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Using Equity Audits to Examine Systemic Educational Inequities: Are Our Perceptions Matched with Reality?

By Josue Falaise

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research brief explores how equity audits can reveal systemic educational inequities. In the wake of a recent shift in the U.S. administration and the introduction of anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) legislation, the imperative to scrutinize and address systemic educational inequities has never been more critical. These changes present both challenges and opportunities for school districts seeking to address systemic inequities. Now more than ever, it is imperative for educational leaders to examine whether perceptions of equity within their institutions align with the realities experienced by students, staff, and families. According to the Middle Atlantic Equity Consortium (2021), an equity audit is a study of the fairness of an institution's policies, programs and practices for all students, regardless of race, language, ability, or other factors. An equity audit examines key areas like resource distribution, student achievement gaps, disciplinary practices, and even hiring practices. This research brief serves as a vital resource for leaders committed to fostering equitable learning environments. It underscores the importance of equity audits as a strategic tool for identifying disparities, challenging assumptions, and guiding action. The recommendations outlined in this brief provide a roadmap for schools and districts to navigate these critical conversations and advance their goals of addressing students' needs. By leveraging equity audits, we can ensure that our perceptions are aligned with reality and that every student can succeed.



Josue Falaise is the founder and CEO of GOMO Educational Services. He is a former teacher, principal, assistant superintendent, and chief academic officer with over two decades of experience in both suburban and urban school districts. He previously served as the Director of the Rutgers Institute for Improving Student Achievement at the Rutgers University Graduate School of Education. During his time at Rutgers University Graduate School of Education, Falaise worked globally with over 100 school district and organizational leadership teams, as well as higher education institutions, to help design systems that address learner-centered needs.

These collaborative partnerships involved short-term and long-term professional development initiatives across the United States, focused on reviewing, critiquing, and redesigning systems, policies, procedures, and practices to ensure equitable access and opportunity for all students and stakeholders.

At GOMO Educational Services, Falaise continues to build partnerships with schools, districts, and businesses to empower adult agency and voice for the benefit of students, leveraging multiple service-learning platforms.



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INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

Let us go back in time for a moment; in 1896, the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* marked a dark chapter in American history by establishing the "separate but equal" doctrine, legalizing racial segregation and setting a precedent for inequity across all facets of public life. Although framed as equal treatment under the law, this doctrine allowed severe access disparities to thrive, particularly in public education, where students of color were systematically denied the same opportunities and resources as their white peers. In 1954, in the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* case, the Supreme Court overturned *Plessy*, declaring segregation in public schools unconstitutional and affirming the right of every child to receive a quality education in an integrated environment. This decision marked a turning point in pursuing educational justice, establishing that all students, regardless of race, should have equal opportunities to succeed academically and in life.

The idea of educational equality implies providing all students access to similar resources and opportunities. Yet, school realities often reveal stark contrasts between this ideal and the lived experiences of students in disadvantaged communities. For example, research by Brown (2010) highlights that, despite legislative changes, significant disparities still exist between students from marginalized communities and their more affluent counterparts. Disparities in school funding, teacher quality, curriculum standards, and extracurricular resources reveal that "equal" treatment does not inherently lead to equitable outcomes. The push for equality without accounting for the varied needs of students leaves many disadvantaged students "behind without hope, without vision, and without equal access to the excellent education all children are entitled" (Brown, 2010, p.2). This reality has led educational leaders to shift from a one-size-fits-all approach toward a focus on educational equity—where each student is provided with tailored resources and support based on their unique needs, maximizing the potential of every learner.

Ensuring that every child receives equitable opportunities is far from complete. While some districts are taking steps to create systems, they believe are fair, true equity cannot be achieved without continuous assessment and reflection. Despite decades of progress since *Brown v. Board of Education*, achieving true educational equity remains a complex and ongoing journey. Educational leaders and policymakers may genuinely perceive their

systems as equitable; however, these perceptions often diverge from the realities experienced by students and families, especially those from marginalized backgrounds. This disconnect calls for equity audits, a tool that empowers school leaders to critically examine and evaluate the structures and practices within their districts, shedding light on the gaps between perception and reality. An equity audit asks: Why does equity matter, and how can we better ensure it? These questions are at the heart of the research presented in this brief, which analyzes equity audits to create schools where every child can thrive.

