

# **Working Towards Educational Justice at State and District Levels: Perspectives of Educational Leaders**

A Paper Prepared for the Washington Education Association

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## Overview

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This research examines the views of current education leaders in Washington state school districts, agencies, professional associations and non-profit organizations with regard to issues of educational justice. We primarily focus on leaders who have specific responsibilities for advancing race and equity work in their organizations, and we actively recruited leaders of color as study participants. We sought to understand the ways (if any) district, state and regional organizations have focused on reducing inequities, what structural inequities they are actively seeking to address, and opportunities that may exist for the redesign of educational systems and decision-making processes.

This paper is part of a series of studies supporting a direction-setting “roadmap” document for reducing barriers of institutional racism in Washington state’s P-12 education system. Funded by the Washington Education Association (WEA), the larger project aims to understand the level and types of investments and practices (i.e., policies, decision-making, and actions, within Washington’s specific historical context) needed to address and eliminate systemic educational inequities from the perspective of families, students and communities that have been historically underserved. This research is driven by the fact that non-dominant communities have lacked authentic opportunities to describe and influence the types of investments and policies they believe are most needed to address educational justice in our state.

## Conceptual Framing

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This study examines the perspectives of educational leaders through a critical and social justice lens, recognizing that organizational and political structures within states and districts are often resistant to equitable policies and practices, and that institutional racism and white privilege play out in various settings (Horsford, Scott & Anderson, 2019; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). A qualitative study such as this has policy implications that are not value neutral (Wright, Arnold & Khalifa, 2018), and attention to issues of equity, adequacy and transparency can be a step toward educational justice.

In this research, we draw from three conceptual frameworks. The first is social justice leadership (Theoharis, 2007), in which leaders seek to disrupt and subvert arrangements that promote marginalization and exclusionary practices. A second key set of concepts is rooted in critical policy analysis (Horsford, Scott & Anderson, 2019) which asks the questions: “Who benefits from this policy or practice? Who is hurt by this policy or practice? Whose knowledge informs this policy? How are social inequalities not only classes but also raced and gendered?” (p. 40). Finally, we draw from knowledge gained through critical race theory (CRT) (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), which focuses on examining how institutional racism, theories of intersection and white privilege play out in a variety of settings.

Schools often bring together racially, socioeconomically and linguistically diverse students and families in ways that intensify issues of equity and access. Social justice leadership perspectives

call us to investigate school and district organizational structures and policies that play a critical role in negotiating the power dynamics within local community contexts. Likewise, critical policy analysis (CPA) challenges traditional notions of power, politics and governance, seeks to center the perspectives of non-dominant groups, and examines the distribution of resources. “Unlike traditional policy analysis, CPA seeks to emphasize the voices, experiences and desires of marginalized people in the policy process as it finds inherent value in what are often underrepresented or ignored worldviews” (Horsford, Scott & Anderson, 2019, p. 39).

Political structures within districts and schools may be resistant to equitable policies and practices as understood by CRT when leaders fail to recognize or address how institutional racism and white privilege cause harm to students and families. For example, as part of CRT, *interest convergence*, a theory originally described by Bell (1980), suggests that policy changes toward racial integration only occur when the interests of dominant and non-dominant groups converge. However, existing political structures favoring white, middle-class, English-dominant groups can quickly lead to their interests taking precedence, which may reflect dominant group interests rather than those of immigrant and historically underserved children and families (Dorner, 2011). It also may lead to *opportunity hoarding* (Lyken-Segosebe & Hintz; 2015), when dominant groups control resources and act to prevent their access to others.

Within the CRT framework, Yosso (2005) focuses on the idea of cultural capital by describing community cultural wealth, with a commitment to schooling that acknowledges the many strengths of communities of color. However, as this study reveals, schools often have broken trust with their communities of color, which will require fundamental repair. Finding a path forward is possible only with relational trust in schools, a term coined by sociologists Bryk and Schneider (2002). Key to relational trust in schools and communities is educators respect and belief in the communities and families that entrust the care of their children to them.

These concepts help us to understand, illustrate and synthesize the tensions facing educational leaders in confronting inequities. They help us to identify ways to value the lived experiences of communities of color, prioritize the recruitment, retention, and care for educators of color, and translate social justice commitments into action.

## **Inquiry Methods**

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The overarching research questions addressed in this study include the ways (if any) district, state and regional organizations have focused their efforts on reducing educational inequities, the structural inequities they are actively seeking to address, and opportunities that may exist for the redesign of educational systems and decision-making processes. We used a basic qualitative approach to our inquiry (Merriam, 2009), relying primarily on confidential, semi-structured interviews. Consistent with the research questions, we developed initial interview protocols and adapted them to the particular level, focus, and purpose of the participants’ organizations.

We identified potential organizations and interview participants through the use of professional networks and recommendations from knowledgeable individuals. We contacted individuals who hold (or held) responsibilities for addressing issues of race and equity within their organizations via email. Nearly all individuals who were contacted agreed to participate. Given that non-dominant communities have lacked authentic opportunities to describe and influence the types of investments and policies they believe are most needed to address issues of educational justice in P-12 education in our state, we prioritized recruitment of individuals of color or from Indigenous backgrounds.

In total, we conducted interviews with 34 individuals from September 2020 to January 2021 entirely via Zoom. Generally, the interviews were conducted individually with each participant and the two researchers. However, in three instances, we conducted focus groups with staff together from within the same organization. The interviews and focus groups typically lasted 40-60 minutes. More than half (59%) of those interviewed were people of color/from Indigenous backgrounds. Study participants represented more than 20 different organizations, including districts, state and regional government agencies, nonprofit organizations, state level advocacy groups, and community-based organizations.

Our original research design had planned for in-person interactions, however given COVID-19, we adapted to conducting interviews via Zoom (Lobe, et al., 2020). With permission from participants, interviews were audio recorded. Detailed notes were taken for a small number of interviews that were not audio recorded. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed thematically to establish initial themes and patterns which formed the basis for the study findings and policy recommendations.

## **Study Limitations and Statement of Positionality**

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This study was conducted during the COVID-19 restrictions of the 2020-21 school year. Our recruitment strategies involved reaching out to educational leaders who could speak to the dilemmas of working on issues of educational justice within their respective educational systems. All study participants were in respected positions of leadership, the preponderance of whom were experienced, mid- to late-career professionals. We acknowledge this may result in certain generational perspectives. Perhaps because these individuals were embedded within their systems, some of their views – unsurprisingly – reflected more modest perspectives on rethinking educational justice within their systems. Participants of color and from Indigenous backgrounds, however, uniformly provided more robust critiques of the systems in which they worked, and we prioritized their perspectives in our analysis. Given that the design of the overall project was to hear from non-dominant communities, we intentionally over-sampled leaders of color to ensure that their views were represented.

We include a brief positionality statement as we are aware of our racial identities and privilege as white women researchers whose work continues to be supported by the same elite spaces that educated us. We pursue educational policy research precisely because of its profound influence in the lives of children and families, and how the field fundamentally needs to address

issues of equity and educational justice. We acknowledge both the promise and limitations of state and district policy to improve equity and educational justice outcomes for children and families. States and districts can be a source of ideas, direction and resources, but also can create obstacles and constraints to change within their respective systems (Shields & Knapp, 1997).

