



Equity as a Key Driver of Policy and Practice for Public Education

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Introduction

As my first school year as Director of Education at the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board (OCDSB) comes to a close, I am increasingly aware and appreciative of the value of equity-driven educational policy and practice as a cornerstone of our democratic society.

In the Spring of 2009, the Ontario Ministry of Education articulated a comprehensive equity and inclusive education strategy for its schools and district school boards, entitled 'Realizing the Promise of Diversity'. The long-awaited strategy stated that equitable, inclusive education is central to the creation of a cohesive society and a strong economy

"In a truly equitable system, factors such as race, gender, and socio-economic status do not prevent students from achieving ambitious outcomes. Our experience shows that barriers can be removed when all education partners create the conditions needed for success." ~ Ontario Ministry of Education (2008)

that secures the province's future prosperity. As one of the nation's most diverse provinces, the strategy recognized that a rapidly changing and increasingly diverse society requires policies and practices that also evolve with changing societal needs. The strategy defined equity as "a condition or state of fair, inclusive, and respectful treatment of all people", and also confirmed that "equity does not mean treating people the same without regard

for individual differences" (p.4). As

part of the strategy's launch, every district across the province was required to establish an equity and inclusive education policy and a religious accommodation guideline in order to support student achievement and promote the well-being of all students. For the OCDSB, Policy P.098.CUR was established, as an example of the policies and/or procedures that have been created since the strategy's release, in support of equity and inclusive education across the system.

Of particular importance to note, the strategy also highlighted the District's partnerships with community agencies in the formation of a Rainbow Coalition which provides 2SLGBTQIA+ students with "a safe space to socialize, support each other, and discuss concerns" (p.16). I reaffirm herein my dedication, and our District's commitment, to creating and sustaining a culture of care and compassion, where 2SLGBTQIA+ students, staff and families matter, and where their voices are valued and welcomed. I acknowledge the many challenges that 2SLGBTQIA+ communities continue to face, and I am steadfast in our support for all identities and in standing together against discrimination.

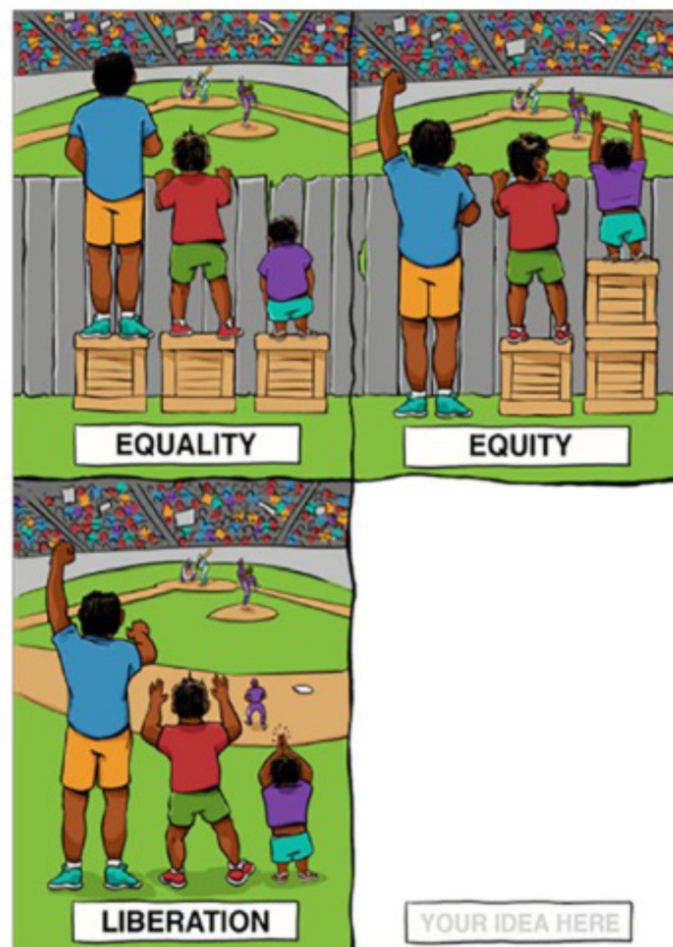
In the Fall of 2017, through [Ontario's Education Equity Action Plan](#), the Ministry of Education Ontario built upon the established strategy by creating an explicit plan for identifying and eliminating discriminatory practices, systemic barriers and biases from district school boards and schools in order to support the potential for all students to succeed. The plan complemented the actions outlined in *The Journey Together: Ontario's Commitment to Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples*, *Ontario's Three-Year Anti-Racism Strategic Plan*, *the Ontario Black Youth Action Plan*, *Ontario's Poverty Reduction Strategy*, as well as *Ontario's Accessibility Action Plan*. To execute the action plan, the Education Equity Secretariat was created, with a mandate to "facilitate the strengthening of cultures of respect for equity in our schools, as places of learning and as places of work, with the assurance of intentionality, accountability, and equity across the education system" (p.10-11). The three-year plan of action focused on four key areas: school and classroom practices; leadership, governance and human resource practices; data collection, integration and reporting; and, organizational culture change. Of note, as part of the action planning process, the District participated in a voluntary, demographic data pilot project, province-wide, at the time.