The significance of this study lies in its assertion that equity is not merely an ideal but an essential pillar of public education. Addressing the diverse needs of students is crucial to their academic success, personal growth, and future aspirations. A student's experience within their school—how they are treated, supported, and understood—shapes their outlook on education and can profoundly impact their confidence in what they can achieve. True equity means that each student, regardless of their background, is given the opportunity and support to succeed, with their unique learning needs met to unlock their full potential. This study engages educators in critically examining their assumptions about equity, challenging them to rethink whether their practices genuinely meet students' needs or merely project the appearance of fairness.

Recognizing the systemic barriers that hinder equity, policymakers have sought to address these challenges through legislation. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015), signed into law by former President Barack Obama, represents one such federal commitment to combating inequities in education. ESSA emphasizes the need for states and school districts to prioritize equity at the local level. The act upholds protections for disadvantaged and high-need students, requiring that all students be taught rigorous academic standards that prepare them for future success. ESSA also mandates statewide assessments to provide essential data on student progress, supporting local innovations and community-based interventions that benefit disadvantaged students. In addition to expanding access to high-quality preschool, ESSA holds schools accountable, with clear expectations for intervention in the lowest-performing schools—particularly those where students consistently lag or experience low graduation rates.

By embracing equity audits as a standard practice, schools and districts can work towards an equitable educational

environment where every student has the resources and support necessary to thrive. The strength of a nation is closely tied to its educational system. Schools and classrooms are intended to foster the knowledge and skills needed to address societal and global challenges. However, without a focus on equity, these spaces risk becoming environments that perpetuate disparities. Educational equity is not only a pathway to the success of all students but also a crucial factor in building a diverse and inclusive learning environment. Equity enables acknowledging each student's unique needs, experiences, and perspectives, thereby creating more prosperous educational outcomes and supporting the collective well-being of our democratic society and global economy (American Council on Education Board of Directors, 2012).



The case study presented in this brief analyzes equity efforts in 62 school systems across New Jersey's urban and suburban districts over one year. To address the pervasive need for equitable systems, each district formed an Equity Leadership Team (ELT) composed of administrators, faculty, teachers, and other stakeholders. These ELTs participated in equity audits facilitated through a networked learning experience with the Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium, Inc. (MAEC). Through this model, district representatives worked collaboratively to assess multiple aspects of equity within their schools, examining:

- Policies
- Organizational Structures and Administration
- Staff Composition
- Professional Development Opportunities
- Classroom Environments and Curriculum
- Student Assessments (both formative and summative)

According to MAEC, an equitable school provides an environment, processes, and content that empower all students and staff to reach their highest potential. An equitable school is defined by:

- A clear mission centered on equitable access, inclusive treatment, and positive outcomes for all students, regardless of race, gender, national origin (including English learners), disability, or socioeconomic status.
- An inclusive and welcoming environment featuring culturally relevant imagery and multilingual representations of diverse student identities and contributions, displayed throughout hallways, classrooms, and shared spaces.
- Active engagement through reflection and collaboration with diverse groups across socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, linguistic, gender, and disability lines within the school community.

Meaningful partnerships with families, businesses, and civic organizations to foster a unified commitment to enriching the curriculum, maintaining high expectations for all students, and offering additional support and opportunities for success.

Each district utilized an equity audit developed by MAEC, revealing disparities within systems previously assumed to be fair, highlighting areas that required immediate reform to close opportunity and achievement gaps. This research emphasizes the essential role that equity audits play in promoting transparency, accountability, and meaningful reform within public education. By focusing on real-world inequities in educational practices, policies, and outcomes, these audits offer critical insights, guiding educational leaders in making substantive changes to policies that affect students' educational experiences and future opportunities. As demonstrated by the findings in this case study, equity audits represent a tool for assessment and a pathway toward fulfilling the promise of an education system that supports all students in reaching their fullest potential.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Educational equity is fundamental to creating inclusive learning environments and dismantling systemic barriers that hinder student success. Scholars such as Paul Gorski and Gloria Ladson-Billings (2014) have profoundly influenced the field by emphasizing the importance of recognizing and addressing these barriers. Gorski (2020) argues that equity involves more than providing equal resources; it requires targeted support to address the distinct challenges faced by marginalized groups,

including low-income students, students of color, and those with disabilities. Meanwhile, Ladson-Billings (2014) highlights the importance of cultural proficiency, asserting that educators should incorporate students' cultural backgrounds into the curriculum to foster a meaningful learning experience and a sense of belonging.

INEQUITABLE SYSTEMS IN EDUCATION

Despite policy efforts to promote equality, inequities remain deeply entrenched in the educational system, particularly affecting minoritized and low-income students. Socioeconomic status, race, and geography often determine access to quality education, with underfunded schools facing overcrowding, outdated resources, and limited extracurricular opportunities. Moreover, discriminatory practices—such as tracking and biased disciplinary measures—worsen educational disparities, disproportionately affecting students of color and economically disadvantaged students (Brown, 2010).