## **Findings: Key Challenges**

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The metaphor of a roadmap for educational justice lends itself well to themes consistently articulated by the state and district level educators that we interviewed for this project. The roadmap work begins with a recognition of the promise of public education for all, and a plan for reconstruction efforts to remove barriers for those whose voices have been historically excluded. Five challenges are explored in the findings section: 1) structural inequities in resources and funding, 2) lack of will to address racism, 3) burdens borne by leaders of color, 4) challenges faced by state level organizations in leading for educational justice, and 5) the need to reimagine the education system to prioritize children and families.

### **1. Structural Inequities in Resources and Funding**

For generations, there has been a robust policy debate regarding several factors that determine school funding. These factors include: 1) the number of dollars allocated to public education, 2) the sources of school funding (i.e., federal, state, district, or local), 3) how states distribute funds to districts, and 4) how districts allocate resources to schools. While developing a fair system of funding is a primary goal, education finance systems fall short of the promise to ensure and provide for equal educational opportunity for all students (Baker, Farrie & Sciarra, 2018). One of the most difficult challenges in developing an equitable funding system is the need to fully address the fact that local communities vary in their wealth and ability to fund schools. This variation in local fiscal wealth has been exacerbated by long-standing practices such as redlining, housing segregation, discriminatory lending, the taking of lands and assignment of Native peoples to less desirable locations, and the failure to fully fund education, particularly in communities of color and low-income communities. A majority of individuals we interviewed articulated the critical importance of addressing school funding and resource allocation in the pursuit of educational justice. In this section, we share some of their perspectives.

#### *Impact of Generations of Segregation and Colonialism*

Many of the educational leaders interviewed for this study discussed the ways in which the state's system of education funding fails to address systemic inequities, which frequently are rooted in historical, segregationist and colonizing practices. One leader of color stated, "We know which communities got redlined, all that stuff, it's all there, but it would take some serious political will to make decisions given those historical inequities." Yet another participant echoed this theme, describing the connection between segregation and educational equity in policymaking as follows:

They [policymakers] weren't taking into account the history of the neighborhoods and all of the policies that were segregationist and intentionally put in place to marginalize. And so we're standing on the shoulders of all that history which has created the neighborhoods and schools that we have and that isn't taken into account [when developing funding systems].

A state policy maker who is a person of color described how the problems in her neighborhood are exactly the same as when she was a student 40 years ago. She detailed how those with power within the educational system reinforce or fail to address historical systemic racist assumptions, or only deal with at the edges. Another state level policy maker noted that Native students and their families have experienced a particular kind of abuse that can take generations to change, particularly considering the state's history of white settler colonialism. These perspectives regarding the impact of segregation and colonialism have implications for how funding systems have been designed and how resource allocation practices reinforce historic inequities.<sup>1</sup>

### *The McCleary Decision and Equity in Funding*

The McCleary decision was a frequent topic of discussion with our study participants. *McCleary v Washington* is a lawsuit initiated in 2007 that resulted in a 2012 Washington State Supreme Court decision declaring the state's system of funding K-12 school to be unconstitutional because the state was not meeting its paramount duty to fund basic education. The Supreme Court set a deadline of 2018 for the state to develop a fully funded system. A number of educational leaders described how the legislative responses to McCleary addressed the adequacy of educational resources, but not the equity of the system itself. One leader of a state level nonprofit organization described the McCleary responses as "wrapped in a cloak of equity," but noted that "the lawsuit wasn't actually about equity...They just had to figure out how to put more money into the system, not the most equitable way to distribute it." Consequently, while current funding policies have resulted in notable increases in state funding for all districts, the disparities in property values across districts persist, creating inequitable access to resources. As a state level leader of an advocacy organization said, "there were some promising changes but largely the distribution of funds is just as inequitable across the state as it was before. So, we've recreated some of the same issues that we had before."

The inequities in state funding associated with the implementation of the regionalization factor was an acute area of concern for some leaders. Because the regionalization factor is based on differences in property valuation as the proxy for cost of living, it drives more dollars to communities with higher per pupil property valuation, further exacerbating wealth disparities

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<sup>1</sup> For a thorough discussion and analysis of the historical and constitutional underpinnings of school funding policy in Washington state, please see *Paramount Duty of the State: A Brief History of Educational Equity and Inequality in Washington State* by Professor Nancy Beadie, University of Washington.

among districts. A leader in a state level organization described the burden on low-wealth districts, “They have to pay a higher tax rate essentially to get less money per student than a better resourced district. So that is still just a glaring inequity.” A leader in state government noted that with districts’ regionalization funds, “[districts] don't have to prove anything other than you have a tax base, your homes are worth more in this community. You don't have to do anything else.” These and other structural barriers impact education funding policies and an equitable distribution of educational resources and services.

In Washington, and in states across the nation, the state education finance system struggles to address funding disparities based on differences in property values across districts. Policies are enacted to provide additional funds based on the proportion of students who are low-income, English learners, or those who are struggling academically or have a disability. However, these policies often result in a piecemeal approach to supporting students. As a state level leader stated, “you get a little bit of LAP money, you get a little bit of this, you're a Title 1 school, you're this you're that, you get this grant, you get this little piece over here.” This approach to supplemental funding also creates additional burden on already under-resourced districts.<sup>2</sup> Several participants described how each additional funding source comes with its own set of application, regulatory, and accountability requirements that create a siloed, disparate approach to resource allocation.

A number of participants discussed inequities in access to resources such as rigorous curricula (e.g., Advanced Placement), the arts, extracurricular activities, and out of school supports. Disparities in funding from local communities was also noted, with a district level leader of color saying, “We have a PTA that's earned over \$150,000 for one fundraiser, compared to a school across town that maybe got \$8,000. I haven't heard them talk about sharing that.” This disparity in access to these types of resources are additional evidence of a lack of equity in the system itself because communities are dependent on their local capacity to augment state funding with additional resources from local levies or local community organizations.

## **2. Lack of Will to Address Racism**

The educational systems in which many leaders find themselves are often antithetical to a vision of social or educational justice. Even when leaders assert such commitments, they often face substantial challenge and resistance when seeking to address racism (Gorski, 2019; Picower, 2011). During our interviews, we asked leaders how their educational organizations have sought to address these matters, particularly with respect to race and racism. Study participants discussed the systematic avoidance of the topic of race and racism by adults in the system, the marginalization of students of color, and the need to prioritize racial equity by altering the education system itself.

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed discussion of current issues related to supplemental funding in Washington state, please see *Establishing Priorities for Education Finance Under Fiscal Uncertainty: Recommendations for Washington State Policymakers* by Professors David Knight and Margaret Plecki, University of Washington.