"Inclusion is not bringing people into what already exists; it is making a new space, a better space for everyone." ~ George Dei (2006)

Since that time, the focus on equity has become an increasingly integrated aspect of provincial priorities for the education sector. The Board Improvement and Equity Plan, for instance, weaves in equity-related indicators, including building human rights and equity capacity through leadership endeavours. Further, the District created an [Indigenous, Equity and Human Rights Roadmap](#) for 2020-2023 that strives to eliminate barriers to success for all students. The roadmap, and its renewed version currently in development, takes into account the stories of lived experience of students and staff, garnered through the 'Valuing Voices' survey for example, in order to set goals and milestones in six key areas: securing accountability; importance of identity; building staff awareness and capacity; representation; programming and support for students; and, engagement and connectedness. I have often shared, in my return to the OCDSB, that this aspirational resource represents the single, most influential area of growth that I have witnessed in the organization's journey during my time away from the District.

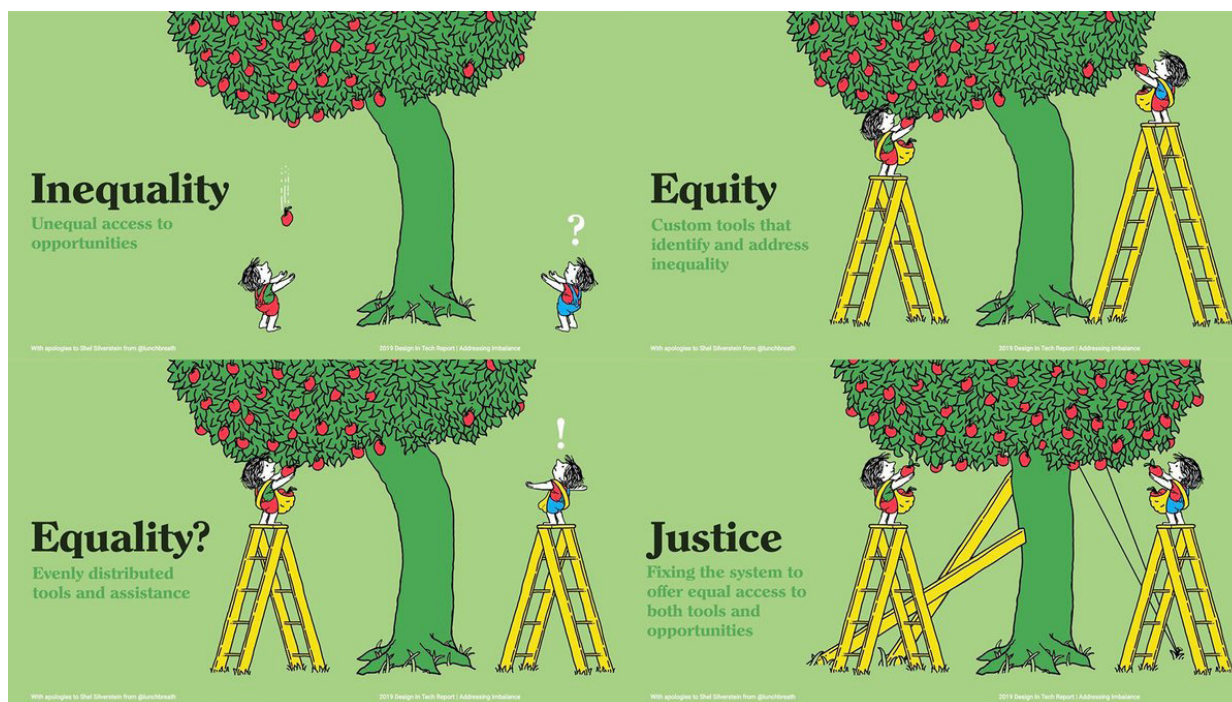
From a thought leadership perspective, both the provincial direction and the organization's own efforts ensure a commitment to equity and inclusivity, especially as it pertains to enhanced diversity in hiring and promotion, professional development focused on human rights and social justice, as well as the formation of structures to promote and enforce both human rights and equity throughout the organization. The establishment of the Office of the Human Rights and Equity Advisor and coordination of an Internal Equity Audit are concrete exemplars of this commitment, system-wide.

