the norm and excellence is the goal.” Research shows that equity is essential to creating a school climate that effectively serves students, staff, and families. A positive school climate has been shown to improve academic outcomes, improve graduation rates, improve motivation to learn, reduce suspension and discipline issues, dramatically reduce “risky” behaviors, provide physical, social, and emotional benefits for students, and improve staff morale.¹⁰

An equitable school climate is an essential part of a healthy and safe learning environment in which students, staff, and families can thrive.¹¹ If school climate is going to be able to provide

all the positive benefits it can, it must serve all students. An analysis of equity within a school district helps us to understand which school community members are being served and which have needs that are not being met. Learning in an inequitable school environment can be a stressful experience that compromises a child’s ability to succeed. There is a significant amount of research on the impacts of childhood trauma on a child’s ability to learn.¹² The discourse on childhood trauma seldom considers the impact of the discrimination, harassment and microaggressions¹³ that young people from marginalized groups experience regularly in educational environments. An essential piece of the work to uncover systemic inequities is to consider the devastating impacts that inequities in schools have on students and their ability to learn. The school community has control over changing these harmful patterns and incidents and must do the hard work of examining how schools themselves are at times causing harm to children. The Equity-Informed School Climate Assessment for Manchester Public Schools tackles this challenge head on, and the results have been detailed in the pages to follow.

EISCA

The Equity-Informed School Climate Assessment (EISCA) of Manchester Public Schools (MPS) is an evaluation of the culture and climate of the district through the lens of racial equity and its intersections.

Research shows that equity is essential to creating a school climate that effectively serves students, staff, and families and positively improves all student outcomes.

This assessment examines the educational, emotional, and social experiences of students, staff, and families from marginalized groups to uncover institutional and systemic inequities that prevent all students from reaping the same social and educational benefits. When those with the most marginalized identities are served well, the school district creates a healthier learning environment for everyone – because a school is only as equitable as those most marginalized experience it to be.