### *Failure to Name Racism*

Many of the educational leaders in the study discussed how districts and schools have increased their focus on issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. However, they also noted that specific references to race and racism are often omitted in conversations, meetings, and policymaking. A community-based leader of color noted the discomfort some individuals experience when discussing race, saying, “But in this anti-racism space, particularly in the Pacific Northwest, although I've seen it across the nation, is this space of wanting to jump past race and go deal with every other intersection, every other oppression before dealing with race.” Another state level leader of color described how students who were asked to present at a district-wide summit on diversity, equity and inclusion found that race was never mentioned during the course of the evening’s event. Other students who started a Black student union were told by their principal, “We’re not comfortable with that title.” This Black leader went on to discuss examining student planners and handbooks:

Schools will say hate speech, but they won't say racist speech. When you look at student planners or student handbooks, the word racism and racist speech is often not used. Students have realized that it's intentionally omitted. One student showed me their planner and it talked about homophobic speech, hate speech, gender bashing, but it didn't say racism... And it becomes a scapegoat thing of, we don't have to say racism because, well, we don't have racism in our handbooks...

Other participants discussed the importance of specifically referencing race in their equity statements and priorities. A district level leader of color described it in this way,

So for me, when we did a race and equity policy, one of the reasons why I called it the race and equity policy is that, I wanted to make sure we were really clear about, we're talking about how race has impacted the district.

Intentionally and directly naming race was a priority raised by these leaders of color.

### *Marginalization of Students of Color*

*“Do you love black people more than you hate the white supremacist systems that oppress them?” And that sits with me a lot in that when we think about a lot of our struggle and work, particularly in education, around educational inequity. I think a lot of times we say that we hate the systems that are oppressing people more than we love the people we're trying to be of service to. And so we do really harmful damaging things in that space. A really concrete example is exactly how we talk about trust in community, right? And we'll say the community doesn't trust us, never mind that we've done things that are untrustworthy and not worthy of trust. But think about what happens when we flip that narrative and we talk about, no, actually we don't trust the community to know what they need. We don't trust the community. And when I say, community, I'm talking about the students.... even the baby, baby pre-K kids know what it means to be in a supportive, loving, learning environment. They know what it means to be*

*taught a certain way by a teacher. They know what it means for a teacher to know how to pronounce their name correctly. They know all these little itty-bitty things that we talk about. It is like, this is important for creating a belonging, loving environment. And yet they are never asked their opinion about these things.*

In the quote above, an executive director of color within a non-profit educational organization reiterated words by a colleague, and further questioned whether educators truly understand the magnitude of the impact of their actions toward children and families of color – actions that often belie a conscious or unconscious bias. Several state and district level leaders described examples of how the voices of students of color are not taken seriously and how students experience denial of their lived experiences by the adults in the system. A leader of color who works with youth across the state described how students of color report feeling an “absence of being seen, treated like a number in the system.” This leader also discussed how some adults respond to students of color who report racist incidents by making excuses as follows,

To students, I'll use their words, it feels racist. To a vast majority of adults and educator's buildings, it's growing pains, "Well, they didn't mean it. Well, that's not what they meant. Well, they're learning. Well, they're 60 years old, and they're from..." They're like, "We don't care how old you are. Don't talk to me that way." But students don't feel they have the power or positionality to be able to say that because it's always met with, "Well, that's Mr. X, and you know Mr. X."

This leader described educators' avoidance and the lack of responsibility taken for harmful actions toward students. Other participants described how adults need to call out racism and take responsibility to advocate for students of color, rather than placing responsibility on students to do so. A state level educator of color said:

Students should not have to advocate for the problem to be solved, that if somebody says something offensive to a student, it is not his job to go to the principal and say, "Have you dealt with this?" But that's what's happening in schools and students aren't saying anything because like, "Well, we've said things and nothing happens. It gets swept under the rug."

Participants discussed an alternative approach which acknowledges and elevates the talents and perspectives of students in shaping policy and action. One leader noted,

It's really important to elevate the voices of students into the conversation, because I mean, they'll tell us everything we need to know about this. They've known it for a while. They're kind of waiting for us to catch up in terms of our own racial literacy, I think. They have all the information at their fingertips, and they have the energy and they're wanting to talk about it.

These quotes highlight how students are eager for issues of racism to be addressed by adults within the system. A district level leader of color described how incidents of racism are not addressed with the same level of seriousness and scrutiny as incidents of bullying or other forms of harassment because adults are uncomfortable overtly naming racism when it is

witnessed. Instead, they describe racist acts as disrespectful or inappropriate. This can contribute to a culture of denying that racism exists, and it impacts students in fundamental ways.

### *Addressing Racism in Policy and Practice*

Educators committed to issues of educational justice have described the need to prioritize racial equity through altering state and district systems, policies and practices. Among our study participants, there was an acknowledgement that “second-class citizenship” has been built into the education system, as evidenced by the lived experiences of children and families of color. Participants discussed the need to build anti-racist organizations and push back against the status quo. A state level leader said:

Because we're in a fundamentally racist system structurally, institutionally there are people who have benefited from the existing system. And if you have benefited from the existing system, you have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. So there's just going to be that kind of pushback to begin with.

In the view of many leaders, the types of policy and organizational changes needed to address systemic inequities are radical, not incremental or neutral. A state level leader said, “It just seems like the racial inequity just is so pervasive and has been baked into the system... it's not like you just uncouple it. You have to implode the systems and rebuild.” Taking a “neutral” position in conversations about race and equity can further deepen the problem. A school leader of color stated, “If you call yourself neutral, what does that mean? And how does that uphold white supremacy? Who's getting privileged when we do that? Not that we need to attach names to it, but we need to stand up and say, ‘White supremacy is just wrong.’” Another state level leader of color emphasized the need to challenge policies that appear to be neutral on their face, but have disparate impacts on specific groups of students and families.

Study participants also noted that standardized tests are rooted in racist principles and, at best, provide a very limited view of student talent and ability. In addition to the tests themselves, leaders discussed how tests are used to sort and define learning opportunities for students, often negatively and disproportionately impacting students of color and lowering expectations for their success. In reflecting on how to become an anti-racist organization, a state level leader of color said, “When we are prioritizing racial equity, we are continually examining the policies, processes, and programs that we have. We found that we really need to continue examining testing barriers.” Other leaders commented on the inadequacy of student assessments as a window into what supports students actually need. For example, a state level leader used the example of Asian American students by saying:

When you look at the collective student graduation rate, SAT, reading scores, the standardized testing, Asian Americans are doing really well. The focus is on that. Now if I shift and I say, “Look at the social, emotional wellness of Asian American students.” See how many Asian American students are going to see their counselors for mental health. The students are not going and there's no reach outreach because they assume that it's

fine. Yet you look at the depression rate, the suicide rate, Asians Americans are high, but of course it's all about standardized testing and graduation rates and things like that.

The pressure and burdens of standardized assessments often fall on students rather than the system. A state level leader wondered, "How do we take the emphasis off of students and classrooms and put the emphasis on districts so that districts more intentionally place the most effective educators with the students who need them the most?" This comment draws attention to the need to effectively support underserved students through staffing and assignment decisions. Throughout this section, we have noted how the lack of will to address racism marginalizes students of color and fails to address critical policies and practices.