Building upon the ministerial definition of equity, Levinson, Geron and Brighthouse (2022) expand upon conceptions of equity in the educational context. They utilize the popular graphic designed by Angus Maguire (2016), and based on an original image by Craig Froehle, to demonstrate that the notion of "educational equity" is universally applauded, but has an array of interpretations and perspectives associated with it (p.1).



Levinson et al (2022) emphasize that although the graphic firmly explains that equity is not equality in terms of resources (the number of milk crates needed) required to achieve an outcome (in order for the children to be able to watch the baseball game), because equality means treating everyone the same, whereas equity requires giving everyone what they need, the image does not take into account - or at the very least, simplifies - broader possibilities associated with the aims of public education. Indeed,

they argue that the objective of the venture may not be to ensure children can all watch the game itself from that particular vantage point, but rather, that institutions of public education prepare children to watch from a seat in the stands, or instead, to play the game itself, or maybe even, to innovate a game of their own... a much more ideological notion of 'liberation', well beyond the privileging of the less advantaged to achieving the educational adequacy that the more advantaged are currently perceived to be experiencing. These perspectives speak to the varied understandings of equity in society and how they reveal different aims, values, and trade-offs in the field of education (p.2). Levinson et al (2022) conclude that the concept of 'educational equity' is complex and can reasonably be interpreted in a number ways, including: equal distribution of outcomes across populations; equal resources allocated toward education across students, schools, districts or jurisdictions; equal experiences for each child; equal levels of growth or development by each learner; or, equal outcomes for every learner. Gray (2023) asserts that imagery is a powerful medium to discuss equity-related matters, and that the conversation must continue to evolve from inequality (unequal access to opportunities) and equality (evenly distributed tools and assistance) through to equity (customization of tools that identify and address inequality) and justice (fixing the entire system in order to offer equal access to both tools and opportunities).



Albeit an interesting debate on the varied perspectives of the term itself, as well as its important evolution into concepts of liberation and justice more broadly, for the purposes of this position paper, the broad definition of equity outlined in the District's Indigenous, Equity and Human Rights Roadmap - related to fairness, impartiality, and even-handedness - will be utilized. That is, equity is a "distinct process of recognizing differences within groups of individuals, and using this understanding to achieve substantive equality in all aspects of a person's life" (p.31).

“Equity in education means that all schools and education systems provide equal learning opportunities to all students. As a result, students of different socio-economic status, gender or immigrant and family background achieve similar levels of academic performance in key cognitive domains, such as reading, mathematics and science, and similar levels of social and emotional well-being in areas such as life satisfaction, self-confidence and social integration, during their education. Equity does not mean that all students obtain equal education outcomes, but rather that differences in students’ outcomes are unrelated to their background or to economic and social circumstances over which the students have no control. Equity in education also demands that students from different backgrounds are equally likely to earn desirable post-secondary education credentials, such as university degrees, that will make it easier for them to succeed in the labour market and to realize their goals as adult members of society.”

~ Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2018)

Current Research as Context for Equity in Public Education

Atchison, Diffey, Rafa and Sarubbi (2017) explain that, in order to “move the needle on equity in education”, school, district and jurisdictional leaders must increase the intentionality of policy assessment and development across four pillars of work: teaching and leading; learning and transitioning; measuring and improving; and, financing (p.1). Atchison et al (2017) insist that although educational equality - all students receiving equal access to the same educational pathways - is a laudable goal, simply leveling the playing field is not enough. They argue that leadership must strive for equity in educational opportunities by providing all students with the unique supports they need to succeed.

In ‘Leading for Equity’, the Aspen Institute (2017) clarifies that educational equity means that “every student has access to the educational resources and rigor they need at the right moment in their education across race, gender, ethnicity, language, disability, sexual orientation, family background and/or family income” (p.3). The institute adds that educational leaders are uniquely positioned to engage diverse audiences - parents/guardians/caregivers, educators, policy makers, private-sector leaders, and faith communities - to forge a new commitment to educational equity. It states that both inputs and outputs must be considered when evaluating equity in education. Inputs such as distribution of funding, access to high-quality educators, rigorous coursework, support services, supportive school climates, and extracurricular opportunities all play a role in contributing to educational equity. By the same token, outputs such as achievement and attainment rates, graduation rates, suspension rates, access to social capital, post-

secondary enrolment and completion, and access to well-paying careers must also be considered as measures of equity (p.4).

