

CHANGING **THE** NARRATIVE

THE PUSH FOR NEW EQUITY MEASURES IN EDUCATION

BY LYNN OLSON AND THOMAS TOCH

NOVEMBER 2021

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About FutureEd

FutureEd is an independent, solution-oriented think tank at Georgetown University's McCourt School of Public Policy, committed to bringing fresh energy to the causes of excellence, equity, and efficiency in K-12 and higher education. Follow us on Twitter at @FutureEdGU

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FOREWORD

Education policymakers and reformers have sought for many years to illuminate student needs and public schools' performance through standardized test scores, graduation rates and other "outcome" measures. Now, there are expanding efforts to add to the education equation the myriad factors that research says contribute to student achievement. These equity indicators go far beyond disparities in test scores and graduation rates to include broader measures of student outcomes such as course completion rates, a deeper understanding of disparities in school-based opportunities to learn such as access to advanced coursework and same-race teachers, and the school and community conditions that influence student learning, including financial resources, food security, health care, neighborhood safety, and reliable internet and transit.

The new push for equity measures has important policy and practice implications. It challenges traditional definitions of a good school. And it could result in a reframing of the national debate on accountability in education. But expanding the conversation on school performance beyond test scores and other traditional success metrics poses many challenges. Which of the many new indicators relate clearly to student success? How many of them are needed to provide a clear picture of educational equity? How should the new information's accuracy be ensured? What's the role of parents and other local stakeholders in selecting the new indicators? What's the most productive way to use the new information?

This FutureEd report examines the movement to expand tracking of disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes, explores its implications for students and educators, and seeks to answer the key questions that the movement raises for education policymakers and practitioners. Associate Director Phyllis Jordan and Jackie Arthur and Molly Breen of our editorial team managed the production of the report, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation funded the project. We're grateful for the foundation's support.

Thomas Toch

Director, FutureEd

An intensifying movement to forge new measures of education equity is taking hold in public education. Designed to give policymakers a clearer picture of school and student performance and student need by capturing the myriad factors that research says contribute to student achievement, the emerging equity measures go far beyond disparities in test scores and graduation rates to encompass broader measures of student outcomes and access to opportunities. These include course completion rates, a deeper understanding of disparities in school-based opportunities to learn such as access to advanced coursework and same-race teachers, and the school and community conditions that influence student learning, including financial resources, food security, health care, neighborhood safety, and reliable internet and transit.

Officials in Tulsa, Oklahoma, for example, in 2018 created a Child Equity Index to track the influence of a student's community on their learning outcomes. The index serves as a broad portrait of educational opportunity that includes measures such as proximity to parks, trails, transit, and grocery stores.

Education consultancies Public Impact in North Carolina and Wisconsin-based Education Analytics are developing an algorithm that captures everything from students' movement from school to school to mean neighborhood income in an effort to identify schools that successfully educate the nation's neediest students.

And in 2019, just before the coronavirus pandemic sent the nation into a tailspin, a committee of the prestigious National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine recommended that states and school districts monitor no fewer than 16 categories of educational equity and opportunity. These categories range far beyond school test scores, from the depth and breadth of classroom curricula to students' perceptions of school safety.¹

A number of developments are fueling these and other initiatives. Evolving research on the science of learning has pointed to social and emotional development as significant contributors to student success. Advances in the collection and analysis of data make it easier to track a range of indicators of student opportunity, both inside and outside of school. And after decades of accountability systems focusing on students, teachers, and schools, critics are calling for policymakers to hold educational and social services systems responsible for ensuring equitable educational opportunities and outcomes, particularly for poorly served student populations.

At the same time, a growing backlash against test-based accountability from both sides of the political spectrum has amplified demands for more complete measures of student learning and well-being, as has mounting evidence that the push in recent decades to raise student achievement by raising academic standards has not been as successful as many had hoped.

These new priorities were reflected in 2015 federal education legislation that sought to reduce the centrality of standardized testing in gauging school performance. And while the push for a wider range of indicators predates the pandemic and the recent national reckoning on racial injustice, both have intensified the equity work by highlighting longstanding disparities in opportunities to learn and sharpening public awareness of the many factors outside school that influence learning. With strong proponents of equity indicators now advising the Biden administration and moving into key policymaking roles in the U.S. Department of Education, demands by many progressive education policy organizations that school and community capacity and student needs play a more central role in the calculations of educational performance are surging.

“We’re doing a disservice to students when we constantly report on test-score gaps without holding the [education] system accountable.”

Laura Hamilton
ETS

The new push for equity indicators has important policy and practice implications. It challenges traditional definitions of a good school. And it could result in a reframing of the national debate on accountability in education.