Contemporary studies have debunked outdated beliefs from the 1966 Coleman Report, which implied that student achievement hinged primarily on socioeconomic background and absolved schools from accountability. Instead, research has shown that with adequate support and resources, disadvantaged students can excel academically (Milner, 2020; Brown, 2010). Additionally, the fragmented education policies identified by Pedro Noguera (2003) further sustain inequities by failing to address the complex intersections of race, class, and culture within schools, reinforcing the argument that public education often reproduces social privileges and disparities (de Royston et al., 2020).

SYSTEMIC EQUITY

Current research underscores the need for systemic equity, beyond individual interventions to transform policies, practices, and structures. Systemic equity, as defined by Bozeman et al. (2022), requires the simultaneous and effective administration of resources (i.e., distributive equity), policies (i.e., procedural equity), and addressing the cultural needs of the systematically marginalized (i.e., recognition equity). Systemic reforms should address biases in curriculum, school funding, and hiring practices to create an educational environment that promotes fairness and justice (CPE, 2016).

The Center for Public Education (CPE) and the National School Boards Association (NSBA) (2021) outline key areas for fostering systemic equity, including equitable access to rigorous coursework and inclusive curricula.

Equity-focused initiatives like those from the Office of Civil Rights reveal ongoing disparities in access to core courses, with underrepresented students often lacking opportunities to take essential classes critical for college and career readiness (U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

EQUITY AUDITS AS TOOLS FOR CHANGE

Equity audits have gained prominence as a transformative approach to addressing school inequities. These audits comprehensively evaluate policies, practices, and outcomes to identify disparities and inform targeted improvements. Research shows that equity audits effectively highlight gaps in areas such as discipline, course access, and resource allocation, providing essential data for actionable changes (Dodman et al., 2019). They also serve as a mechanism for promoting accountability, requiring schools and districts to assess and revise policies that inadvertently perpetuate inequities.



Ishimaru's (2021) work emphasizes that equity efforts often begin with a "hearts and minds" approach, focusing on shifting attitudes and beliefs. However, genuine change requires structural modifications within policies and organizational practices. By involving stakeholders in equity audits, schools can ensure that systemic changes align with the real experiences of students, educators, and families, promoting a sustainable equity model. Dodman, DeMulder, and View (2023) support this approach, demonstrating that professional development in data use for equity can enhance participants' sense of agency, perceptions of equity, and multicultural capacities. Although participants in their study made

strides in strengthening their data and equity literacies, they stressed that developing data use for equity must be an ongoing effort.

Research demonstrates that achieving systemic equity requires more than policy mandates or superficial changes; it necessitates tools like equity audits to comprehensively assess and reform educational practices. The integration of Gorski's call for dismantling barriers and Ladson-Billings' emphasis on cultural relevance speaks to the necessity of these audits in advancing social justice within education.

STUDY CONTEXT

Paul Gorski's equity literacy framework guides this study's approach to measuring equity in schools, emphasizing educators' ability to recognize, respond to, and correct biases within the education system (Gorski & Equity Literacy Institute, 2002). This framework aims to explore how perceptions of equity align—or fail to align—with actual experiences in educational systems. Through equity audits, school districts can assess the effectiveness of their equitable practices across multiple domains, enabling educators and leaders to identify and address gaps. The study's research question is: Will educators' perceptions of educational equity in their school district change between pre- and post-surveys? The findings from this question will inform school districts to use equity audits as a tool for meaningful change, helping schools and districts develop equitable practices that promote the success of all students.

The Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium (MAEC) Equity Audit was used as the primary tool in this study to help districts assess their equity-related policies, programs, and practices. Unlike traditional audits, this perceptual audit addresses factors directly impacting students and staff, such as race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and other identity markers. By engaging educational leaders in defining and assessing equity, the audit provides a lens to identify systemic inequities within their schools and districts.

District superintendents each designated a leader responsible for forming an Equity Leadership Team (ELT) composed of five key stakeholders—teachers, administrators, counselors, and central office leaders. These teams participated in a series of equity-focused sessions and activities designed to assess, reflect on, and enhance equitable practices within their educational systems.

EQUITY LEADERSHIP NETWORK SESSIONS

The study involved five sessions over a five-month period:

Organization, Administration & Staff (September 22, 2021)

- This session focused on how an equitable organization's culture and mission can positively impact the school community, allowing participants to examine components of an equitable system.