Ainscow (2020) claims that the promotion of inclusion and equity in education is “less about the introduction of particular techniques or new organizational arrangements, and much more about processes of social learning within particular contexts” (p.14). He delineates that equity and inclusion in education must be justified on a number of grounds, including: an educational justification that emphasizes teaching and learning environments that respond to the individual differences and needs of all learners; a social justification that ensures schools and the staff within them are able to change long-standing attitudes by educating all students together, forming the basis for a just and non-discriminatory society; and, an economic justification that explains it is likely to be less costly to establish and maintain schools which educate all children together than to set up a complex system of different types of school specializing in particular groups of children (p.8).

Three Essential Ideas About Equity-Driven Education

As Chief Education/Executive Officer of the District, there are a number of essential ideas about equity-driven education that have resonated with me and, to my mind, will help shape the move forward through the development and implementation of our policies and procedures, practices and processes. I believe that three of these ideas, in particular, reflect the spirit of the provincial strategy, its accompanying guideline, and the associated policy/program memorandum. They are also centred in current research, and represent the essence of equity-related aspects within the renewed organizational roadmap for Indigenous, Equity and Human Rights.

■ Establishment of an Ecosystemic Approach to Educational Equity

Wheatley (1998) defines communities, including those in the education sector, as webs of relationships called ecosystems. She explains that everywhere in nature, communities of diverse individuals live together in ways that support both the individual and the entire system. As these systems evolve, new capabilities and talents emerge from the sheer process of being together. Wheatley’s description of ecosystems is an apt analogy for the interactions that take place amongst organizational members in the important work of educational equity.

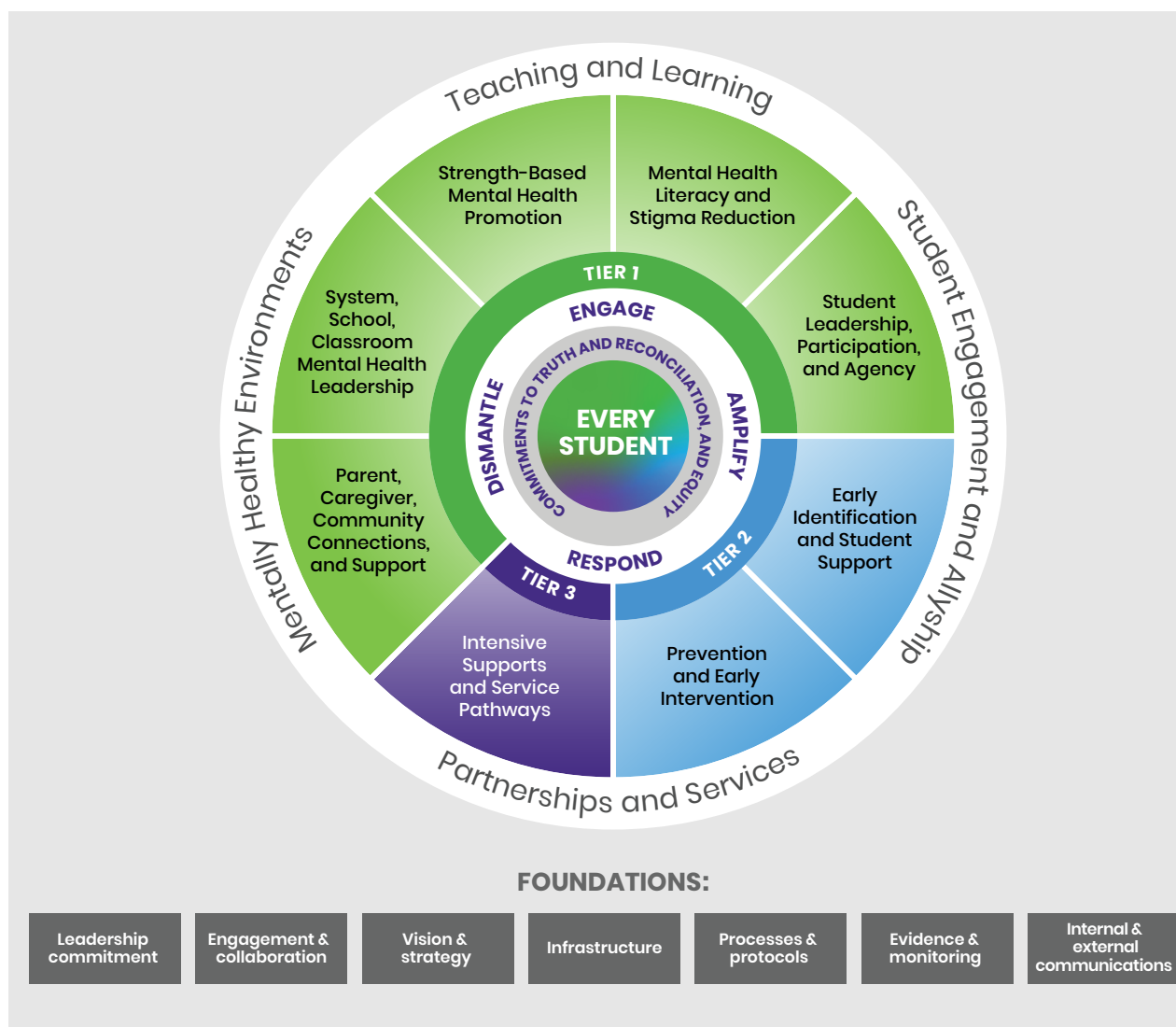
Ainscow, Dyson, Goldrick and West (2012) share that equity of students’ access and opportunities, experiences and outcomes inside schools and systems depend on a whole range of interacting processes and practices that reach into schools and systems from the outside, and vice-versa. From the inside, equity is influenced by instructional practices of educators, as well as the climate of school sites, which has an impact on the perceptions of sites in their local communities. From the outside, equity is influenced by the demographics of the areas served by the schools, the histories and cultures of populations who send (or fail to send) their children to schools, as well as the economic realities faced by those populations, which has an impact on the daily functions of the