### **3. Burdens Borne by Leaders of Color**

Research has documented the many strengths of a more diverse educator workforce, but also the discrimination and the presence of de-professionalizing and disrespectful working conditions for educators of color, including racial discrimination, relegation to serving in disciplinary roles, and being overlooked for promotions. These factors contribute to a "push out" effect for educators of color, thereby impacting retention (Carter Andrews et al., 2019), and in Washington state, a lack of representation within the cadre of state and district leaders. Consequently, leaders of color often are either the only person of color working in their organization or have only a handful of other colleagues who are individuals of color. Additionally, these leaders of color are usually asked to take responsibility for organizing and shepherding the race and equity work within their organizations.

Being the only one, or one of few persons of color in spaces of educational decision-making, leaders of color unfairly are expected to know and represent diverse groups within organizations structured to uphold white normative perspectives. When the authors of this study were actively recruiting superintendents of color to participate, we were unable to identify a single Asian, Pacific Islander or Native Hawaiian school superintendent in the state's administrative database in the 2019-20 school year. We found a few Asian, Pacific Islander and Hawaiian leaders in other district level positions, in higher education, and state level organizations, but as reflected in the voice of one educator who serves on state education commissions, "I always think about who is at the table, and oftentimes I am probably the only Asian American." This fundamental lack of diversity in leadership was pointed out by a superintendent of color:

There are plenty of superintendents that are steeped in talking about equity and diversifying, and you know what they don't diversify? They don't diversify their cabinet. Their cabinet looks exactly the same as it did 10 years ago, and these are people that are supposed to be leaders in that area, or self-proclaimed leaders in that area. So, that's one of the ironies that I see.

This superintendent highlighted that increasing diversity of leaders of color needs to happen at all levels of the system. Leaders of color also repeatedly mentioned the challenge of leading organizations within a white culture that actively works against them. Leaders of color have the

added burden of worrying about how a majority white culture will perceive their leadership and potentially judge their actions more harshly. As a Native American leader explained, “...and any misstep, any miscommunication has the potential to be elevated or augmented in a way that is even more challenging to overcome.”

Doing the work of educational justice within white organizations is fraught with challenges, especially with few to lead the work. Several study participants discussed the frequent assignment of a person of color to lead an organization’s equity and diversity work. As a school superintendent of color explained, the responsibility for the work of educational justice belongs to everyone in the school community, not just a single person of color holding that position:

I had a real hang up about putting a black man or a black woman in an equity position, because that is par for the course. Everybody does that, and I knew that was going to be something that I did not want to replicate, but at the same time, I needed somebody who had the skills to do what we needed to do... I think this is important for districts to understand, is your equity, your titled equity lead cannot be your equity torch bearer... They have to be somebody that is walking side by side with everyone to build the capacity and build the understanding... But everyone doesn’t have the vocabulary, for one, they don't have the background, the knowledge, they're not familiar with the studies. And unless you are steeped in that, unless you have professional development and understanding on how to lead for equity, it becomes very difficult quickly.

The tension of appointing a person of color to be the diversity and equity lead within an organization is evident in this superintendent’s comments, as well as concern for how the message will be received regarding responsibility for the work. Leading for educational justice involves developing the capacity of white educators to engage in the work and help carry the load. A Black leader in a state non-profit organization explained the necessity of white educators’ participation:

I'm just saying, the complexity of this is white folks have to see themselves in this work too. It becomes a space where if we have 76% of our teachers in this country are white women and they can't find themselves in this work, it will never go anywhere. We will never do anything. It's not to say that you are to be the sole bearer of our 400 years of stuff. But you have got to see that every day you are in front of a child, that you are systemically either perpetuating the situation or you are systemically trying to change the situation.

Organizational change for educational justice requires that educators at all levels of the system participate in addressing inequities and in changing the system that perpetuates them.

### *Doing the Work of Racial Justice within White Organizations*

Leaders of color interviewed for this study described what doing the work of racial justice looks like in predominantly white organizations. They use a variety of strategies to identify problematic behavior and invite change. Within the Black Lives Matter movement of 2020, educators of color encouraged discomfort among their white colleagues. They dealt with push

back from those who didn't feel comfortable dealing with the topic of racial justice. One Black district administrator said bluntly, "I don't care, personally, I don't care if you feel comfortable or not, because the reality is, that every single day we're seeing more and more Black people being killed on the streets, and no one's doing anything about it." Disruption was a strategy identified by multiple participants engaged in this kind of leadership work (i.e., social justice leadership). A Black leader in a non-profit explained the work within her organization:

So every step of the way people of color had to be literally disrupting every decision that was being made and be very bold with those conversations. And many, many times things will be said in staff meetings that stung a little bit, but you had to go do that. If we didn't do those things, we would never be where we are today.

Another leader of color in a state agency described how she was very direct but also acted as a mirror to staff, so they potentially could "see" in a new way:

I want you to see, "here's what you did and here's what you espoused, but this is how it was received. This is the behavior that was happening," and then moving them, like the preferred behavior. "What could we do with the behavior that is something that's tangible and embed that into the way we do meetings now, so it doesn't happen again?" That felt doable by the group, not just like I was labeling them or complaining or having an emotional reaction.

Other leaders of color described how white staff had difficulty finding themselves in the work because there was not a mechanism for them to say, "this is what I do." Rather the process of organizational change requires white educators to deeply reflect on what is happening within their own organization and what it would mean to change how they do their own work. For some, push back came in the form of passive aggressive emails or side talk. As a Black district administrator described, you can't "tell a Black person what they are saying is offensive to you. That's too racist, but you can tell the person next to you."

Several leaders of color spoke with clarity about the work not being about replacing white educators, but rather "being unhooked from whiteness and whiteness as supreme, and as the only way of knowing and being... That you can both hate whiteness and love white people and that's real and that's okay." Finally, a leader of color suggested how discussions of race can be conducted in a sustainable way:

I truly don't believe that race conversations, race work needs to be this shaming, guilty kind of conversation. I truly believe that it can be pleasure work, that it can be joy work. That when we get to a space where we actually can have those conversations, where we're seeing each other for who we are, that, that it's really meaty work that's sustainable for us getting to the things that we all want for our communities.

For leaders of color, doing the work of racial justice within white organizations often meant unsettling conversations with white colleagues, but they also found it to be a place where progress could be made.

### *The Emotional Labor and Costs of Doing Justice Work*

Leaders of color talk about the emotional labor of doing justice work. Being able to name the work of unpacking racism as emotional labor was helpful to one state agency leader, who explained, “[It] helps, being able to have language for a thing that I knew at a gut level, but I couldn't always articulate...” Some educators of color have felt that they had to norm themselves within their white institutions, and literally check their culture and beliefs at the door. To advance racial equity, caucuses are sometimes created as spaces for white educators and educators of color to do this work separately and together. But leaders of color acknowledged that even in those spaces, care must be taken to prevent trauma to staff. A district level administrator described procedures that aren't helpful, and created self-protective strategies to survive within a system that is slow to acknowledge racism:

When a staff of color says they are experiencing something, or they've had something really obvious happen to them, and the response is like, here fill out this report, and we'll figure out how to address it. That is not going to solve the issue. It doesn't help. So yeah, there's a lot of layers to that... I created my own inner circle, which provides a cocoon in a lot of ways. And I do have support from my direct supervisors, but at the end of the day, I'm still a Black person who still has to figure out a way to make my presence and voice heard.