MPS

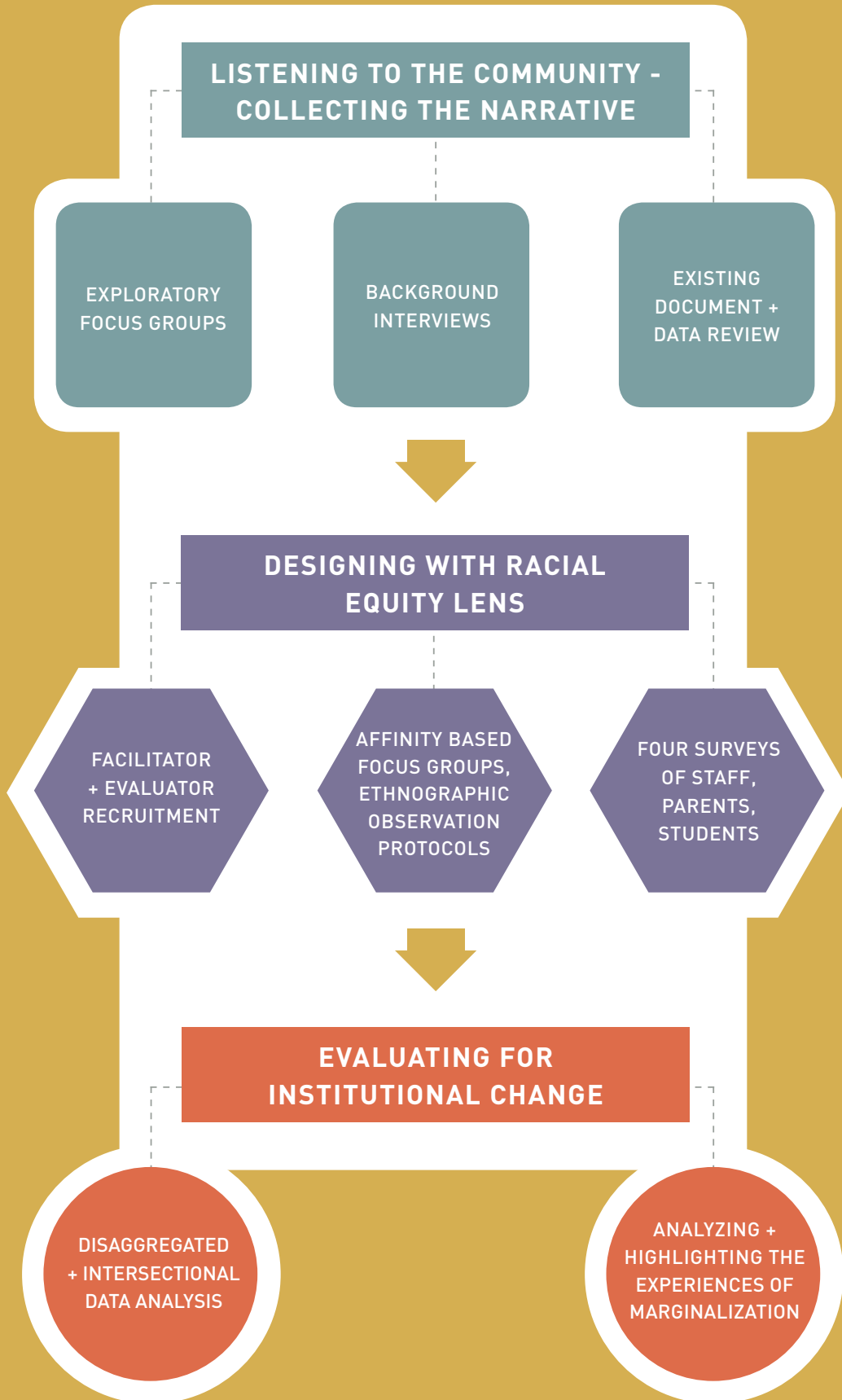


THE CENTRAL QUESTION GUIDING THIS ASSESSMENT WAS:

To what extent is Manchester Public Schools an equitable environment for all members of the district community?

This assessment was conducted as a collaboration between RE-Center, *Race & Equity in Education* (formerly The Discovery Center), and MPS with the purpose of identifying existing obstacles to an equitable climate and providing recommendations to guide administrators in creating an action plan that directly addresses the impacts of racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, classism, and other forms of inequity within MPS. The assessment highlights the promising work that the district has begun and details key areas for continued progress and improvement.

PROCESS



WE EVALUATED SCHOOL CLIMATE BY ASKING ABOUT:

- + Safety
- + Access to Opportunities
- + Value
- + School Engagement and Connectedness

Data to inform this assessment of school climate were collected during the 2017-2018 academic year.

Evaluators gathered quantitative data through four separate surveys:

- + a survey of students in grades 5 and 6;
- + a survey of students in grades 7-12;
- + a survey of MPS administrators, educators, certified staff members, and non-certified staff members;
- + and a survey of family members of children attending schools in the district.

Designed with a racial equity lens.

Evaluators collected qualitative data through affinity-based focus groups, background interviews, write-in survey questions, and ethnographic school site observations. Evaluators designed affinity-based focus groups to capture the experiences of students, staff, and families with currently and historically marginalized identities, specifically focused on race, gender identity, sexual orientation, language, disability, and their intersections.

Evaluating for institutional change.

The information gathered through these methods of engagement painted an expansive and detailed picture of the school climate in MPS. Manchester Public Schools is taking important steps to address inequities within the district, and many opportunities exist for MPS to fully support all students, staff, and families, including those from marginalized groups. Naming and understanding the key themes emerging from this assessment can inform the district's action plan to create a more equitable school environment for students, staff, and families.

WHAT IS GOING WELL IN MANCHESTER

Students, staff members, and family members from marginalized groups offered their perspectives of the current culture and climate in Manchester Public Schools.

1 Students, staff & families are **EAGER to have CONVERSATIONS** about racial identity and other identities they hold

4 Students reported receiving **ENCOURAGEMENT AND SUPPORT** from teachers and staff

2 MPS students embody **MULTICULTURAL DIVERSITY**

5 There are individuals at MPS with a deep **COMMITMENT to EQUITY**

3 Staff report **POSITIVE WORK ENVIRONMENT**

6 **FAMILIES FEEL RESPECTED** and have a positive outlook on their child's experience



OVERVIEW

BACKGROUND



1. Students, staff members, and family members were eager to have conversations about race, gender identity, and any other identities they might hold.