sites themselves. These interactions impact one another in daily practices of teaching and learning environments, and involve underlying socio-economic processes that make some areas more or less advantaged. The interactions of processes and practices are, at times, also influenced by the wider politics of education as a profession, of decision making at the district level, and of jurisdictional policy making. These interactions form an 'ecology' of sorts, where the collaborative interplay within schools and systems, between schools and systems, and beyond schools and systems allows for the sharing of concerns and queries, thoughts and wonderings in a constructive, respectful manner, ensuring that new capabilities and talents do indeed emerge in moving educational equity forward.

"A culture of inclusion in education requires a shared set of assumptions and beliefs amongst policy makers and senior staff at the district and school levels that value differences, believe in collaboration, and are committed to offering educational opportunities to all students... Leaders at all levels, including those in civil society and other sectors, therefore have to be prepared to analyze their own situations, identify local barriers and facilitators, plan an appropriate development process, and provide leadership for inclusive practices and effective strategies for monitoring equity in education." ~ Ainscow (2020)

Bishop and Noguera (2019) build upon the notion of the ecology of educational equity by sharing a comprehensive framework that makes it possible for educational institutions to respond to the social and economic factors that impact, and often undermine, the efforts to improve academic outcomes. The framework to advance equity goals takes local context into account, recognizing that children and their development are impacted at multiple levels - micro (interpersonal and intrapersonal), meso (school and community) and macro (society and social institutions). It also considers factors that are common in ecologically-based public health models for treating the causes rather than the symptoms of inequality, such as factors that contribute to risk, resilience, and protection (p.126-127). Most specifically, protective factors - or interventions such as mental health supports and access to healthy foods, mentors and tutoring, for example - can help build the strengths of an individual or a community and can mitigate against potentially negative influences. Similarly, Belfanz, Bridgeland, Bruce and Fox (2012) have demonstrated that such an approach can have positive, productive applications in education when guided by policies that deliberately address the academic, social, emotional and health needs of all children.

In the provincial context, School Mental Health Ontario (SMHO) has developed a strategy that takes into consideration a multitude of factors well beyond the teaching and learning environment, including environmental factors related to mental health and wellness, student leadership, voice and agency, along with community services offered through partnerships with local agencies/organizations. In addition, a series of 'foundations' are taken into consideration as part of the ecosystem that serves students, including the organization's infrastructure.



Each research study, framework and/or strategy cited above exemplifies how an ecosystemic approach, where connections and relationships between stakeholders - students, staff, parents/guardians/caregivers, and community members - are truly interactional in nature, can be utilized to recognize the differences within groups of individuals, and use this understanding to enhance substantive equality for various aspects of the educational experience.