But expanding the conversation on school performance beyond test scores and other traditional success metrics poses many challenges. Which of the many new indicators relate clearly to student success? How many of them are needed to provide a clear picture of educational equity? How should the new information’s accuracy be ensured? What’s the role of parents and other local stakeholders in selecting the new indicators? Can a local role be reconciled with a desire to compare performance across schools, school districts, and states? What’s the most productive way to use the new information?

This report examines the fast-growing movement to expand the tracking of disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes and its implications for students and educators and seeks to answer the key questions that the movement raises for education policymakers and practitioners.

A Contentious History

The concept of opportunity-to-learn indicators first appeared in the 1960s as a method to ensure the technical validity of international comparisons of student achievement. The idea then was to examine whether students in different countries had opportunities to learn the content being tested.

Over the next two decades, research continued to find a significant relationship between students’ exposure to curriculum and their achievement. In 1981, the U.S. Court of Appeals ruled in the celebrated case of *Debra P. v. Turlington* that if the Florida high school graduation test “covers material not taught to the students, it is unfair and violates the Equal Protection and Due Process clauses of the United States Constitution.”² By the mid-1980s, the opportunity-to-learn concept had further expanded to include other measures thought to directly influence student learning, such as course offerings, student enrollment patterns, access to qualified and experienced teachers, and the availability and use of instructional materials.³

This broadened definition of opportunity to learn was reflected in a new wave of school finance litigation in states focused on ensuring that all students have access to the educational opportunities needed to achieve in the classroom. In bringing these so-called “adequacy” lawsuits under the education clauses of state constitutions, plaintiffs typically argued that one or more districts lacked the resources needed to provide students with adequate educational opportunities as evidenced, in part, by the inability of students to meet state standards.⁴

Opportunity-to-learn standards entered the policy debate more prominently during the early days of the standards-based reform movement in the 1990s. In

1991, Congress was weighing the desirability of national content standards and tests as part of President George H.W. Bush's America 2000 legislation. But support was not universal. Political conservatives worried about the federal government undermining local control of education. Progressives worried that the tests could pose barriers to historically marginalized students, who would not have equitable access to the support needed to achieve the standards. These concerns led Congress to create a National Council on Education Standards and Testing (NCEST) in June 1991 to study the "desirability and feasibility" of national standards and assessments.⁵

In January 1992, the council—comprising governors, Congressional leaders, the presidents of the two national teacher unions, superintendents, testing experts, and teachers—released a report endorsing the creation of national standards for what students should know and be able to do and the performance levels they should be expected to reach.⁶

States would voluntarily subscribe to the standards and to a system of student assessments. And states would develop their own "school delivery standards" to ensure that all students had equitable access to rigorous instruction. The latter represented a compromise between NCEST members who argued for setting school delivery standards at the national level and those who opposed having the federal government define inputs, rather than outcomes, for fear it would micromanage the schools and reduce flexibility.

In preparing an alternative to Bush's America 2000 legislation, Congressional Democrats incorporated the concept of school delivery standards into their bill, which reassured liberal Democrats that disadvantaged students would not be harmed by national standards and tests.

When President Bill Clinton took office, without the legislation having passed, his administration introduced the Goals 2000 Act, which similarly called for a voluntary system of national standards and tests. Once again, House Democrats demanded the inclusion of school delivery or "opportunity-to-learn" standards in the bill. They argued that the Clinton administration's focus

on student performance should be balanced by an investment in learning resources, particularly those available to students living in poverty, in order to create equitable opportunities for all students to achieve the higher standards.

The final House bill defined opportunity to learn broadly, including not only access to the content in national or state standards but also "the sufficiency or quality of the resources, practices, and conditions necessary at each level of the education system (schools, local educational agencies, and states) to provide all students with an opportunity to learn the material in voluntary national content standards or state content standards."⁷

Yet the nascent standards movement made outcomes paramount in response to mounting evidence that many states and school districts lacked the conviction that all students—particularly students of color and those from disadvantaged backgrounds—could, or even should, be taught to high standards. Many in the education establishment argued that they shouldn't be held accountable for their students' results because of factors outside of schools' control that influence performance.

Although Goals 2000 eventually became law, the opportunity-to-learn standards were dropped from the legislation in order to win Republican support. "There just wasn't a strong constituency," recalls Jennifer Davis, a senior advisor at Harvard's Education Redesign Lab who worked for the U.S. Department of Education at the time and helped shepherd the Goals 2000 Act through Congress under U.S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley. "We didn't even have a base level of academic standards in most states that could be measured. There was a belief that for a number of years, we'd been pouring money into the schools without knowing how we were doing. So, opportunity to learn fell by the wayside."

