

Denver Public Schools (DPS)

A Literature Review on the Topic of Educational Equity

For nearly two decades, DPS has relied on the *Denver Plan* to identify where it is going, how to get there, and how to gauge progress. Over the years, the leadership of the Denver Public Schools has marshalled efforts to refresh the document to keep pace with forces and trends both inside and outside of education. For instance, in the last 20 years federal and state laws have heightened educator accountability. Demographic shifts have made the District more diverse than ever. English learners are more commonplace in DPS classrooms than ever. Racial isolation continues to be a challenge, and as the total enrollment rises so too does the number of children from financially insecure families.

As efforts to update the most current version of the Plan began to take shape, a literature review was undertaken. Broadly focused on educational equity, its purpose was to inform the work of those undertaking to revise the *Denver Plan 2020*.

From an equity standpoint, certain questions frame the effort to revise the *Denver Plan 2020* and animate the literature review effort. What impedes DPS from overcoming access disparities that impair student opportunities and outcomes? What are the contributing causes when student groups differ in academic progress (for instance, on-time high school graduation) or goal attainment (such as a 3 or more on an Advanced Placement exam)? What inequities arise from selection decisions at the school, program, or district level (such as enrollment in gifted and talented elementary school)? Do these selection decisions tend to vary systematically based on student race, ethnicity, national origin, or other background characteristic? When it comes to the choices available to students (such as whether to participate in college-preparatory coursework), does the access students have to these choices tend to differ systematically based on student race, ethnicity, national origin, or other background characteristics? When it comes to the choices available to teachers and principals (such as which students are recommended for college-prep course streams), do these choices differ based on student race, ethnicity, neighborhood, or family wealth?

The purpose of the review was to identify similar efforts elsewhere in the nation that might provide helpful examples of districtwide equity frameworks (school districts in Seattle and Chicago, etc.). It was also to gather resources that might help Denver community members (who are recruited to serve on an advisory team) to understand key ideas in the equity arena, such as culturally responsive education, targeted universalism, etc. The purpose was also to gather DPS documents that might be useful resources (the Bailey Report, the Jefferson Study, African American Equity Task Force Recommendations, the Black Excellence Resolution by the Board of Education, etc.).

At the same time, this was not intended to be a comprehensive and exhaustive review. The chief purpose was to gather material that could be readily available to a DPS team that was asked to help develop content for the *Denver Plan* (specifically goals, measures, strategies, and a theory of action).

A total of 99 different publications are included in the literature review; at the same time, there are 122 entries. The discrepancy arises because some entries appear in more than one category. These publications have been organized into eight categories:

- Landscape, historical, or contextual (18 entries)

- Equity general (23 entries)
- Race and equity (25 entries)
- Achievement and Opportunity Gaps (13 entries)
- Educators of Color (6 entries)
- Cultural Relevance/Responsiveness (10 entries)
- Community/Family Engagement (6 entries)
- Examples (21 entries)

In addition to author, publisher, copyright date, and an abstract, the citations for each include a link to the full text of the publication (where available). Below appear eight publications within the literature review. A brief description is included explaining the relevance of the publication to the work of a DPS team charged with revising the *Denver Plan 2020*.

John Rawls, Justice as Fairness, Harvard College, 1985

By setting forth the notion of distributive justice, Rawls provides philosophical grounding for the concept of equity. In broad strokes, the author contends that all in society should benefit from the actions of government, but those who face the steepest climb should benefit most, should not be harmed, and should not be forgotten. Rawls enunciates a “liberty principle” that emphasizes that there is not a single “liberty” that governments should aim at, but instead there is a set of liberties that ground citizens’ powers to form and act from conceptions of justice and of a fully worthwhile life. Rawls presents an analysis that emphasizes justice as fairness with respect to its political aspects. This groundbreaking book is the capstone to a half- century’s deep thinking by the author on the subject.

Greg Duncan and Richard Murnane, Restoring Opportunity: Crisis of Inequality and the Challenge for American Education, Harvard Education Press, 2014

This well-documented empirical study uses compelling evidence to demonstrate that strategically targeted interventions in schools have improved the life chances of students from financially insecure families in large urban school settings. The authors describe the interplay of social and economic factors that has made it increasingly difficult for schools to counteract the effects of inequality and has led to a widening wedge between low- and high-income students. Restoring Opportunity provides detailed portraits of proven initiatives that are transforming the lives of low-income children from prekindergarten through high school. All cited programs are research-tested and have demonstrated sustained effectiveness over time and at significant scale. Together, they offer a powerful vision of what good instruction in effective schools can look like. The authors conclude by outlining the elements of a new agenda for education reform. Restoring Opportunity is a landmark contribution from two leading economists in the field of education. It is also a passionate call to action on behalf of the young people on whom our nation’s future depends.