■ Enhancement of Organizational Capacity related to Fairness, Impartiality and Even-Handedness

Jackson (2016) proclaims that equity-driven capacity building is expressly attuned to who is being served, and the social, political and cultural context in which the organization is situated. She describes a number of pivotal activities for using an equity lens grounded in excellence at the classroom, school, system and governance levels. At the classroom level, for example, strategies that support students' socio-emotional development promote competencies students need to successfully navigate school and life, including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. At the school level, professional development that ensures diversity of assessment and instructional practices has become increasingly necessary, including interdisciplinary studies and project-based learning, for instance. At the system level, clear descriptors of high-quality instruction and support help school leaders in their 'look fors' on site in order to move the instructional core - the dynamic interplay between students, educators and the task at hand - forward productively. Further, Jackson insists a systems approach is essential, improving coherence and collaboration by reducing siloing across departments through cross-functional teams (p.10). She also claims that system leaders must ensure equitable distribution of resources through a thoughtful, differentiated approach. And, last but certainly not least, Jackson (2016) feels that the governance body should conduct "listening campaigns" with members of the community to determine which strategies are working and which ones are not.

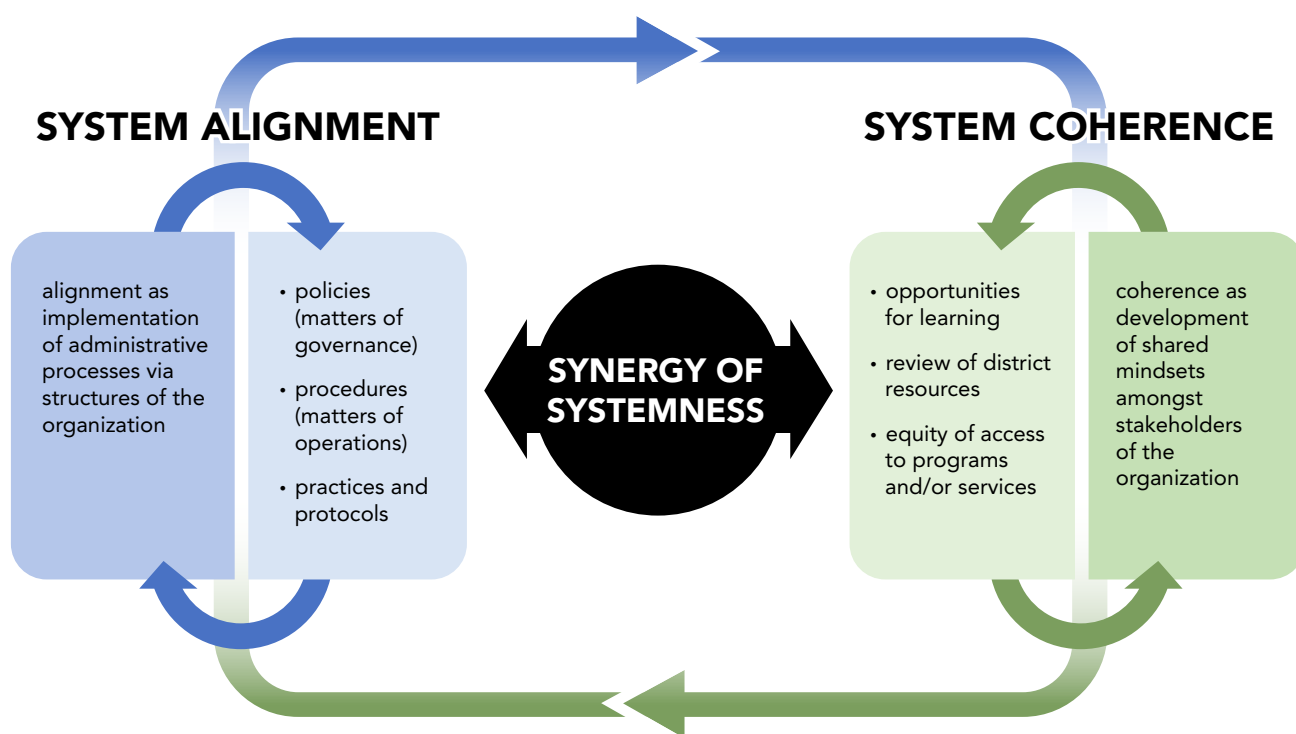
"Meaningful use of the lens of equity requires leaders to continuously ask, 'Who is being well-served, and who is left out or harmed by the policies and practices of the organization?' Leaders for equity are committed to interrupting policies, practices and procedures that, explicitly or implicitly, perpetuate unequal outcomes for children who are furthest away from opportunity."