While the federal debate over opportunity-to-learn standards faded, the tension regarding how best to support students of color and those living in poverty has persisted. Some advocates of high standards have embraced a "no excuses" mantra to counter any tendency to lower expectations for students because of factors outside schools' control. But many educators

and national organizations representing school boards, administrators, and teachers have continued to contend that it is unfair to hold students, schools, and teachers responsible for outcomes without also addressing the impacts of poverty and injustice on students' lives and learning. In recent years, policymakers have sought a middle ground in the debate.

When Congress rewrote federal elementary and secondary education law in 2015, lawmakers sought to scale back the emphasis on standardized test scores in school accountability. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires that all students be held to high academic standards that will prepare them to succeed in college and careers, but it requires states to supplement four indicators focused on academic achievement with a fifth, nonacademic indicator of school quality or student success. In response, most state leaders have adopted chronic student absenteeism as their "fifth indicator."⁸

ESSA and the new equity indicator projects emerging today reflect the decades of legislation and court efforts to address barriers to educational attainment facing students of color, students living in poverty, students with disabilities, and English language learners.⁹ They also reflect the reality that more than two decades of standards-based reform focused largely on achievement outcomes has failed to close achievement gaps

sufficiently, and, further, that reporting on achievement gaps by race, ethnicity, and income without focusing on the system's role in providing opportunities to learn inadvertently blames the student and has overemphasized test results.¹⁰ "We're doing a disservice to students when we constantly report on test-score gaps without holding the system accountable," says Laura Hamilton, an associate vice president at ETS and a member of the committee that produced the National Academies report.

Since the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, advocates of equity indicators have pushed harder. In October 2020, the Aspen Institute Education & Society Program and the Center for Assessment urged states to collect opportunity-to-learn data during the 2020-21 school year to "shine a light on inequitable opportunities" during the pandemic, direct resources where needed, and help interpret test results.¹¹

The opportunity-to-learn movement also has an international dimension. In 2018, UNESCO published a "Handbook on Measuring Equity in Education."¹² That same year, the OECD published its own report, "Equity in Education: Breaking Down Barriers to Social Mobility."¹³ Both focused on the relationship between the equitable allocation of educational resources and students' academic performance by race and class.

FIVE QUESTIONS TO ASK IN SELECTING EQUITY INDICATORS

In order to create a manageable number of equity indicators, educators might ask themselves these questions:

- What student outcomes do you hope to shift by focusing on these indicators?
- What research exists that links each indicator to those outcomes, particularly for students of color and traditionally underserved groups? Absent such evidence, how do you think improvements on a

particular indicator will lead to greater student success?

- How do you plan to measure each indicator and who is expected to collect and report this data?
- Who are the primary audiences for this data and how will you make it accessible to them?
- What actions do you hope these audiences will take as a result of this information?

Evolving Indicators

The National Academies of Sciences' 2019 report exemplifies the increasingly expansive view of education equity measures. It recommends tracking disparities in student engagement and coursework performance alongside disparities in test performance. To measure differential access to supportive school and classroom environments, the report recommends tracking disparities in school climate, out-of-school suspensions and expulsions, and nonacademic support for student success, including supports for emotional, behavioral, mental, and physical health.¹⁴

The Academies' recommendations and those of several other new indicator initiatives are adding a new dimension to the school-performance conversation. Most notable is the inclusion of data about how students experience the learning environment, based on research showing that the degree to which students feel interested in and connected to school heavily influences their engagement in learning and, ultimately, their performance.¹⁵

"People are increasingly recognizing that learning is not just an input-outputs process," says Elaine Allensworth, director of the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research. "There's a social-emotional component to learning, so students' social-emotional experiences in school are an important component of their opportunity to learn. If students don't feel safe, supported and challenged, they are not going to learn."

For example, about 35 schools that belong to CORE, a network of California districts working to increase the number of students who graduate high school ready to succeed in college and careers, are focused specifically on improving the 9th-grade experience, when many students lose momentum toward postsecondary success. School teams are monitoring a set of 9th grade on-track indicators, including each student's enrollment and grades in the courses needed for admission to California's public universities (known as the A-G requirements), as well as students' overall grade-point-

average, attendance, and total credits earned. They also are using data to develop and test change ideas.

Some schools are reviewing their scheduling practices to provide more 9th graders with access to rigorous content. They are developing a "strength of schedule metric" that looks not only at whether students are enrolled in A-G coursework, but also whether those courses are of "low," "medium," or "high" rigor, such as honors or advanced courses. Schools focused on strengthening staff-student relationships during 9th grade are administering a "developmental relationship survey" to students several times a year. "The survey is intended to help spur the school teams to action, by thinking how can we better support kids right now, based on what they're telling us right now?" says Dave Calhoun, who provides data and measurement support for the CORE districts.

"If students don't feel safe, supported and challenged, they're not going to learn."