Kayla Patrick, Allison Socol, and Ivy Morgan, Inequities in advanced coursework: What’s driving them and what leaders can do, Ed Trust, 2020

This report shows how – at the state and federal levels – African American, black, and Latinx students from elementary through high school are denied access to meaningful advanced coursework opportunities. This publication documents specific barriers to each of these student populations. Further, it offers actionable solutions for state, district, and school leaders to address those barriers. In some instances, the challenge is that Black and Latinx students attend a school without any advanced courses; in others, they attend a school that enrolls too few students in advanced coursework overall, or one with inequitable course assignment, meaning Black and Latinx students in particular are being denied

access to courses. Also, within a particular state, the problems are often different for Black students than Latinx students. In all cases, unearthing these barriers to opportunity will help education leaders pursue targeted solutions that evidence shows will move the needle for both groups of students.

National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, “Monitoring Educational Equity” (National Academy Press, 2019)

This presents a framework for measuring and monitoring equity in the nation’s pre-K to grade 12 education system. Laying out a set of indicators and measures, the framework “provides the architecture for a system to help policymakers address questions of equity within the public education system. It not only lays out indicators and measures but also the follow-on work needed to advance such a system.” p. x)

The charge to the 15-member task force that assembled the report was to identify not only the means for appraising equity but also a mechanism for “improving such outcomes as achievement, graduation rates, college and career readiness, and postsecondary educational attainment for students whose characteristics or circumstances put them at risk of school failure.” The framework and indicators were not simply designed to measure the extent of disparity within a system of public education; instead, the purpose of the framework is to “shed light on group *differences in progress* toward an aspirational goal (such as all students graduate within 4 years of entering ninth grade), *differences in student background* and other characteristics, and *differences in the conditions and structures of the education system* that exacerbate or mitigate the effect of those characteristics” (p. 20-21).

The piece offers useful context for DPS. In paraphrased form, its central claim is this. Equity acknowledges that students have different starting places in life and that this reality confers advantage of some over others. To advance equity, resources and services and opportunities are intentionally allocated and distributed to compensate for and overcome starting-gate differences. Rather than equally distributing services and resources and opportunities so that every student gets the same amount, instead needier students receive what is needed so they can compete on a level playing field. This approach to equity envisions success as a birthright for every student willing to work hard (p. 22)

Importantly, at the outset, the task force that produced “Monitoring Educational Equity” put into context the efforts that our country has undertaken to characterize and advance educational equity. From the birth of our nation through the century following the Civil War, the notion of educational equity was chiefly addressed by the courts through antidiscrimination cases. The basis for these cases was the concept of need-blind *constitutional equality* that found its roots in the *U.S. Constitution* and the *Bill of Rights*. The notion of *regulatory equity* that is sensitive to the differing needs of individuals joined the conversation in 1965 with passage of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*. Acknowledging the plight of the most-vulnerable students, this set of social policies expressed a national commitment to the educational welfare of financially insecure students who struggle academically. The guiding principle for this sea-change in policy was not equality but instead the allocation of expanded opportunities and improved services for those with greater need. Within this commitment, the notion of educational equity first finds its form and meaning in federal policies that, in effect, have the force of law (p. ix-x).

The framework for measuring and monitoring equity in education includes indicators that measure disparity in both student academic outcomes as well as the access students have to vital resources and opportunities. At the same time, the framework is attentive to how “societal conditions such as income inequality and residential segregation intersect with the educational process in ways that have profound implications for efforts to reduce group disparities in educational progress, achievement, and attainment” (p. 39). Further, “these conditions lead to disparities in the resources that are available to support children’s learning and

development in their families, schools, and neighborhoods. Combined with differential treatment of children and parents who are racial, ethnic, and linguistic minorities, these disparities contribute to between-group differences in educational outcomes. Between-group differences in educational outcomes are important to understand and monitor because they reflect differences in the structure of educational opportunity – thus signaling disparities in the education system. Many students do not have access to these important resources, and their access is strongly related to life circumstances beyond their control – where they live, their parents’ education and income, their race or ethnicity, and the language spoken in their home. Schools cannot be expected to address the root causes of income inequality, residential segregation, or structural racism, but as long as these conditions exist, schools and school systems must grapple with their effects. Without meaningful actions on the part of schools, communities, and states, the education system will simply replicate societal disparities” (p. 37-40)