~ Janice Jackson (2016)

Through its '[Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario Schools](#)' guideline for the development of policy and implementation, the Ministry of Education Ontario (2014) confirms that educational equity requires educators and school leaders to prevent and respond appropriately to discrimination and harassment, to create an inclusive environment, to remove barriers that limit the ability of students, and to provide accommodations, where necessary. Guiding principles and areas of focus for the equity and inclusive education strategy include: policies, programs, guidelines and practices at the district level; shared and committed leadership; school-community relationships; inclusive curriculum and assessment practices; religious accommodation; school climate

and the prevention of discrimination and harassment; professional learning; and, accountability and transparency (p.15-16). The ministerial direction further endorses the instruction of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy, as well as the implementation of principles of inclusive education.

Buffone (2022) details the development of shared mindsets regarding a small number of ambitious goals (system coherence) and the implementation of administrative processes such as policies and procedures (system alignment) as key to the cultivation of systemness for enhanced equity, diversity and inclusivity throughout institutions of public education. The use of professional learning networks in a blend of face-to-face and digital interactions to collect, communicate, collaborate and create amongst colleagues in order to address bias awareness and critical consciousness, for instance, can allow for the cross-organizational collaboration required for knowledge mobilization and solution generation related to educational equity. The graphic below highlights the interplay between coherence and alignment, as a synergy of systemness, in order to ameliorate fairness, impartiality and even-handedness throughout the organization (p.46).



The building of capacity with all organizational members - students, staff, parents/guardians/caregivers, and community members - will undoubtedly facilitate the recognition of differences within groups of individuals, and further the utilization of knowledge and skills acquired to enhance substantive equality for those individuals/groups who are less advantaged.

■ Measurement of What Really Matters through Accountability Metrics

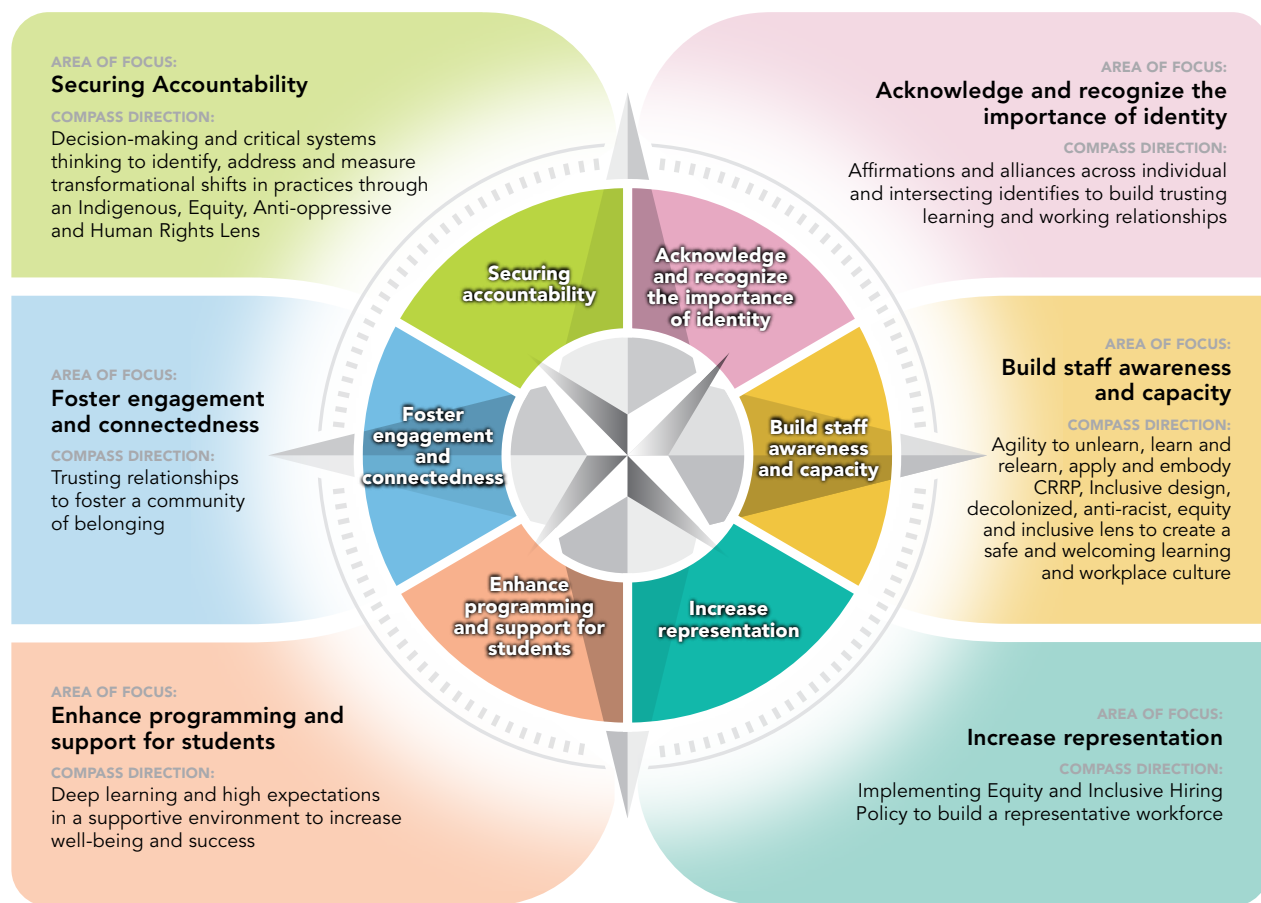
The Aspen Institute (2017) endorses the creation of an accountability framework for equity, in essence, measuring what matters to the organization. It states that greater transparency and public reporting is required in order to hold system leaders accountable for equity (p.10). Specific actions suggested include: inclusion of measures of proficiency, progress and growth in the accountability system devised by jurisdictions; establishment of ambitious and achievable interim- and long-term goals for multilingual learners and students with special needs, along with all learners; collection of data and reporting on school climate; as well as, differentiation of school and system improvement efforts that are targeted to community needs and strengths.