Standards, Curriculum & Assessment (October 13, 2021)

- Participants evaluated curriculum practices and their effects on equity, exploring how inclusive curriculum policies support social and emotional learning.

Professional Learning (November 17, 2021)

- This session addressed the alignment between professional learning and equity standards, discussing hiring practices and retention within a context of equity.

Climate & Environment (December 15, 2021)

- Participants learned to “name” and “frame” equity challenges, examining how climate affects perceptions and experiences of equity within the school system.

Policy (January 12, 2022)

- The session emphasized the importance of policy in sustaining equitable practices and included activities on designing policies that support long-term equity goals.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The MAEC Equity Audit was administered as a pre- and post-assessment for each session. Participants responded to audit questions on each domain, selecting from “yes,” “no,” or “needs improvement.” The responses were calculated, and the equity grade was determined based on the average of “yes” responses across all domains. This process provided a clear measure of participants' perceptions of equity within their educational contexts before and after each session.

METHODOLOGY

The research used a predominantly quantitative approach to analyze shifts in stakeholder perceptions of equity within New Jersey school districts. The MAEC

Equity Audit, developed by MAEC, Inc., was utilized throughout the study to provide a structured framework for examining equity practices and policies within participating schools and districts. In 2018, conversations around educational equity gained significant momentum in higher education, particularly within the American Educational Research Association (AERA). Recognizing this growing focus, the dean of the Rutgers University Graduate School of Education (GSE) encouraged me to design a learning initiative centered on educational equity. At the time, this was not a widely discussed topic in K-12 education, especially in New Jersey. To better understand the needs of K-12 educators, I reached out to over 100 education administrators across the state and hosted an informational session to identify priority areas for professional development. Educational equity emerged as the top request, followed by education technology tools like virtual reality.

The first step was to define educational equity clearly. Next, I sought to provide participants with a practical understanding of what educational equity looks like in practice. To design the project and associated sessions, I collaborated with Rutgers GSE colleagues, professors from other universities, and instructors from private organizations, all of whom were experts in the selected focus areas. As the director of the professional development institute hosting the training series, my goal was to ensure that district teams left each session with enhanced theoretical knowledge, practical strategies for implementation, and responses to lingering questions about equity application and integration.

To measure participants' understanding and progress, I utilized the Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium (MAEC) Criteria for an Equitable School - Equity Audit tool. This tool helped identify perceptions of equity in specific areas, highlighting gaps or areas needing improvement. During the planning phase, it became clear that a single full-day session would not suffice because the depth of aligning the concepts and educational equity would require time for coherence and integration. As a result, I developed a comprehensive five-day series titled Equity Leadership Network: Designing Equitable and Sustainable Learning Systems, which took place over five months.

After finalizing the project design and logistics, I focused on promotion. First, I met with the New Jersey Commissioner of Education, Lamont Rapollet and all county executive superintendents to secure their support. I then presented the network series at monthly superintendent county roundtables across the

state. The NJ Commissioner of Education also shared the event during one of his monthly messages to state superintendents. Finally, I utilized social media platforms to promote the series, tagging as many New Jersey education administrators as possible.

In searching for an appropriate equity tool, I reviewed various resources online and within the Rutgers University database before selecting the MAEC Equity Audit tool. While not a rubric, this tool allowed me to collect data on perceptions of equity, focusing on areas where respondents indicated "no" or "needs improvement" to identify gaps. These responses illuminated the absence or insufficient presence of educational equity across domains.

The network series was funded through a one-time fee paid by participating school districts, which allowed the same five team members to attend all five sessions. Only session facilitators were compensated for their preparation and leadership. Districts independently selected their five-member equity leadership teams (ELTs). Although I encouraged districts to include individuals who would replicate the learning in their schools, participation was often determined by school or district administrators. Participants included a range of roles, from teachers and principals to superintendents. The composition of each ELT varied; some included superintendents and principals, while others consisted of curriculum directors, vice principals, and teachers.

Each participant completed pre- and post-assessment sections of the MAEC Equity Audit across five sessions, with each session focusing on a different equity-related domain. The audit's perceptual nature allowed stakeholders to define and evaluate their understanding of equity in relation to their systems, thus illuminating both perceived and actual practices.