Changing the educational system so that leaders of color can thrive is essential to the work of educational justice, as is increasing their representation at all levels of the system.

#### **4. The Challenges of State Level Organizations Leading for Educational Justice**

In this section, we examine the multi-dimensional nature of educational justice through the lens of state level organizations and policy making. Addressing equity, diversity and anti-racism at the state level is complex because it involves understanding issues at multiple levels of the system and across a broad sector of agencies, associations and organizations that govern and support educators, children and families. In 2009, the Washington State Legislature statutorily created the Educational Opportunity Gap Oversight and Accountability Committee (EOGOAC) to address educational inequities. Despite this unique governing body, its members – who are primarily educators of color – indicated that until recently it has been very difficult for antiracist conversations to gain legitimacy in Washington state.

#### *The Siloed Work of State Level Agencies and Organizations Hinders Efforts*

Education, as outlined in the state's constitution, is the state's paramount duty. Yet schools are required to address issues that go beyond the education of children. This work involves the coordination of services from a variety of state agencies and organizations. Ideally, these entities would work in tandem, aligning and coordinating their efforts. However, as a state policy maker described, often this is not the case:

The education sector is in this unique space where all of these inequities from all of the other sectors are coming through our doors. The fact that policies are not aligned across housing and health and workforce and transportation, et cetera, it means that the people in the education sector are fighting against all the impacts and the conditions that have been created by that lack of alignment in history in trying to serve children, and it is making their mission incredibly difficult.

Unfortunately, services intended to support the well-being of children and youth are often siloed within and among agencies which compete for resources, further reducing their capacity to assume joint responsibility. For schools and teachers on the frontlines, lack of systems of support can have a direct impact. Educators in schools are expected to address issues that they have not been professionally trained to do. A state policy maker explained, “We ask them to be a counselor, we ask them to feed kids, we ask them to make sure all of those [needs in] Maslow's Hierarchy are fixed first. Even, I think about COVID. We're asking them to fit masks, we're asking them to be medical professionals...”

According to some, Washington’s populist traditions resulted in a fragmented state educational system that contributes to a multitude of agencies with overlapping responsibilities and siloes of policy. Additionally, in a system where public schools are primarily governed by locally elected school boards, state officials are often hesitant to act or intervene. Examples provided by a state education leader included interaction between OSPI and the state’s nine educational service districts (ESDs), remarking about “How nine ESD's could be so different from each other, different mindsets and business models.” Other study participants expressed frustration at the state’s response during the pandemic when most decisions were pushed to the local level. One state level educator of color described what she’d been told:

‘Well we're a local-control state, so we can't require the districts do community engagement in their reopening process.’ Well then, you're going to get a different type of engagement across all 295 districts. It's something in between everybody doing their own thing and state dictating and mandating.

The lack of alignment and messaging from state agencies, associations, and organizations about issues of educational justice also creates barriers to school districts trying to do the work in local contexts. A superintendent of color explained how the Washington Education Association (WEA), and other organizations need to engage more directly in this work:

I believe that there needs to be that consistent message coming from the teacher unions about the importance of equity, and if they do their job in having the conversations and putting in the articles, and having that at their conferences and sending out the e-communications, and all of that around equity, then it takes away the argument of some of our teachers on “Why are we doing this?” Well, they are hearing it from us, but are they hearing it from the associations? Are they hearing it from the university programs? How is it tied in? Students are coming out to these programs and there is not an alignment around that piece. It makes it more challenging.

Frequently, state level leaders mentioned the importance of schools and districts working directly with community-based organizations (CBOs) in addressing the needs of children and families. A Latinx state leader envisioned breaking down the barriers to allow CBOs to interact with families and determine what they need in terms of structure and support, and by asking questions such as:

“How is the mental health in their family? What are the pitfalls? Are they behind on rent?” There are so many other barriers that are keeping these kids from being really productive. It [involves] trust, and it has to be a real trust that the schools can trust us with their kids, and we can trust that they're trying to change institutional racism that may be in their system.

Many study participants described how agencies, organizations and associations need to be working with community-based organizations to address inequities within the system because they are often known as a trusted organization with the community. A state level educator talked about how encouraged and hopeful she was to see the small community-based organizations that have banded together, saying, “We're tired of sitting at your table. We're making our own.” This comment reflects the disconnection and lack of communication among agencies and organizations tasked with serving children and families.

#### *State Level Organizations Lack Capacity to Address Systemic Racism, and Well-intentioned Leaders are Unprepared to Lead for Educational Justice*

State level agencies, associations and organizations hold considerable influence in the state, yet lack capacity to address issues of educational justice. In part, this is because they were originally designed to serve white educators and their families. To this day, many of these entities continue to be led by white educators, and even the structural elements of leadership appointments to various education boards and organizations privilege the selection of white educators. The state's current administrative code outlines the process for the selection of elected and appointed board positions, but it takes intentionality on the part of leaders to diversify state boards and agencies. For example, if the state associations' selections for a state board come from within their own membership, and that membership is overwhelmingly white, a person of color is unlikely to be selected as the representative. The structural issue of administrative code regarding who serves on state boards would require legislative action to change. While there have been efforts to reshape state governing boards, both by professional associations and the Governor's Office, the larger issue is the underlying inequity of the organizational structure itself.

Washington state is filled with well-intentioned education leaders, many of whom are admittedly ill-prepared to lead anti-racist work. This leaves many state organizations and associations in the nascent stages of developing an agenda for educational justice. As one leader of a state association explained: “I would consider it a great organization, but maybe [it] took a passive reactive approach to issues in the state. And for lack of any better terminology, I would say the organization itself was very white, male dominated.” He went on to say:

So how [do we] identify, dismantle, rebuild systems that are equitable for kids? That's never language that's been spoken. So as an education system, we can do all sorts of lip service around racial literacy and equity and all that. But it takes leadership, takes trust in relationships that are in the building long enough to move the adult culture, and to frankly, dismantle those horrific systems that have been in place for decades.

The leader of a state agency described his organization in the following way:

We've got a lot of interest and a lot of willingness, and like most school systems, not a very good bench of staff to pull from. We're a predominantly white organization trying to educate ourselves as well, so I definitely don't represent us in any way as experts or models to be looked to, but certainly, we're trying to adopt a forward-leaning learning stance.

Study participants acknowledged the need to commit to encouraging, supporting and recruiting educators of color into state level leadership positions:

I do think that we need to do a job as school district leaders, superintendents, principals, assistant superintendents, I think we need to do a better job of really, really looking for talent and potential, for example, in our teachers of color or in our principals of color, who might have potential to become superintendents.

State leaders were asked about the kinds of things they were doing inside their organizations in terms of professional learning or the reallocation of resources to address inequities. Their responses suggest a slow process involving capacity building among staff. Nearly all described professional development, hiring consultants to work with their boards, book studies to build culture and understanding, and trying to take a critical look at policies and practices. Some found staff members who were not open to what equity looked like, and therefore wouldn't be able to recognize how inequities show up in their work or programs. An administrator of color explained:

First, just building the capacity for, "Are you open to investigating and examining?" And the second thing was actually application. "So now that you are aware, how do you apply some of the things you're learning, to actually create a different way of being in your system, in your program, in your department?"