“Diversity refers to the presence of a wide range of human qualities and attributes within a group, organization, or society. The dimensions of diversity include, but are not limited to, age, ancestry, colour, citizenship, creed, culture, ethnic origin, family status, gender, gender identity, gender expression, immigration status, language, marital status, physical and intellectual ability, place of origin, race, racial identity, sex, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status.”

~ OCDSB Policy P.146.HR - Equitable Recruitment, Hiring and Promotion (2021)

The District’s policy P.098.CUR demonstrates a commitment to equity and inclusive education, guided by the Ministry of Education’s Policy/Program Memorandum No. 119, “Developing and Implementing Equity and Inclusive Education Policies in Ontario Schools”, and includes a subsection on the assessment and monitoring of its progress in implementing an equity and inclusive education policy by: embedding equity and inclusive principles into system and school improvement planning processes, as well as other policies, programs, procedures and practices; communicating the policy, related initiatives, and results to all members of the organizational community, and making it readily available on the District’s website; and, integrating updates of the District’s progress in my annual report as Director of Education.

The renewed version of the District’s roadmap for Indigenous, Equity and Human Rights for 2024-2028 builds upon the description of “What Do We Expect to See by 2023” with increasingly explicit areas of focus, indicators of progress and priorities for action in the move forward. More specifically, equity remains a key driver in order for the organization to fulfill its strategic priorities related to learning, well-being and social responsibility. As described therein, the renewed roadmap continues the organization’s journey in leadership and learning by embedding more transformative and responsive practices - through ‘compass directions’ - in order to foster a more equitable and inclusive learning and workplace culture.



The accountability framework achieved through the District’s multi-year strategic plan, as well as the work plans for senior staff and trustees, along with the District’s policy for equity and inclusive education, and the ‘compass directions’ set in the renewed roadmap will also be utilized to recognize the differences within groups of individuals, and further our collective understanding to enhance substantive equality for those individuals/groups in greatest need of assistance/support.

Consolidation

The provincial direction and the organization's own efforts to ensure a commitment to equity and inclusivity, especially as it pertains to enhanced diversity in hiring and promotion, professional development focused on human rights and social justice, as well as the formation of structures to promote and enforce both human rights and equity throughout the organization, are exciting advancements for educational equity. Our schools and system, as well as the province as a jurisdiction, have come a long way over the past fifteen plus years.

The essential ideas about equity-driven education - establishment of an ecosystemic approach to educational equity, enhancement of organizational capacity related to fairness, impartiality and even-handedness, and measurement of what matters to ensure accountability - provide a further spark in the move forward for equity and inclusive education, system-wide.

Equity will undoubtedly continue to serve as a key driver of policy and practice for public education. I am grateful for this continued focus (centring) of equity in our District. I am very excited about the important work ahead in the short term. I am also convinced that our thoughts and perspectives, awareness and understanding will continue to grow as we learn and lead alongside this collective work, both personally and professionally, in the long term. I acknowledge that we are on a journey in this respect, as individuals and as a system, and that we will most assuredly make mistakes along the way. We'll take the opportunity to correct these mishaps, and learn valuable lessons from these experiences, so that we are better able to serve our students, staff and school communities well into the future. As Love (2024) so eloquently declares... "If we can engineer inequality, we can engineer equality."

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