Evaluators found that MPS students were enthusiastic about discussing their experiences, both positive and negative, and excited to have an opportunity to be included in reshaping their schools. Staff members were eager to offer their insights into both the challenges and effectiveness of equity initiatives in MPS through their participation in focus groups, conversations, and background interviews. Many of the family members who participated in the family focus groups were parents and guardians deeply involved in their children's education and knowledgeable about equity issues at their children's schools.

2. The MPS student body embodies multicultural diversity.

Many students, especially those new to the district, recognized their school's diversity as a positive and important aspect of their educational environment. Based on a number of key metrics in surveys, focus groups, and interviews, evaluators found that the vast majority of students, including students from marginalized groups, are building community at school through friendships with their peers.

3. Staff members, including those from marginalized groups, reported overall positive experiences in their work environments in MPS.

When surveyed, more than 90 percent of staff, including more than 90 percent of staff members of color, agreed that they are proud to work in their school or office, agreed they feel a warm connection with at least two coworkers, and agreed that they are valued members of their school or office team.

4. Students reported receiving encouragement and support from teachers, and staff members have begun learning how to implement social-emotional learning tools and restorative practices in schools.

When surveyed, 85 percent of students in grades 5 and 6 agreed that teachers help them discover how they learn best and 89 percent agreed that teachers show them how to learn from their mistakes. Eighty-eight percent of family members agreed that their child's school helps them develop social and emotional skills. Restorative Practices have been introduced in MPS elementary, middle, and high schools to help school community members build and sustain positive relationships with each other and address student behavioral issues. Through quantitative and qualitative data analysis, evaluators found there is more work to be done in fully implementing these tools and practices and aligning them with equity principles; however, introducing them is an important step towards building an equitable school district and creating alternatives to exclusionary disciplinary actions.

5. There are individuals within MPS with a deep understanding and commitment to equity.

During the EISCA process, evaluators spoke with numerous staff members who are deeply committed to creating equitable environments in MPS. Evaluators found that there are staff members in key roles who have the knowledge, awareness, and skills to be leaders in moving the district's equity work forward.

6. Family members surveyed feel respected by district staff and have a positive outlook on their child's experience at and beyond MPS.

When surveyed, more than 90 percent of family members, including families of color and families for whom English is not their native language, agreed that they feel good about their child's future; agreed that they feel comfortable speaking with their child's teachers; and agreed that they are greeted with kindness when they call or visit the school. Family members also reported easy access to interpretation services in MPS, a key part of experiencing schools as welcoming environments for non-native English-speaking family members.

“In school, people say that Puerto Ricans are dumb and idiots.”

- MPS Student

“Being bisexual in this school...I’m not able to tell anyone and I don’t feel like myself when I am here.”

- MPS Student

“8th grade boys are very inappropriate. They treat us like ‘fresh bait.’”

- MPS Student

“Children need to be taught more things about their own culture. The education is very one-sided.”

- MPS Parent of Color

“We need teachers of color...but I do not feel like I want to ask people of color to come work in a place to struggle with us.”

- MPS Staff Member of Color

“Indirectly, they expect me to explain certain aspects of minority culture. They ask me to speak to the ‘aggressive’ POC [people of color] parents. I don’t want to be seen as the angry Black woman.”

- MPS Staff Member of Color

“My six-year-old should never be called the ‘n-word’.”

- Parent of a Black MPS Student

“One is a Black child who is suspended two times and teachers are saying, ‘I wish his mother would do something.’ The other is a white child who was suspended one time. Teachers are saying, ‘His meds aren’t working’.”