Several state leaders of color expressed incredulity that educators themselves often aren't willing to grow and change, as one described:

And that has struck me as the oddest thing in education that as educators, that we're not committed to continually growing and that we got to get it right the first time. It's like, we can't try this new thing because we can't determine beforehand if it's going to be perfect, even though what we have isn't working all that great for everybody.

Another explained, "We default back to what is easier for the adults in the system, which I think we do a lot, so... and none of those things are easy. That's the hard thing. ...These are things you never really... they're not fully realized. You have to keep working on them." This default of inaction or resistance sometimes includes patronizing beliefs that white educators know what is

better for children than the families and communities of the children they are seeking to serve. Early efforts to change student and community involvement had been taken up by several state agencies and organizations, but it has been a slow process.

### *Need to Amplify Student and Community Voice in State Policy Making*

Leaders of several state boards described more deliberate efforts to center student voice. One way they have done this is by more actively involving their student board members and creating new spaces for them at the table. A state leader described reframing student positions such that board members would think of them as fellow board members first, and as students, second. This board changed their bylaws to allow for a student advisory vote and gave them the opportunity to vote first on issues. According to the director, this has “given them a little more voice and a little bit more power.” But as we found with leaders of color, these students carry a disproportionate burden in participation on boards because they often miss class to attend board meetings. Giving students more responsibility and decision-making power also requires a shift in mindset around students’ capacity to do much more than what we are expecting of them. A lack of belief in their capabilities reflects implicit, and sometimes explicit bias, and harms students, particularly students of color, and students from English learner backgrounds. A state agency leader described it this way:

...you can find examples of it in the language that we use at the state. It is just a through line, this whole belief in the capacity of students as learners, is something that we have to shift that idea from the state level to the classroom level, and I think it comes with moving big rocks in our system that we have just been complacent around for a long time.

In addition to more actively involving the students in state level decision-making, agencies and boards talked about rethinking how to engage the community. In the past, they would host community forums and events, but they weren't particularly successful in drawing families and communities of color. Now they are considering new avenues with social media, communications, and physically situating those meetings in community spaces. A state level educator who talked about how inequities are perpetuated when families and communities of color are excluded, spoke of a power shift, particularly with associations like the WEA and asked the question, “how do we get families at the bargaining table too, right? So that their voice is represented with the teacher's voice.”

Bold state level leadership to address educational justice will require more than tinkering around the edges. Reflecting on this past pandemic year, a state leader explained,

We have a lot of people who are not, they're not really in this “to roll up their sleeves.” And most of what I'm seeing are technical responses when what we need is adaptive leadership. And I'm sorry, when you're in a pandemic, a dual pandemic, actually a triple pandemic, you got a public health crisis, you've got 400 years of racism and you've got an economic disaster that's looming. You cannot respond to systemic issues by tinkering around the edges.

Adaptive leadership does more than tinker around the edges; it requires reimagining the education system and who it is meant to serve. In the final section, we discuss what leaders of color describe as the challenge of a new vision for our education system, one that prioritizes children and families.

## **5. Need to Reimagine the Education System to Prioritize Children and Families**

In prior sections of this report, we have discussed barriers to educational justice that reflect historical discrimination, unwillingness on the part of leaders to name and address racism, the burden borne by leaders of color, and structural and organizational impediments to change. Leaders of color interviewed for this study uniformly spoke of the need to listen to and value the lived experiences of marginalized families, students with disabilities and families of color, and to engage with their communities. They describe an education system resistant to change and unwilling to address the needs of diverse students and communities. In order for them to thrive, the system needs to be reimagined in ways that center students and families.

### *Leadership and Decision-Making that Puts Students First*

Leadership is key for enacting systemic change, and our participants emphasize the need to alter decision-making practices. This begins with valuing the knowledge, experiences, and ideas of those most impacted by educational decisions: students and families. Our participants noted the difference between making decisions for others and making decisions together in authentic partnerships. Participants cited examples of how families and communities are not truly engaged, because those in positional authority think they know best. A district level leader of color described the goal in this way:

So, the goal is to really transform what we're doing to make sure that we are built around the co-design with our community on what that can look like. It's how do we do that co-design when we are in that position of authority. And typically, that's not what we do. We just get the feedback, and then the community waits for us to push out whatever policy it is, because we have all the answers in education, and we're going to tell you what you should be doing instead of asking what we can do to change our system to improve and go beyond what it was originally designed for.

Instead of gathering feedback from communities, this leader described co-designing policies with the community. A leader of color in a state level organization discussed how white, male leaders in predominantly white communities may not have a sense of urgency about discussing issues of race and racism, noting that they believe “it’s uncomfortable, and what does it have to do with math or reading?” This stands in contrast to the view of leading with race first and altering leadership behavior in support of the community. A leader of color explained, “Instead of being in front of the community, we’re trying to reposition to be in the back where our hands are on the back of the community. Before, we were in the lead of everything.”

This kind of leadership is also needed for families of students with disabilities. Disability educators want families and students present in school spaces to share their stories and to

provide opportunities for educators learn about ableism and inclusive practices. A leader who advocates on behalf of students with disabilities explained, "It's been wonderful to have students share their own experiences of disability identity and what inclusion looks like..." She went on to say that the students most effected by decision-making are often not seen: "I mean, the irony is, I don't think that many of the higher-level education organizations actually see [these] students very often." Hearing directly from the children and families impacted by decision-making can be a powerful experience for everyone.

### *Listening to Build Trust and Engagement*

A first step toward educational justice is listen to the voices of those who have been excluded, to acknowledge the history of discrimination, to learn what these communities need, and then to act based on their direction. One leader of color summarized it this way: "Listen, learn, act, repeat." Another noted, "Do nothing without us." Yet another, "For us, by us."

This work begins, as a Black district administrator explained, with a recognition of the competence of the child's first teachers as parents and families:

For me, the level of trust in our families to actually be able to take care of their children... Families are the first child's teacher, that they are ultimately the only source of comfort they are going to have for their whole lives, and [that] schools are to have them for temporary time periods. Are we really able to build a partnership that's equitable and reciprocal, which involves trust? You have to trust. Families don't always have a lot of reasons to trust schools. This lack of trust is the result of years of harm experienced by families and communities of color within public education.

The act of listening requires building trust in mutually constructed spaces that make it easy for families to participate. Trust building takes time and intentional communication, particularly at the micro-level with teachers in classrooms. A parent advocate who has served on one of the state's ethnic commissions described it this way:

...people sometimes they don't trust, and you have to build that trust, and it takes time. That trust starts in the classroom with your teachers, teachers with their families on the ground, and then with the principal. And then it's like you notice them. I think there's a lot of opportunities, but we have to find out a way how to, number one, communicate clearly and transparently and effectively with simple language, whatever you want to communicate with the parents."