Elaine Allensworth
University of Chicago Consortium
on School Research

Some equity frameworks explicitly reject the heavy focus on test results under existing accountability systems. Community Responsive Education, a national nonprofit that provides consulting services to schools and districts to make their pedagogy and curricula more reflective of the youth and families they serve, is developing a Wellness Index, based on a student survey, that focuses on what it calls "leading" indicators of students' well-being, including students' sense of self-love, empathy, connectedness, and agency. "There is no academic rigor without wellness," says Jeff Duncan-Andrade, one of the co-founders of CRE and a professor of ethnic studies at San Francisco State University. He contends that education's focus on lagging indicators such as grades and test scores diminishes the incentive to address students' overall well-being as a precondition for success in school.

The more students with high needs a school serves, the worse its performance looks using traditional measures such as test scores, argues Bryan C. Hassel, co-president of Public Impact. Together with Education Analytics, Public Impact is constructing the “School Needs Index” to help identify which schools are best at supporting the most disadvantaged students.

The index uses dozens of student characteristics in four domains to identify the level of student need in a school: student engagement (including chronic absenteeism and suspension rates); demographics (such as students with specific disability status or from migrant families); academics (including prior test scores); and economics (including homelessness and mean neighborhood income). The project’s algorithm weights each characteristic based on research showing how much it contributes to student outcomes.¹⁶ Using the index, Hassel explains, makes it possible to compare learning growth in schools serving similar students, direct resources more equitably, and enable schools to learn from each other.

Racial Equity

Many of the groups using equity indicators explicitly target racial equity to hold organizations accountable for their contributions to racial disparities in education outcomes.

StriveTogether is a Cincinnati-based nonprofit that works with a network of nearly 70 communities across the country to advance outcomes for children and youth by tracking and improving a set of key education milestones from infancy to young adulthood. Recently, the organization and its members have concluded that outcome data are important but insufficient for transforming school systems for youth of color. So, in 2021, the organization released a guide to help communities report on 17 additional system-level indicators in education and other sectors—such as health care, housing, and transportation—that can contribute to disparate racial outcomes and urged that data be disaggregated by race, ethnicity, gender, and

income-level when possible. These include 10 education- and employment-related indicators—such as per pupil funding, teacher qualifications, internet and computer access, and internship and mentoring opportunities—and seven indicators in sectors outside education: financial well-being, housing, health care, food security, transportation, racially and ethnically inclusive communities and neighborhoods, and exposure to crime and overly punitive policing.¹⁷

“Part of this is helping to change the narrative around whose efforts are needed in changing cradle-to-career outcomes for children of color.”

Parvathi Santhosh-Kumar
StriveTogether

Parvathi Santhosh-Kumar, StriveTogether’s vice president for equitable results, says, “Part of this is helping to change the narrative around whose efforts are needed in changing cradle-to-career outcomes for children of color.” By coupling student-level outcome indicators with systems-level indicators, she says, StriveTogether hopes to hold organizations and institutions accountable for creating the conditions where all children can thrive, rather than placing blame on students and their families.

The organization is testing the framework through cradle-to-career networks in Boston; Monterey County, California; Pensacola, Florida; Tulsa, Oklahoma; Salt Lake City, Utah; and Bexar County, Texas, where affiliates have begun tracking system-level indicators as part of an effort to validate and refine them.

In 2020, for example, ROC the Future, an alliance of over 60 Rochester-area institutions and partners, and a StriveTogether affiliate—including the City of Rochester, the Rochester Chamber of Commerce, the United Way of Rochester, and Rochester Regional Health—published a report card on equity and education that, for the first time, included such opportunity-to-learn indicators as chronic absenteeism, the percentage of teachers absent more than 10 days, and teacher-student, social worker-student, and counselor-student ratios.¹⁸

The report card also tracked the percentage of schools with restorative-justice practices that seek to create safe and supportive school environments and extended learning time. “It helped bring a lot more nuance to what equity means in the Rochester School System,” says Stephanie Townsend, the director of research and analytics for the partnership, “because, yes, there are equity issues in city versus suburb, but there are also issues of equity within the city school system. These indicators were intended to make people more aware of that.”

In 2019, Bright Futures of Monterey County, a StriveTogether-affiliated community partnership of more than 20 organizations working to improve education outcomes, formed a racial equity task force to better understand the causes behind the disparities in education outcomes that it was reporting. In 2020, that led Bright Futures to decide to track seven additional equity indicators that could be contributing to those gaps: inequities in school funding; inequities in access to same-race teachers, fully credentialed teachers, and bilingual teachers; inequities in access to digital devices and high-speed internet; and inequities in school suspension rates.