- MPS Staff Member

FINDINGS

Through survey questions, background interviews, focus groups, and conversations held during the ethnographic site observations, evaluators identified these major themes as opportunities for improvement in Manchester Public Schools (MPS):

1 Discrimination is still impacting students, staff, and families from marginalized groups in MPS.

Students, staff members, and family members in MPS reported witnessing racist behavior and experiencing microaggressions. Students, staff members, and family members from marginalized groups, in particular those belonging to more than one marginalized group, reported they do not feel safe at school including students and staff members of color and students experiencing food insecurity. Female students, including female students belonging to more than one marginalized group, reported being harassed in school. LGBTQ+, transgender, and gender non-conforming students, in particular LGBTQ+, transgender, and gender non-conforming students of color, reported being discriminated against in school. Across all races, students, staff, and family members with one or more disabilities reported feeling unsafe in school, and, across all races, non-Christian students and staff reported feeling stereotyped and discriminated against in school.

2 There is a lack of institutional structures for support of staff in creating an equitable school climate in MPS.

MPS lacks a comprehensive vision for equity work that can help the district systematically address obstacles to an equitable climate, more effectively communicate opportunities for engagement, and share successes in the district's equity work. The current organization of equity work in MPS and the lack of requirements for professional learning also fail to distribute the responsibility of institutionalizing equity onto all leadership. MPS is lagging in its stated recruitment goals for staff of color and in its retention of staff members of color; and the lack of staff members of color, particularly educators of color, was a common concern among students, staff, and families. There are particular gaps in institutional support structures needed by staff members of color and staff members with disabilities. MPS lacks a true multicultural curriculum and the tools staff members need to create an equitable classroom environment.

3 There are significant gaps in MPS staff members' skills needed to foster equitable learning environments.

Based on survey data and conversations with MPS staff members, evaluators found that many MPS staff members lack the knowledge, awareness, and

skills to address the ways race, class, sexuality, gender identity, ability, religion, and language are impacting climate in MPS schools and workplaces. Staff members fail to consistently respond to discrimination, harassment, and inequities in MPS, and evaluators found a school culture in which administrators and adults are not encouraged to talk about race, class, sexuality, gender identity, and other critical equity issues. This lack of knowledge and skills among MPS staff is impacting relationships between staff and students from marginalized groups and their families.

4 Students, staff, and families from marginalized groups reported barriers to accessing academic, extracurricular, and professional learning opportunities, major factors that contribute to the creation and maintenance of the equity gap.

The unequal access to opportunities includes: students from marginalized groups disproportionately experiencing exclusionary disciplinary actions; students and families from marginalized groups facing cost and transportation barriers preventing them from taking full advantage of academic and extracurricular opportunities in MPS; family members from marginalized groups—especially family members with disabilities—lacking information needed to support their students' learning opportunities; a lack of clear entrance and exit criteria for alternative education placements in the district; and significant disparities between mainstream school environments and alternative education programs in climate and academic rigor. Low expectations from educators also prevent students from marginalized groups from fully accessing academic opportunities available in MPS.

5 Students and staff from marginalized groups reported a lack of connectedness to their school environment.

This trend emerged prominently among LGBTQ+ students, transgender students, and gender non-conforming students, in particular students of color belonging to one of these marginalized identities; students and staff with disabilities; and non-Christian students. It is important to note that when assessing the experiences of male students of color, evaluators collected conflicting data on feelings of safety and belonging in school.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This assessment was not intended to uncover and correct every instance of discrimination and marginalization that occurs in Manchester Public Schools. Rather, the key themes detailed in this report have been used to make systems-level recommendations at the district level to aid MPS leaders in reexamining and revising the policies and practices that govern all MPS schools. Based on the key findings of this report, we recommend that Manchester Public Schools prioritize the following actions in its plan to build an equitable school environment for the most marginalized—and thereby, all students:

- 1 Address policies and practices that have been shown to be inequitable**
- 2 Develop a multi-year District Equity Plan (DEP)**
- 3 Implement a multi-year strategy for comprehensive equity-focused professional learning for all staff**
- 4 Fill institutional gaps in equity-based skills**
- 5 Create and implement a meaningfully multicultural curriculum**
- 6 Invest in creating institutional policies and culture that will attract and retain teachers of color**
- 7 Collect and analyze additional equity-based data and increase accessibility of data**
- 8 Center student voices and leadership**

Many school districts are facing challenges when working to institutionalize equity. Manchester Public Schools is doing the forward-thinking work of identifying opportunities to solve pervasive school climate problems impacting students, staff, and families from historically and currently marginalized groups—a process that will benefit other school districts around Connecticut and across the country.