A Black school principal explained her process for diversifying community participation on the school design team:

When I first asked for just volunteers and who wants to be on this team, everybody's white, everybody, except maybe one or two people. And so I went back and said we can't do this. You know, we have 80% kids of color. I cannot be the only person of color on this committee. We have to figure this out. So we did, together we figured it out. And I said, "I think invitations, like this are not welcoming to people of color in the same way they are to white folks." So, let's figure out what else we have to do. Maybe we have to

just tap people on the shoulder and say, “I think you'd be great on this committee.” ... And we got a much more diverse group of people on that team. Because people wanted to do it, they just didn't see themselves there.

The principal went on to say that creating diverse community participation included thinking more flexibility about what families needed to be able to participate, such as bring their kids along or providing rides to the meeting. With the proliferation of digital platforms during the pandemic, there are even more opportunities for families to participate virtually in meetings, without having to leave home. Decentering white perspectives is a necessary step for educational leaders to engage in this work with communities, as a white state level educational leader explained, “I don't want to sound simple-minded, but there's a lot of us that need to do a whole lot more listening and a lot less talking.” He went on to say that privileged families know how to navigate and work the education system to their advantage and that becomes a barrier to justice for all. The work of listening and valuing and engaging with children and families is the responsibility of educators at all levels of the system.

### *Funding a Student and Family-centered System*

Many educational leaders in the study called for a fundamental change in the state's funding system. They want a system that is based on the needs of students and their families, rather than a system focused on supporting the adults who work in the system. An equitable, student-centered education system would respond to the needs of families and provide a level playing field. This call for structural change also implies that academic and nonacademic support services are needed, some of which would extend beyond the school day. A participant working with communities of color at the state level said:

We're always seeing the need for those things we underfund, so school nurses, social workers, family engagement folks... So, I think that those basics of bridging that gap between families and schools that really contributes to many of the families that we're working with left feeling like everything is being put on them.

Finally, the pandemic brought issues of educational justice into sharp relief, and because our interviews were conducted under COVID protocols, we conclude with participants' reflections on leadership during this time of social and educational disruption.

### *Post-script: Learning from COVID-19*

Most of our study participants reflected on how the pandemic has exacerbated and illuminated disparities in access to educational resources. One state level leader described the challenge of online learning:

We are hearing from communities where you've got intergenerational families who are living together in small spaces, with multiple kids, and so how do you support learning there? It just might be too noisy in your home, or you have the older child supporting younger children learning.

A school leader of color noted that the pandemic also highlighted inequities that existed for individuals of color who are working in schools, expressing surprise that several of the teachers in the school and a significant number of instructional assistants did not have access to the internet at home. This leader also noted many of those lacking internet access were individuals of color who were earning low salaries. A state level leader noted that while COVID-19 presents dangers for all, the challenges and risks were not shared equitably, stating:

I don't buy into the fact that we're all in this crisis together. We are in the same storm, but we're having very different experiences. And those who are in the battleship or the yacht are having a very different experience than those in the rowboat.

While the pandemic illustrated the existing inequities in educational resources, some participants noted that it served as an example of how quickly some system-level changes can happen under pressure in a crisis. A participant who works for a state level advocacy group explained this insight as follows:

It is way too easy in education to blame all of our issues on a lack of funding. And yes, we all could use more resources but if I've learned anything in the time of COVID it's that this is not a lack of resources issue. It's a lack of will. Because I have seen things happen in 48 hours that people were wringing their hands over for five years.

Attitudes reflecting a lack of will and trust are evident in decision-making that is divorced from the voices of children and families of color. The pandemic has exposed inequitable and vacillating decision-making practices around school closures, online learning and reopening plans, and reveal how some districts failed to consult those most impacted by the pandemic and failed to reach out to create a mutually workable solution with families. Even before the pandemic, one of the most persistent inequities has been access to a school environment in which every student feels loved, supported, seen and respected in their school. Research has shown that students need this to thrive and flourish, and the opportunity gap continues to widen as students feel they are never going to succeed academically or be able to fully access educational opportunities.

Distance learning during the pandemic also exposed examples of implicit bias and shaming in relation to families, and their access to technological resources. A particularly striking example occurred when some districts and schools have insisted on having digital cameras turned on during online learning, as a state policymaker explained:

Whose needs are being met by that? Are you imposing your white middle-class structures on students by that [policy]? Our kids, and for families of color, their home has been the one place that they've been safe and they haven't had the white gaze looking at them. And now it's in their homes. ... you've got kids who don't want you to know that they're calling in from the Safeway because that's where they have internet access. They don't want you to know that they're in some type of a homeless circumstance. And they have that right.

The question, “Whose interests are being served?” is frequently invoked by those seeking educational justice. In this report, we have highlighted challenges and barriers to justice from the perspective of educators in a variety of leadership positions. We conclude with a discussion of the recommendations from study participants for dismantling and rebuilding a more just and equitable system.

## Recommendations from Study Participants

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The views of study participants and the conceptual framing presented at the beginning of this paper align well as we consider how educational leaders understand efforts to advance justice and the formation of equitable education policy. In particular, we find Horsford, Scott and Anderson’s discussion of critical policy analysis informative. They write: “Perhaps more importantly, leaders should not get out ahead of their communities or make policy for their communities. Rather they should be networked with authentic community leaders and move toward change with their communities” (2019, p. 9). In this final section, we present recommendations as articulated by our study participants. We emphasize that these are their recommendations, summarized and presented as faithfully as possible by the study authors.

### 1) Prioritize and Address Inequities at All Levels of the System

For systemic change to happen, educational leaders at all levels of the system must prioritize the work of educational justice. For too long, educators have conveniently ignored these issues without accountability or transparency (Gorski, 2019). A superintendent of color explained what this looks like within a district system:

We have to have the board understand equity, what that means, and be committed, and we have to have the cabinet singing the same tune, and we have to have our principals understanding what the long-range plan is before we can really do what we need to do with teachers. But we can't wait... **We can't move at the pace of privilege** [*emphasis added*]. We've got to make sure that we are pushing the system, because if we're moving at the pace of privilege, it's never going to happen, because it's too uncomfortable.

Prioritizing educational justice involves empowering educators to embrace change and act. It requires continuous professional development, and engagement across agencies, departments and levels of the system to dismantle what doesn’t work.

#### *Empower Educators to Embrace Change and Act*

Educators at all levels of the system should be encouraged to ask questions like “why are these issues important to my community?” and then to figure out what the work of educational justice looks like in their specific context. What does it look like when there are very few students of color in my school, or when I am the minority voice in my building? As a Black principal described, “...what I really want is to get people thinking. And acting. Like you've read all the books, that's great. What are your actions? Let's try that. That didn't work. Okay, let's try

something else. Don't be afraid to act.” Beyond mere verbal affirmations, educators need to take action and show bold support, which includes offering back up for others when they get push back from some in the community.

Leading for justice means making time and space for educators to continuously learn through engaging in professional development and conversations (Capper, 2015, Scanlan, 2012), and to consider it a lifelong personal process. Activities that contribute to prioritizing equity and justice work include new learning opportunities, collegial relationships, and developing a growth mindset, all of which create the conditions for educators to do their very best work. This involves inviting educators and community members to utilize their own experiences as assets in conversations as they prepare to serve students who have a wide variety of experiences. Prioritizing the work of educational justice means continuing to champion it, as a district level leader described, “...in education, we're very good at doing things once... we're going to talk about equity one week or one month, and then we're going to address it next year at the same time. My intentionality is around making sure that this is something that we do all the time.”