Participants responded to questions in each domain using "yes," "no," or "needs improvement." To quantify and analyze these perceptions, Equity Point Averages (E.P.A.) were calculated by the Equity Grade for each domain as a percentage of "Yes" responses, representing affirmative perceptions or positive indicators of equity within that area. The E.P.A. serves as a key metric, providing a clear and accessible measurement of perceived equity across the sessions. Comparing E.P.A. scores from Fall (pre-assessment) to Spring (post-assessment) illustrate shifts in perception, reflecting the potential impact of the Equity Leadership Network's sessions. For instance, a decrease in E.P.A. from Fall to Spring suggests that participants, after engaging in the sessions, became

more critical of their systems, recognizing areas in need of improvement to achieve true equity. This process provided a comprehensive metric to assess changes in stakeholder perceptions of equity.

By tracking E.P.A. scores, school leaders can readily identify strengths and gaps in equity, aligning with the equity literacy framework's goals of enhancing awareness, guiding actionable strategies, and supporting equitable policy alignment. The findings from these tests underscore the impact of the equity-focused sessions, ultimately guiding schools and districts toward the development of equitable environments that support the success of all students.

The Equity Leadership Network (ELN) consisted of five structured sessions spanning five months, each focusing on a different domain of equity:

Session 1 - Organization, Administration & Staff (September 22, 2021)

This session emphasized the diversity of perspectives within a school system and its impact on the community. Participants identified components of an equitable school system and discussed challenges and steps toward equity, with insights from a public school district team that shared their journey.

The first full-day session was facilitated by the author of the report. Following an introduction, participants engaged in the MAEC Criteria for an Equitable School Equity Audit. This tool assessed their individual and collective perceptions of seven critical domains:

- School Policy
- School Organization/Administration
- School Climate/Environment
- Staff
- Assessment/Placement
- Professional Learning
- Standards and Curriculum Development

Each district Equity Leadership Team (ELT) brought materials, such as their Comprehensive Equity Plan (CEP), NJ School Performance Reports, and other internal data. The session's guiding equity questions prompted ELTs to reflect on CEP domains while triangulating their data to identify equity challenges. Teams discussed these challenges as issues, not problems, and considered reflective questions like:

- What are two opportunities or solutions to address your school or system's significant equity threats?

ELTs then partnered to exchange insights, discuss activities, and outline next steps. This collaborative process fostered deeper exploration and shared strategies for addressing systemic inequities.

Session 2 - Standards, Curriculum & Assessment (October 13, 2021)

This session explored embedding equity in curriculum design, examining the impact of culturally responsive and rigorous expectations on student success. Attendees discussed how curriculum inequities can affect social and emotional learning across student development stages.

Gloria Ladson-Billings, a renowned professor from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, facilitated the second session. She illuminated the differing expectations of students across racial lines and their self-fulfilling consequences through the lens of explicit, implicit, and null curricula. Participants explored culturally relevant pedagogy, emphasizing its impact and core components.

An interactive activity involved participants reviewing their English Language Arts and Social Studies curricula, using reflective questions like:

- Will students learn something new about another's family, culture, or community?
- Will the activities help students connect their learning to their lives outside school?

Responses ranged from "not really" to "most definitely," though responses were not formally recorded.

The session concluded with participants completing a post-survey on three domains:

School Climate/Environment

- Example: Do displays and classrooms reflect diversity in gender, race, and ability in various roles?

Assessment/Placement

- Example: Do all class levels proportionately reflect the diversity of the overall student population?

Standards and Curriculum Development

- Example: Does the curriculum integrate perspectives and contributions of people of color and women across subjects?

Session 3 - Professional Learning (November 17, 2021)

Focused on equity in employment practices, this session covered the New Jersey Administrative Code N.J.A.C 6A:7, outlining equality expectations in hiring, recruitment, and retention. Activities allowed attendees to evaluate their district's practices in these areas.

Lora Clark, Director of Personnel and Equity in the Morris School District, facilitated the third session. Participants explored challenges within the district regarding human resources, professional development, resource allocation, and student achievement.

One activity focused on retaining diverse staff. ELT members identified their knowledge about teachers from various backgrounds (e.g., Native American, Muslim, LGBTQ, teachers with disabilities). They then reviewed stories from educators facing inequity, such as a wheelchair-bound teacher without proper emergency accommodations or access to restrooms.

The session emphasized the importance of addressing workplace inequities to retain a diverse workforce. ELTs reflected on their human resources procedures and outlined actionable next steps during peer discussions.

The session concluded with a post-survey on three domains:

School Organization/Administration

- Example: Are administrators trained to identify and address equity issues?

Staff

- Example: Are equity competencies part of staff performance evaluations?

Professional Learning

- Example: Do staff receive cross-cultural communication training?