In a pre-K to grade 12 system of education, inequity arises due to the presence of certain conditions:

- There is excessive disparity between groups with respect to an outcome (such as HS graduation), access to a resource (like Advanced Placement courses), or progress toward some goal of the system (an example is credit accumulation for graduation).
- There is an unacceptably poor fit between resources and student needs (the focus here is not just on whether resources are targeted and provided to support terminal outcomes at the high school level but also on the adequacy of the opportunity runway leading from Preschool to High School).
- There is an inadequate effort to mitigate the effects of structural disadvantage – like segregation – on a structural disadvantage facing a student group (e.g., those from financially insecure families, those who are English learners, blacks, Latinos, etc.).

When it comes to these three conditions, the task force produced indicators for the first two but elected to forgo producing indicators related to the third. While the task force readily acknowledged that “out of school context matters for student outcomes [and] can affect school readiness, student engagement, and student achievement.” Nevertheless, “addressing student needs in light of life circumstances requires a wide range of resources and is a responsibility that needs to be shared by schools, school systems, other agencies serving children and families, and nongovernmental community organizations” (p. 50)

If we accept that the aim of public education is to equip all students with the tools they need to make a home, a life, and a future, then the report of the *National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine* can be helpful because the task force identified two types of indicators:

- Indicators related to student outcomes
- Indicators related to educational opportunities

Sharon Bailey, “An Examination of Student and Educator Experiences in Denver Public Schools Through the Voiced of African-American Teachers and Administrators”, Denver Public Schools, 2016

Through this qualitative study, the voices of African-American teachers and administrators have related their observations about the issues impacting African-American students and their own workplace experiences in the Denver Public Schools. Despite differences in age, years of teaching, level of education, teacher or administrator and location of employment, they provided similar answers to the interview questions. Participants identified several issues and areas of policy and practice they perceived as having both negative and positive impacts. The dominant themes that emerged from the analysis of transcripts from interviews and focus groups challenge the district’s stated commitments to the shared values of equity and diversity, cultural competence, eliminating achievement and opportunity gaps, and fostering positive teaching and learning environments. This feedback also reflected areas of missed opportunity which, if addressed, may provide a framework for enhancing the outcomes for African- American students

and the workplace experiences of African-American educators. The report sends a persuasive message that without a focus on targeted initiatives for African American students, equity remains elusive.

African-American Equity Task Force, “African American Equity Task Force Guidelines and Recommendations”, AAETF, 2017

Based on these thoughtful and robust conversations, as well as extensive research into ongoing disparities and root causes, the working groups have developed specific recommendations for defined levers of impact that will enable Denver Public Schools to more effectively address opportunity and achievement gaps for African-American students and educators. Based on these levers of impact, the recommendations have been grouped into the following: (1) District and School Structures to Promote Equity; (2) Culturally Responsive Instruction, Engagement and Communication; (3) Targeted Supports for Students; (4) Community and Family Resources; and, (5). Equitable Employment Practices and Work Environments. The AAETF recommends targeted supports for African American students.

Fabienne Doucet, “Centering the Margins: Redefining Useful Research Evidence through Critical Perspective”, William T. Grant Foundation, 2019

Makes a persuasive case that in matters of policy research, the voices that matter most are those who are impacted most (and typically silenced or ignored). In the case of research and policy in the public education arena, this piece advocates for a larger role for student voice. As a human endeavor, research is inextricably implicated in the societal structures and systems that have served to maintain power hierarchies and accept social inequity as a given. Indeed, research has been historically and contemporaneously (mis)used to justify a range of social harms from enslavement, colonial conquest, and genocide, to high- stakes testing, disproportionality in child welfare services, and “broken windows” policing. Critical perspectives offer possibilities for repairing these wrongs and for reimagining the possibilities of what research can accomplish.

Chicago Public Schools, “Chicago Public Schools Equity Framework”, 2019

The CPS Equity Framework is a package of resources designed to instill a deep foundation of -- and commitment to -- equity as well as resources to help school leaders and educators initiate change, within their school-specific context and data, in their school communities. The Framework provides shared language, tools, and accountability on what equity means in CPS, the four dimensions that will support driving equity, and the foundation for understanding and building out change ideas. The Equity Framework complements the CPS 5-Year Vision and is centered around a four-part model of Targeted Universalism. Elements of the four dimensions include: (1) Use Liberatory Thinking, (2) Inclusive Partnerships, (3) Direct Resource Equity, and (4) Design Fair Policies and Systems