### *Engage in Cross Agency, Organization and System Level Collaboration*

There is no room for territorial defensiveness or competition by agencies or organizations around the work of educational justice. While organizations play different roles in various parts of the system, a state level policy maker explained: “You just have to bust through your silos, and although it's additional work, you have to work with people from different areas. To say, ‘This strategy not only relates to education, but it's health and human services, it's the economy...’” To address racial inequities, leaders should prioritize cross agency work, particularly with community-based organizations that often operate outside conventional systems. Regarding labor associations, a state level leader of color described how no one gets a pass:

Like any institution, unions have their own institutional racism that they have to undo also. So I don't let them off the hook... I'm not anti-union, I'm coming in to say I want to partner with the Washington Education Association... Because they're the ones writing the rules on the conduct of teachers, so let's make sure that we're working together on that.

The work of educational justice presents an opportunity to learn and grow together through cross agency and organization work.

## **2) Engage in Critical Policy Analysis to Dismantle What Doesn't Work, and Act to Change It**

The Washington education system would benefit from a from a top to bottom critical analysis of policies and practices to address how well they work for diverse communities. Educators should be encouraged to question structures and policies established decades ago which no longer serve the community. A district administrator explained, “The schoolhouse – well intended though it maybe – is just not for everybody, whether it's when we have our holidays set, when we go to school, when we serve food, when we test...” Reviewing the impact of

decisions, policies or practices through an equity and justice lens should be part of the regular business of schooling. A state level leader of color described changing things on paper, and then follow them up with action: “People are [for], I call it ‘fluffy equity.’ People are very good at saying words on paper and not accompanying it with an action.” Changing the policies on paper must then be followed up with requisite actions. Educators use nice buzzwords and add-ons, land acknowledgements, and equity statements, but none of that has translated in the reopening process during this past year.

Critical policy analysis is particularly needed regarding Washington’s school funding policies and those surrounding the recruitment and retention of educators of color. In particular, funding formulas must have equity directly built in, rather than as an “add on” to basic education. Resource allocation to address the needs of historically underserved students is currently not a central concern of the state’s funding system, and results in an inequitable distribution of resources.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, critical analysis is needed to determine why policies to address the recruitment and retention of educators of color, some of which have been in place for decades, have done little to increase the diversity of the state’s educator workforce.

Beyond obvious shifts away from deficit approaches to teaching and learning, other areas for redress include rethinking curricular content and pacing, decentering whiteness (Paris & Alim, 2017), reconsidering the system of student credit hours, and standardized state testing. What would a decolonizing curriculum look like, and how might it go beyond cultural responsiveness? What would it mean to create a policy framework that intentionally addresses the opportunity gap? Are there interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary approaches to learning that should be considered rather than standalone ethnic studies courses? Could there be multiple pathways to demonstrate evidence of learning, or competency-based or mastery learning approaches? Are there approaches that support what communities need and want to know regarding how well their children are doing in school? Post-pandemic efforts will require attention to policies that support recovery and rebuilding in ways that wholistically support students and staff.

Additionally, it is essential to address the burden borne by educators of color and to support their flourishing at all levels of the system. A good place to start would be to create schooling spaces that are foundationally structured in care centered practices.<sup>4</sup>

### **3) Elevate Student Voice in Authentic Ways and Include Students in Decision-Making**

Amplifying the voices of students and making space for them involves finding new and different formats for students to share their stories of how policies directly impact them, whether it is police in schools, the impacts of truancy, or what it’s like to have an incarcerated parent. At the state and district policy level, education committees should consider having a student member

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<sup>3</sup> See report by David S. Knight and Marge Plecki, *Establishing Priorities for Education Finance Under Fiscal Uncertainty: Recommendations for Washington State Policymakers*.

<sup>4</sup> For examples of care centered practices, see *Spaces of Belonging: Learning With and From Black-Led Community Organizations and Community Members of Color*, by Shaneé Washington, Kaleb Germinaro, Kayla Chui, and Jessica Ramirez.

when they name their committee members. In some cases, this might mean changing the format of the committee appointment, in terms of length, and providing financial resources. As one state level leader explained, “I may get reimbursed if I drive to Olympia, but families and students don't.” In some cases, elevating student voice would involve providing protections for those where identification might put them at risk, such as immigrant and LGBTQ students.

Elevating student voice involves helping children and youth to see themselves as a leader from an early age. A state leader who works with students explained, “We've turned leadership into this thing, and our students of color specifically feel this – of this is our prototype of what a leader is. ‘Well, I'm not that.’” Educators need to find new ways to articulate an inclusive vision of leadership that includes children and youth as leaders in authentic ways.

#### **4) Create a Just and Equitable Child and Family Centered Education System**

Reimagining an education system where children and families, rather than adults, are at the center, would require a substantial shift in our understanding of equity and educational justice. It also requires considerable determination to accomplish and a fundamental restructuring of school resources. It would mean greater representation and opportunities for the voices of the many families and educators beyond the I-5 corridor. Nearly all study participants insisted that listening to and valuing the lived experiences of families and communities and finding ways to honor their engagement and participation was at the heart the work. A white state level educator explained what reaching out and building trust and listening would require:

I think a lot of us white people would really benefit from being in situations where we are the minority and just sitting there and listening, because there's a lot to learn. And there's a lot of brilliance that we have ignored in both Indigenous culture and Black and other cultures, in how community is centered and how things are done.

Educational justice is not possible apart from engaging with people who have experienced oppression by the system. Recent advancements in technologies and free translation services have opened new opportunities for engagement with families, and few excuses not to do so. Families and communities also benefit from school-based family support workers who have a different kind of relationship with the families, as a principal described:

The family support worker is a conduit that people go to when they don't want to come to the office to ask for help. That person has a different kind of relationship with families and so if we lose that, then we lose that connection. He is the one that they can say, “We need heating oil,” and they're not going to come to the principal to ask for that. But they feel safe with him to ask him that, and know that he's going to do everything he can to help. And so he can do a home visit, give them a ride to the doctor, they come to him with that kind of stuff, and that's really helpful. It's more than helpful, it's essential, honestly.

Family partnerships also can be strengthened through professional development provided to current educators and those in training. A deeper understanding of the forms of participation that are most valued by communities can help shift old paradigms. The importance of family

and community partnerships cannot be understated, if educators are genuinely seeking to address issues of educational justice.

The current education system does not work well for many students and their families. Instead of reverting back to old ways of schooling after the pandemic, we have an opportunity to consider different educational delivery systems. Crises disrupt the status quo and create opportunities for change. If we were to build a new system from scratch, how would we ensure that we didn't recreate the same system with the same inequities? This study provides direction as to where we might begin – by centering the work around children and families and building anti-racist principles into all aspects of education policymaking. The opportunity to reimagine a system is an opportunity that won't come again soon. We are in one such moment; now is the time for bold action and commitment.

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