Session 4 - Climate & Environment (December 15, 2021)

Based on research from the Center for Social Inclusion, this session encouraged participants to rethink conventional approaches to fostering diversity. Attendees practiced identifying ("naming") and addressing ("framing") equity challenges within their communities.

Ronald Taylor, Superintendent of the South Orange-Maplewood School District, led the fourth session. He presented data highlighting inequities across economic,

racial, and disciplinary lines and shared his district's intentional integration plan.

Participants analyzed their own data in areas such as:

- Facilities
- Budget allocations
- Placement of high-performing teachers
- Curriculum
- Culturally rich texts
- Classroom size
- Discipline trends
- Counseling services

ELTs created equity presentations to showcase their district's successes and disparities, identifying steps to address inequities. During network time, ELTs shared feedback on their peers' presentations and discussed actionable strategies.



Session 5 - Policy (January 12, 2022)

This final session addressed how policy can sustain equity initiatives, emphasizing the need for funding and structured support. Participants discussed next steps for implementing equitable practices through policy development.

David Aderhold, Superintendent of West Windsor-Plainsboro Schools, facilitated the final session. Participants explored his district's process for building an equitable system and engaged in activities that included:

- Crafting equity principles
- Addressing structural challenges
- Reviewing equity policies
- Discussing how to fund equity-driven initiatives

For districts without equity policies, participants strategized steps for creation and discussed potential community challenges and benefits. During network time, ELTs critiqued current policies and shared ideas for implementation.

PRE-ASSESSMENT

DOMAIN/ SESSION	YES	NO	NEEDS IMPROVEMENT	Domain Grades
Organization/Administration	62	27	109	31.31%
Staff	102	43	118	38.78%
Standards & Curriculum	136	32	116	47.89%
Assessment	61	12	37	55.45%
Professional Learning	84	50	108	34.71%
Climate & Environment	116	21	81	53.21%
Policy	86	41	73	43.00%
E.P.A				43.00%

POST-ASSESSMENT

DOMAIN/SESSION	YES	NO	NEEDS IMPROVEMENT	Domain Grades
Organization/Administration	52	17	120	27.51%
Staff	66	41	138	26.94%
Standards & Curriculum	90	12	145	36.44%
Assessment	44	8	43	46.32%
Professional Learning	43	41	147	18.61%
Climate & Environment	97	21	81	48.74%
Policy	34	28	73	25.19%
E.P.A				25.19%

Across the five sessions, participants engaged in reflective activities, analyzed data, and collaborated to create actionable equity strategies. The sessions provided a comprehensive approach to identifying and addressing inequities within schools, empowering districts to move toward systemic change.