Evaluators anticipate this report will provide guidance for administrators in directly addressing the impacts of racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of inequity within MPS. Identifying existing obstacles to an equitable climate—as MPS has done in this assessment—will help the district implement real solutions to address issues of racism and other forms of inequity and build a healthy and equitable environment in Manchester Public Schools.



The Equity-Informed School Climate Assessment of Manchester Public Schools is a Collaboration between RE-Center, *Race & Equity in Education* (formerly The Discovery Center) and Manchester Public Schools

Project Design & Analysis in Consultation with EdChange

RESOURCES

- ¹ School Climate: School climate is based on the patterns of people's experiences of school life; it reflects the norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching, learning and leadership practices, and organizational structures that comprise school life. See Appendix A: Glossary of Terms for references.
- ² Intersectionality: When identities along race, class, gender, socio-economics, and ability [and other identity markers] intersect within an individual, the confluence of their identities informs how they view, discuss, and navigate through the world. See Appendix A: Glossary of Terms for references.
- ³ Education Equality in America: Comparing the Achievement Gap Across Schools, Cities, and States. Education Cities and the Education Equality Index, 2016, www.educationequalityindex.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Education-Equality-in-America-v1-4.pdf.
- ⁴ "When quantitative methods are used alone, or used to acquire more depth about the topic, they are not sufficient. To get the complete picture, it is important to understand and be able to conduct qualitative research – research that traditionally does not include numbers, and statistical figures, or 'count' data... As we work to change not only life-styles but also systems, built environments, and policies, the 'deeper data' that we can tap into using qualitative methods become increasingly valuable": Watkins, Daphne C. "Qualitative Research: The Importance of Conducting Research That Doesn't 'Count'." *Health Promotion Practice*, vol. 13, no. 2, pp. 153-158, 1 Mar. 2012, doi. org/10.1177/1524839912437370.
- ⁵ Gorski, Paul. "Five Paradigm Shifts for Equitable Educators." EdChange and the Equity Literacy Institute, 26 Nov. 2017, www.edchange.org/handouts/paradigmshifts.pdf; Gorski, Paul. "Basic Principles for Equity Literacy." EdChange and the Equity Literacy Institute, 9 Dec. 2017, www.edchange.org/handouts/Equity-Literacy-Principles.pdf.
- ⁶ "Equity." The Great Schools Partnership: The Glossary of Education Reform, 21 Apr. 2016, www.edglossary.org/equity.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Galloway, Mollie K., and Ann M. Ishimaru. "Equitable leadership on the ground: converging on high-leverage practices." *Education Policy Analysis Archives/Archivos Analíticos de Políticas Educativas*, vol. 25, no. 2, 9 Jan. 2017, doi: dx.doi. org/10.14507/epaa.25.2205.
- ⁹ See endnote 6 in full report.
- ¹⁰ "Why Is School Climate Important?." National School Climate Center, www.schoolclimate.org/about/our-approach/why-is-school-climate-important. Accessed 9 June 2018.
- ¹¹ Ross, Randy. "School Climate and Equity." National School Climate Center, February 2013, www.schoolclimate.org/themes/schoolclimate/assets/pdf/practice/sc-brief-equity.pdf.
- ¹² McNerney, Maura and Amy McKlindon. "Unlocking the Door to Learning: Trauma-Informed Classrooms & Transformational Schools." Education Law Center, December 2014, www.elc-pa.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Trauma-Informed-in-Schools-Classrooms-FINAL-December2014-2.pdf.
- ¹³ Microaggressions: subconscious and often well-meaning actions or remarks that convey an unconscious bias and hurt the person at the receiving end. See Appendix A: Glossary of Terms for references.

For the full report and complete list of references, visit www.re-center.org or contact us at (860) 284.9489 to request a copy of the full report.



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