Michael Applegate, Bright Future’s data and research manager, says over time the goal is to report differences in opportunities and outcomes “right next to each other to try to get more people to lean into policy and practice changes” that can influence outcomes for youth. As an example, several organizations are partnering to create new teacher pathways that will increase the diversity of the teaching force in hopes of improving outcomes for young people of color.

Covid Catalyst

In their efforts to understand how students are navigating the pandemic, states and school districts intentionally or unintentionally have added momentum to the search for equity indicators. Among the metrics that education leaders have prioritized during the Covid crisis are access to technology devices, access to reliable

high-speed internet, and signs of student engagement such as attendance and chronic absenteeism. These are the same measures that many equity advocates promoted pre-pandemic.

The Connecticut State Department of Education, for example, established a new system to collect student-level attendance data in various modes of learning (in-person, hybrid, or remote) on a monthly basis during the pandemic. Data collection by district, school, and student groups has enabled the state to identify and support districts where attendance is substantially lower than in prior years and to target resources to high-need students, such as English learners, students with disabilities, and students from low-income families.

Beyond the Schoolhouse

Many of the emerging equity indices look beyond the schoolhouse to include community-based factors in student success. Some cities are creating community dashboards or wellness indices of both school and community capacity to address racial equity.

In 2018, Tulsa Public School’s Deputy Superintendent Paula Shannon approached Impact Tulsa, another StriveTogether member, about developing better data to understand the factors outside of the classroom that impact student outcomes. Both Delia Kimbrel, the director of research and analytics at Impact Tulsa, and Jonathan McIlroy, the director of data-strategy and analytics for the school district, were familiar with Harvard economist Raj Chetty’s Moving to Opportunity experiment, which found significantly improved college attendance rates and earnings for young children whose families received vouchers enabling them to move from high-poverty housing to lower poverty neighborhoods.¹⁹ “We said, how do we create a data model that assesses neighborhood impacts on student outcomes,” recounts Kimbrell.

The project brought together a range of stakeholders—including experts in housing, social services, neighborhood development, and health—to identify important neighborhood factors that contribute to

student success. It also built on an existing project, the Equality Indicators Initiative, by the City of Tulsa and local nonprofit the Community Service Council, that was already tracking progress in reducing or eliminating disparities on a set of 54 indicators organized into six broad themes: economic opportunity, education, housing, justice, public health, and services.

The resulting Child Equity Index connects individual data on student outcomes and student-level characteristics, such as grade or disability status, with census-tract data on neighborhoods in four domains: neighborhood poverty and education levels; neighborhood health; custodianship (such as citizen complaints); and neighborhood access to such assets as schools, parks, trails, transit, and grocery stores.

The school district has used the index to identify areas where schools and their community-based partners need to work more closely to eliminate barriers to student success. For example, the index revealed a correlation between geographic concentrations of chronic student absenteeism and limited access to

vehicles or public transit. That led to conversations with Tulsa's public transportation system to realign bus routes and to expand a ride-for-free program for high schoolers to include middle school students.

During the pandemic, Impact Tulsa and the school district collaborated with the Tulsa Planning Office to pair student-address data with internet-service data to understand which families lacked internet subscriptions. That enabled the mayor's team to advocate for \$5.6 million in state CARES Act dollars to provide free Wi-Fi for Tulsa Housing Authority complexes, subsidize internet subscriptions for up to 20,000 public school families, and pay internet-access navigators to break down barriers for families.

Similarly, the Schott Foundation's Loving Cities Index challenges the notion that school-based reforms alone can provide all students with fair and substantive opportunities to learn. The Loving Cities Index measures 24 different types of supports for children and families in cities, including access to healthy food, affordable housing, sustainable wages, and public transportation.

CRITERIA FOR EQUITY INDICATORS

The National Academies report prioritizes evidence-based indicators linked to disparities in student outcomes. In identifying its 16 indicators, the Academies committee determined they need to:

- Measure multiple dimensions of educational outcomes and opportunities, including changes over time;
- Focus on disparities between the population subgroups most salient for policy attention;
- Use measures that are comparable across time and place and useful at several organizational scales (classrooms, schools, districts, states, nation);

- Use indicators and measures appropriate to grade level;
- Measure contextual and structural characteristics of or affecting the educational system, such as racial segregation and concentrated poverty;
- Produce frequent, readily understood, high-level summary statistics, in addition to more nuanced statistics;
- Be based on scientifically sound measures; and
- Incorporate mechanisms for continuous improvement based on research and other developments.

SOURCE: Monitoring Educational Equity, National Academies Press

In-school indicators include access to support staff, gifted and advanced high school curricula, experienced teachers, and well-resourced and economically integrated schools.