LIMITATIONS

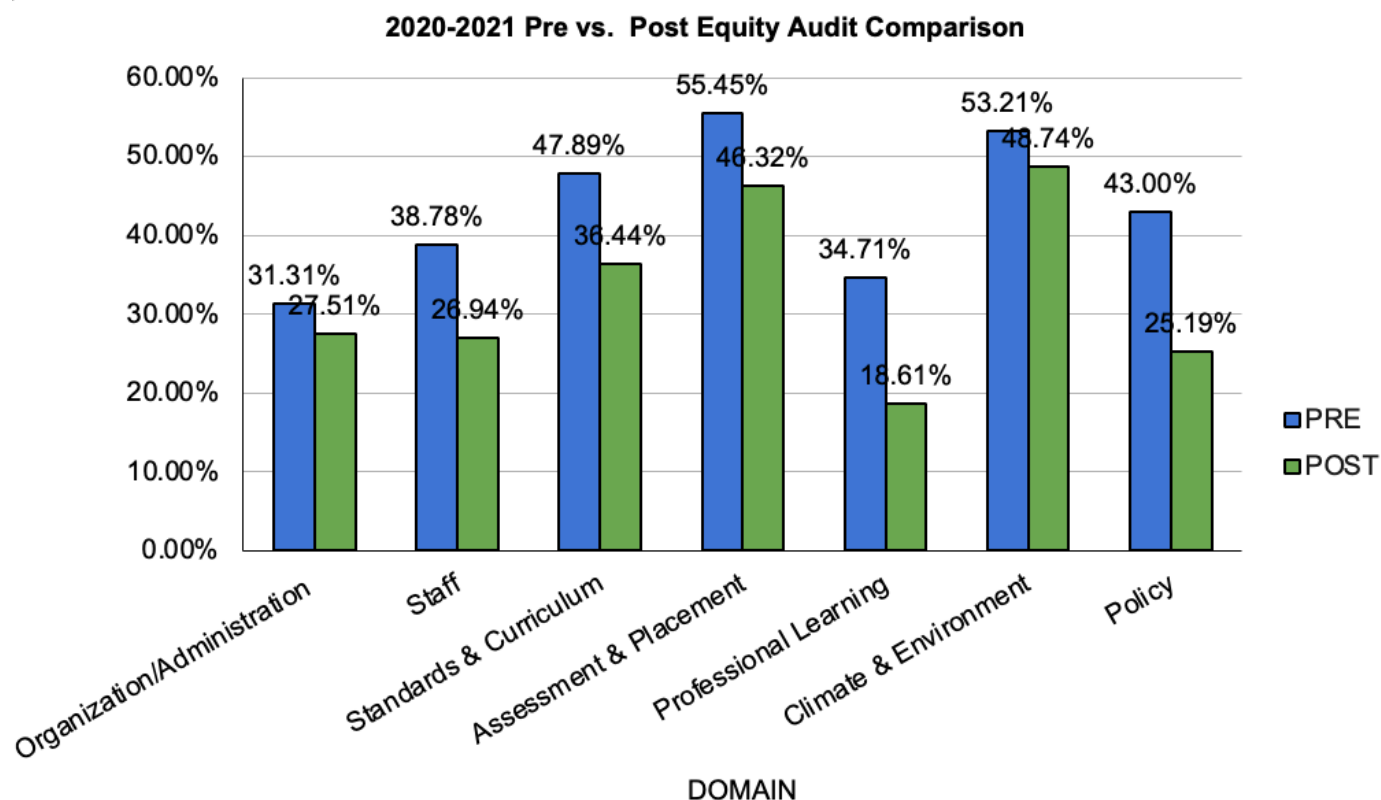
The audit results were negatively impacted by decreased participant attendance during sessions, including late arrivals, early departures, and absences. These issues skewed the data, as the audit assessed individual perceptions of equity before and after participation in the Equity Leadership Network (ELT) sessions. Consequently, gaps in participation prior to post-assessments affected the overall Equity Point Average (E.P.A) comparisons. To address these challenges, school officials should ensure that all selected ELT members can commit to attending all five sessions in full.

During the 2021-2022 school year, 75% of participating districts received supplementary equity training from GOMO Educational Services. It is important to note that many districts felt ill-prepared for meaningful equity

discussions during the 2020-2021 school year. However, by the end of the ELT session, districts showed significant progress in understanding systemic equity and literacy. Increased equity expectations from the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) also contributed to the results. The introduction of the Comprehensive Equity Plan marked a transformative shift in educational practices, with the NJDOE checklist facilitating the triangulation of the equity audit with outlined expectations and school performance reports. This empowered districts to identify and address inequitable practices within their policies, administration, staffing, professional learning, classroom environments, curriculum, and assessments.

RESULTS SUMMARY

The study aimed to assess the impact of targeted professional development sessions on stakeholders' perceptions of equity within New Jersey school districts. This was achieved by comparing pre- and post-assessment Equity Point Averages (E.P.A.) across key domains of equitable practice: Organization/Administration, Staff, Standards & Curriculum, Assessment, Professional Learning, Climate & Environment, and Policy.



1. OVERALL PERCEPTION SHIFT

A comparison of pre- and post-assessment data revealed a noticeable decrease in E.P.A., from 43.00% in the pre-assessment to 25.19% in the post-assessment. This decline suggests a shift in participants' understanding and a more critical view of their district's equity practices. Initially, stakeholders perceived their systems as more equitable, likely due to limited exposure to specific equity frameworks and benchmarks. However, after engaging in the Equity Leadership Network sessions, stakeholders began to recognize gaps and areas in need of improvement, reflecting a more nuanced awareness of equity issues.

2. DOMAIN-SPECIFIC FINDINGS

Analyzing E.P.A. by domain highlights the differential impact of the sessions on various aspects of district operations:

- **Organization/Administration:** The domain grade dropped from 31.31% to 27.51%, suggesting a growing recognition among participants of structural inequities within their administrative practices.
- **Staff:** The staff domain saw a decrease from 38.78% to 26.94%, indicating a shift in how stakeholders perceive equitable practices in hiring, recruiting, and retaining staff.