According to the Schott Foundation, public education needs a “shift from a standards-based agenda where we only analyze [students’] shortcomings to a supports-based agenda where we focus on the resources needed for all students to overcome obstacles created by inequity and achieve high outcomes.”²⁰

Since 2018, the foundation has used the Loving Cities Index to rate 20 cities across the United States on a five-level scale from “copper” (providing fewer than 50 percent of supports measured) to “platinum” (providing more than 80 percent of supports measured). So far, most of the cities rated—Albuquerque, Atlanta, Baltimore, Chicago, Charlotte, Dallas, Denver, Detroit, Hartford, Jackson, Little Rock, Miami, Oakland, Philadelphia, Providence, Springfield, and St. Paul—have been designated copper.

Only Minneapolis; Long Beach, California; and Buffalo have received a bronze—one step up from copper on the continuum—for their combination of care (including such indicators as pre-natal health, clean air, parks, and in-school support staff), stability (including such indicators as public transit, youth safety, and livable wages), commitment (including such indicators as K-12 suspension alternatives, early childhood education, and anti-bullying), and capacity (including such indicators as experienced teachers, well-resourced schools, and economically integrated schools).

But the Schott city ratings point to a political dimension of some of the new metrics. In seeking to look beyond test scores and to stress the importance of experienced teachers and ample school funding, the Schott Foundation reflects the views of the two national teacher unions, which have contributed heavily to the foundation’s political action arm and have long opposed the use of test scores in evaluating schools or teachers.²¹

Significant Hurdles

Despite growing support for equity indicators, policymakers face significant hurdles in implementing the new metrics, including a host of challenges in selecting indicators, ensuring their accuracy and comparability from school-to-school and district-to-district, and making tough decisions about how to use them.

Selection Criteria

The question of what indicators to use has many dimensions.

To produce a clear picture of educational inequities, metrics need to be predictive, they need to show an evidence-based relationship to student outcomes, and they need to signal how students are likely to perform in school and beyond. For example, significant research demonstrates that disparities in exposure to challenging coursework and instruction contribute to disparities in educational outcomes by race, ethnicity, and income.²² But there’s less consensus on which community factors contribute to student success or how best to measure them. “A driving principle for including a measure is whether there is strong evidence that it’s associated with better learning outcomes for students,” says David Paunesku, a senior behavioral scientist at Stanford University.

Also, as the National Academies report noted, indicators need to be based on scientifically sound measures that can track changes over time. While it might be desirable to measure students’ sense of empathy, for example, there’s no consensus on how to measure such a quality.

For practical purposes, equity metrics also need to be publicly available or easily accessible to partner organizations like those in Rochester, Monterey Bay, and Tulsa. But some seemingly valuable equity indicators are tough to implement, says Scott Norton, deputy executive director of programs at the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). Measuring student access to high-quality curricula, for example, could help level the

educational playing field. But it requires a framework for evaluating curricula and a means for tracking curriculum adoption and use across districts and schools—not easy tasks.

For years, CCSSO encouraged states to survey teachers to gauge the gap between state content standards and the depth and breadth of what teachers actually taught, a potentially important indicator of students' opportunity to learn. But the organization had scant success. "We learned it's hard to do," says Norton. "Those kinds of difficult-to-measure things take a lot more effort." Even comparable, non-corruptible data such as students' access to Advanced Placement courses can be problematic, since schools can label a course AP without providing rigorous instruction.

In another instance, the California Department of Education sought to track which students were receiving in-person, synchronous, or asynchronous instruction during the pandemic. The state budget office told the department that gathering the information would create an additional, unauthorized burden on local education agencies and refused the request.

In contrast, one reason many states selected chronic student absenteeism as their fifth indicator under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act was because they were already collecting absenteeism information, so it did not pose a significant, additional data burden.

The number of equity indicators also should be small enough to be impactful. While state and local policymakers may be inclined to adopt large numbers of equity indicators in response to requests from a range of stakeholders, it's a temptation they should avoid. While it may be more difficult to win initial support for a targeted set of measures with strong research backing than for a more glamorous "big picture" undertaking, a narrower set of metrics ultimately makes it easier to rally the community around a data-based proposal for change. "You want a parsimonious set of indicators and underlying constructs that are informed by the science and research," says Christopher Edley Jr., who chaired the committee that produced the National Academies report.

At the same time, stakeholders are more likely to embrace equity metrics if the metrics are intrinsically relevant to parents and other public audiences. In developing their Child Equity Index, Impact Tulsa and the Tulsa Public Schools prioritized metrics like a neighborhood walkability score and other indicators that seemed particularly meaningful to the Tulsa community. "That was absolutely necessary for us, both in terms of what's important to measure and how you measure it," says Edley of the National Academies' work. "It's not just what's in the research literature but also is there a lot of consensus behind it."

"You want a parsimonious set of indicators and underlying constructs that are informed by the science and research."

Christopher Edley Jr.
National Academies Committee on
Developing Indicators of Educational Equity

Finally, indicators should be actionable. "There's no point in collecting information if, after going to the trouble of gathering it, there's nothing we can do with it," says Laura Hamilton of ETS. The Alliance for Resource Equity, a project of the Education Trust and Education Resource Strategies, has developed one such equity inventory via a 10-part framework, focusing on school funding, teacher quality, school leadership quality and diversity, rigorous course content, instructional time, a positive school climate, student supports, high-quality early learning, educational facilities, and racial diversity.²³ The Alliance has developed a diagnostic tool based on the framework that educators and community members can use to identify gaps in school capacity based on data, such as course enrollments and interviews with students and school staff, and guidebooks for actions to take.

The Black and Brown Coalition for Educational Equity and Excellence, a local advocacy group in Montgomery County, Maryland, used the diagnostic tool and found gaps in access to advanced coursework in their

community. When the group dug further, it discovered that Black and Latino students who scored well on Maryland's standardized math test were less likely to be enrolled in Algebra 1 in middle school than White students with comparable scores. In response, the district instituted a policy of automatically enrolling students in Algebra 1 based on their state test results.

Who Chooses

The question of who participates in the selection of equity indicators can be a source of tension.

Many emerging indicator projects make a point of including community members and other stakeholders in the selection of indicators. The National Academies plans to involve both state and local officials and stakeholders, as well as researchers, in a pilot project introducing its equity indicators in some two dozen school districts in four states. Edley imagines a core set of comparable indicators across states and districts that can be tailored to local needs over time. At the local level, projects have tried to engage communities through focus groups, surveys, town halls, and existing parent and community networks.

In the view of many community advocates, there's an important social-justice dimension to community participation. "When do communities like ours, communities of color, communities that have multigenerational entrenched poverty...get to be self-determining about what we actually want from the public education system for our children?" asks Jeff Duncan-Andrade of Community Responsive Education (CRE), an organization through which "leaders and their organizations can develop their capacity and agency to become more responsive to the needs of the communities that they serve." CRE included students and community members in the development of its Wellness Index, which prioritizes student self-efficacy, empathy, connectedness, and agency. One explanation for the recent backlash against standardized testing is that the tests come through state departments of education under federal mandates, with limited local input; many parents and other community stakeholders don't feel a

sense of ownership of the testing regimes and haven't received much useful information from the test results.

But reconciling community preferences with the need to select valid, reliable metrics that are actionable for policymakers and practitioners can be difficult. "Calls for...the use of indicators to ensure accountability for educational equity are loud and clear," concludes a literature review of educational equity indicators by Brenda Santos from the Social Policy Hub for Equity Research in Education (SPHERE) at Rhode Island College. "But those calls position parents' role as constructors of the vision and strategy for educational equity in very limited ways, and largely fail to acknowledge students at all."²⁴ SPHERE and Schools and Communities Organizing for Racial Equity are bringing together a group of Providence parents and students to craft equity indicators for their district. Adds Jennifer Davis of the Harvard Education Redesign Lab: "There is a huge movement to ensure that communities and community activists are at the table in determining citywide goals. Some communities have gotten quite good at that; other communities don't seem to have the tools to know how to engage the community."

One challenge is that family and community preferences may differ from the opportunity indicators preferred by policy experts. In New London, Connecticut, for example, a group of students has created a framework called Schools that Work for Us that calls for such improvements as school funding equity, Black and Brown mental health staff on campus, restorative justice practices, anti-bias and anti-racism training, and a focus on relationships. That's a very different list than the indicators tracked by most existing equity dashboards, which frequently include metrics such as access to qualified teachers and advanced coursework.

This tension can't always be resolved in favor of local voices. If the measures that communities want can't be collected, don't promote student learning, or aren't actionable, they won't do much to advance educational equity. Advocates for equal opportunities are going to need to strike a balance between quality indicators and community preferences.

Transparency, or Accountability

Ultimately, policymakers need to decide whether to use equity indicators to get a clearer picture of student needs and the resources available to address them, or to go a step further and use the new information alongside test scores and graduation rates to hold teachers, schools and other agencies responsible for how well they're serving their students.

Adopting the new metrics merely to increase transparency would allow policymakers to draw on a wide range of indicators. But if they want to include equity metrics in accountability systems, they will have to exclude many that lack statistical validity and reliability—metrics vulnerable to legal challenges if they are deployed in ways that have consequences for educators. Policymakers would also have to worry about educators shaping students' responses to school-climate surveys and other attempts to game equity metrics, which are easier to manipulate than standardized tests.

The National Academies report is notably silent on the potential use of equity indicators for accountability. But most of the projects around the country that

“When do communities like ours, communities of color, ... get to be self-determining about what we actually want from the public education system for our children?”