- **Standards & Curriculum:** This domain showed a significant decline, from 47.89% to 36.44%. Participants seemed more aware of potential inequities within the curriculum, possibly reflecting a heightened understanding of the importance of culturally responsive teaching.
- **Assessment:** The assessment domain decreased from 55.45% to 46.32%, showing stakeholders' increased awareness of assessment practices and their implications for equitable outcomes.
- **Professional Learning:** This domain experienced one of the largest decreases, from 34.71% to 18.61%. The drop underscores participants' growing awareness of the need for targeted, equity-focused professional development.
- **Climate & Environment:** This domain dropped from 53.21% to 48.74%, indicating that participants are more critically evaluating the inclusiveness of their school climates.
- **Policy:** The Policy domain score dropped from 43.00% to 25.19%, highlighting a deeper understanding of how policies can either promote or hinder equitable practices.

3. INTERPRETATION OF SHIFTS

The observed shifts in E.P.A. across all domains suggest that the Equity Leadership Network sessions were effective in broadening participants' perspectives on

equity. Initially, many stakeholders perceived their practices as relatively equitable. However, through targeted sessions that exposed them to equity frameworks, challenges, and strategies, participants began to recognize limitations in their current systems. This more critical view post-assessment aligns with the study's objective: to foster a deeper understanding of equity and identify areas for tangible improvements.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE PRACTICE

The quantitative results gathered highlights significant implications for future professional development initiatives. Ensuring that educators have access to ongoing support and resources will be essential in equipping them to meet the demands of fostering equity within their schools. These findings suggest that districts should not only conduct regular audits but also prioritize ongoing professional development in equity to sustain awareness and progress.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

In efforts to combat systemic inequality, I have compiled the following recommendations based on the findings from the MAEC Equity Audit tool, which was administered as a perceptual audit solely to district Equity Leadership Team (ELT) representatives:

Tool Selection: Districts should begin by identifying and selecting an assessment tool that aligns with their needs, enabling them to gather perceptions from various stakeholder groups. The tool must be customizable to address specific challenges or priority areas that the district identifies. It should also provide reports and visual data representations that are easily interpretable by diverse stakeholders, facilitating the development of targeted interventions and strategic planning.

Data Comparison: Districts should compare the results of their perceptual audit with other forms of data to identify and validate existing inequalities within their systems. This process involves determining whether perceptual data aligns with or contradicts other data sets. For example, if quantitative audit results highlight a lack of culturally relevant teaching materials or curriculum, the district should examine whether these findings correlate with disproportionate outcomes in student assignment grades and overall performance. Additionally, districts should conduct interviews with students and families from various affinity groups to see if qualitative feedback supports the findings of disproportionate grades and audit perceptions from different stakeholder groups.

Professional Development: Following the receipt of feedback, districts should design ongoing professional development opportunities for staff and administration throughout the school year, focusing on systemic educational equity. This process should involve creating a multiyear professional development plan, developed by a committee of diverse stakeholders, including district staff, community representatives, and municipal partners. By drawing on a wide range of perspectives, the plan can address both classroom and broader community needs. The plan should be informed by historical data, equity audit results, school performance data, and qualitative feedback. The committee should meet regularly to refine the plan, ensuring that the methods, modes, and effectiveness of the training and related activities are evaluated over time.

Stakeholder Engagement: Teams of one or two representatives from each district should engage with all stakeholders—students, community members, staff, and others—to gather their perceptions. The primary goal is to uncover and challenge flawed perceptions of equity, fostering the adoption of genuine equitable practices. These practices should permeate all aspects of the district, including policies, administration, school climate, curriculum, and professional development. To build credibility, it is essential that these sessions be transparent, inclusive, and guided by clear, actionable data. To mitigate potential tensions among diverse stakeholder groups, the process should emphasize active listening, open communication, and a commitment to shared goals, ensuring that all voices are heard and respected throughout the engagement process.

CONCLUSION

The call for equity literacy and systemic equity emphasized in this research brief can be effectively addressed through the implementation of equity audits. While schools have intended to improve their policies, administration, climate, staff engagement, curriculum, assessment practices, and professional development to mitigate inequalities, the findings presented here indicate that many institutions are falling short of their goals. This research underscores that equity audits provide a powerful tool for schools to critically examine their current systems and uncover educational inequities.

Research indicates that educational inequality can be reduced through equity audits, as recognizing and diagnosing a problem is a fundamental step in addressing it. It is imperative for districts to conduct thorough examinations of their systems to ensure they meet the diverse needs of every student, thereby combating

the persistent inequities that continue to afflict our educational landscape. A student's experience and perceptions within their school environment significantly shape their views on education and their beliefs about their own potential. Regardless of race, gender, ability level, or socioeconomic status, every student deserves the opportunity to reach their fullest potential. Achieving this requires districts to first undertake an equity audit and subsequently develop a robust understanding of equity literacy, striving for a truly equitable educational experience for all students.

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