Jeff Duncan-Andrade
Community Responsive Education

have adopted equity metrics are more focused on transparency than accountability, publicly reporting results in easy-to-grasp formats rather than incorporating them into formal accountability structures.

Progressive organizations, such as the Learning Policy Institute, are advocating for the inclusion of opportunity-to-learn indicators in the next reauthorization of

the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, on the grounds that their inclusion would signal their importance to student success and encourage local leaders to act on the information, and, ultimately, lead to a redistribution of educational resources. Some advocates of standards-based reform counter that placing more weight on such indicators could significantly reduce the focus on outcomes and the responsibility placed on educators for teaching all students, particularly under-served students, to high standards.

The question of whether to use equity measures for transparency or accountability “is something we struggle with a lot,” says Elaine Allensworth of the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, an organization at the forefront of the movement to extend the focus on student need and school performance beyond standardized test scores.

Yet early efforts to gather a wider range of information on students and schools, including students' social and emotional well-being and school climate, suggest that equity information may not need to be part of accountability systems to drive change.

The Fresno Unified School District is one of several large California school districts that have introduced annual surveys of student, teacher and parent perspectives on school life. The district publicizes the results of surveys on such topics as students' sense of belonging and their belief in their ability to succeed in school. It encourages schools to use the results in improvement efforts and has a staff to help with that work. But the district does not judge schools on the survey results. “The [survey] reports are a value statement,” says Kim Mecum, the district's chief academic officer. “The natural tendency [of educators] is to go to academics only. From the classroom to the boardroom, the hiring process, everything is focused on academics. The survey data signals that the other half of school life is equally important, and that's our goal!”

The standards movement also suggested the power of transparency to focus educators' efforts. The publication of student test scores and high school graduation rates, even when the results didn't have consequences for educators, led many schools to focus on tested subjects and on ways to help students earn diplomas. "States have learned a lot about accountability systems and the pros and cons of putting in indicators that count toward school ratings," says Scott Norton of CCSSO. "There's just a ton of value in reporting information in a clear way, even if you don't use it to grade a school." As the equity movement expands, and as the reauthorization of the federal Every Student Succeeds Act looms larger, that perspective is likely to be widely debated.

National Academies Proposed Indicators of Educational Equity

| DOMAIN | INDICATORS OF DISPARITIES | MEASURES |
|--|--|--|
| Kindergarten Readiness | Academic Readiness | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Reading/literacy skills ■ Numeracy/math skills |
| | Self-Regulation and Attention Skills | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Self-regulation skills ■ Attention skills |
| K-12 Learning and Engagement | Engagement in Schooling | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Attendance/absenteeism ■ Academic engagement |
| | Performance on Coursework | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Success in classes ■ Accumulating credits (being on track to graduate) ■ Grades, GPA |
| | Performance on Tests | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Achievement in reading, math, and science ■ Learning growth in reading, math, and science achievement |
| Educational Attainment | On-Time Graduation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ On-time graduation |
| | Postsecondary Readiness | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Enrollment in college ■ Entry into the workforce ■ Enlistment in the military |
| Extent of Racial, Ethnic, and Economic Segregation | Students' Exposure to Racial, Ethnic, and Economic Segregation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Concentration of poverty in schools ■ Racial segregation within and across schools |
| Equitable Access to High-Quality Early Learning Programs | Access to and Participation in High-Quality Pre-K Programs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Availability of licensed pre-K programs ■ Participation in licensed pre-K programs |

National Academies Proposed Indicators of Educational Equity *continued*

| DOMAIN | INDICATORS OF DISPARITIES | MEASURES |
|--|---|---|
| Equitable Access to High-Quality Curricula and Instruction | Access to Effective Teaching | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers' years of experience Teachers' credentials, certification Racial and ethnic diversity of the teach force |
| | Access to and Enrollment in Rigorous Coursework | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Availability of and enrollment in advanced, rigorous course work Availability of and enrollment in advanced placement, international baccalaureate, and dual enrollment programs Availability of and enrollment in gifted and talented programs |
| | Curricular Breadth | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Availability and enrollment in coursework in the arts, social sciences, sciences and technology |
| Equitable Access to Supportive School and Classroom Environments | Access to High-Quality Academic Supports | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Access to and participation in formalized systems of tutoring or other types of academic supports, including special education services and services for English learners |
| | School Climate | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Perceptions of safety, academic support, academically focused culture, and teacher-student trust |
| | Nonexclusionary Discipline Practices | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Out-of-school suspensions and expulsions |
| | Nonacademic Supports for Student Success | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support for emotional, behavioral, mental, and physical health |

SOURCE: Monitoring Educational Equity, National Academies Press

ENDNOTES

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CHANGING THE NARRATIVE
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IN EDUCATION