



**Building Systemic Capacity for Racial Equity:
District-Union-University Partnering for Racial Equity**

December 2019

Partnering for Racial Equity Project:

Dr. Filiberto Barajas-López Dr. Ann M. Ishimaru Dr. Min Sun
with Ishmael Miller and Zach LeClair
College of Education
University of Washington

Marquita Prinzing
Center for Racial Equity, Seattle Education Association

Dr. Eric Anderson Dr. Keisha Scarlett Dr. Laura VanDerPloeg Dr. Concie Pedroza
Seattle Public Schools

Building Systemic Capacity for Racial Equity: District-Union-University Partnering for Racial Equity

Executive Summary

Introduction

Across the country, a wave of racial equity initiatives has emerged to address long-standing disproportionalities in discipline and other racial inequities in US public schools. At the forefront of these efforts and in support of Seattle Public Schools' (SPS) Racial Equity Policy 0030, SPS and the Seattle Education Association (SEA) developed a joint initiative in 2015 to develop and support Racial Equity Teams in cohorts of schools across the district. Despite the importance of such initiatives, the field of education has had little systematic data or inquiry about how equity teams approach their work and inform their progress. Our [Partnering for Racial Equity](#) research-practice partnership (PRE) – between SPS, the Seattle Education Association (SEA), and the University of Washington (UW) – is among the first in the nation to undertake systematic data collection and inquiry into these efforts to drive systemic improvements and inform efforts across the country.

This partnership between a school district, union, and university aims to support broader racial equity efforts in the district and use analyses of program implementation to inform efforts to foster educational justice. To accomplish these aims, the partnership has hosted regular meetings, developed new measures of practice and climate relevant to issues of racial equity, conducted mixed-methods analysis of Racial Equity Team (RET) implementation, and co-developed a theory of change grounded in a multi-level approach to policies and practices. This paper addresses key developments in systemic racial equity efforts in Seattle supported by the PRE, both qualitative and quantitative analyses of initial RET implementation, and next steps for continuing to build racial equity capacity and transformation in Seattle schools.

Partnership Accomplishments

Over the last 4 years, this unique partnership has played a key role in:

1. **Supporting the district in centering racial equity in policies and initiatives.** The partnership (among many efforts) has helped to disrupt conventional siloed work between different departments and initiatives and contributed to systemic alignment in bringing efforts to address racial inequities to the center of the district's strategies. Much of this shift is reflected in official district documentation, as Seattle has steadily built upon the foundation of its School Board Policy #0030 through both its Collective Bargaining Agreements and district Strategic Plans. These documents reflect an expansion of racial equity efforts across the district, from the steady rollout of RETs to schools in the district, to expanded supports for educators of color, like affinity groups, to re-evaluation of hiring practices to promote the recruitment and retention of educators of color.

2. **Working with data and developing a system of measures focused on racial equity.** Part of our partnership’s work has been to develop and pilot survey items related to key areas of practice that had not previously been measured as well as integrating the use of both qualitative and quantitative data to inform ongoing improvement in racial equity initiatives.
3. **Evolving the district theory of change to guide efforts to build capacity for equitable practice in the district.** District efforts were originally focused on foundational attitudes and beliefs of staff members, which steered initiatives towards efforts to change the “hearts and minds” of all individuals *prior* to other aspects of change. Through iterative analysis of staff perceptions and practices (including surveys, case studies, and administrative data), our approach to systemic change has become more multi-dimensional, and now addresses shifts in instructional practice and systems-level coordination as part of the overall theory of change.

Partnership Activities

For the past 4 years, our partnership has navigated these developments across multiple phases of work through iterative research, practice and continuous improvement. We first established the research-practice-partnership and sought to better understand and improve the RET initiative in relationship with the district and union. In our subsequent early implementation inquiry (2017-2019), we conducted school and district case studies, piloted an RET survey, and conducted quantitative analyses to develop new knowledge and practices about how district leaders, researchers, teachers, and other educators can collaborate via racial equity teams to catalyze multilevel changes. This summary highlights findings from those studies, many of which have already been incorporated into improvements to system-wide racial equity work.

In the upcoming phase (beginning in 2020), we will initiate codesign with educators and leaders drawn from schools with RETs as well as families and communities to continue to build culturally responsive practices, as well as measures and organizational conditions to support them.

Current Theory of Change

Our work aims to bridge equitable instruction with systems capacity-building to facilitate collective learning for equitable change in schools. Our updated framework includes four tenets, asserting that effective racial equity reform efforts should:

1. **Centrally focus on changing practice:** focus on educators’ instructional practice and actionable knowledge to work effectively with learners and their families, especially those directly impacted by educational injustices
2. **Leverage teacher leadership:** foster the capacity of educator teacher teams to leverage and develop the wealth of educators’ knowledge and practices within schools

3. **Undertake race-conscious inquiry:** embed race-conscious, iterative, problem-driven data inquiry and expand the forms of data and ways of using it in the reform process
4. **Foster collective systemic learning:** foster multi-level collective learning across classroom, school, and district levels to sustain systemic improvement.

Early Implementation Research Questions:

To understand early RET implementation, mechanisms, and influences across multiple levels of the system, we conducted a mixed-methods study from 2016-2018 to address:

1. How do schools with Racial Equity Teams (RETs) seek to address racial inequities in student experiences and outcomes?
 - a. How do schools with RETs work to build educators' practice to address racial inequities in classrooms and schools?
 - b. What RET characteristics, supports, and organizational conditions hinder or foster team efforts to shift policy and practice to foster greater racial equity?
2. How are RETs associated with student/adult perceptions and student outcomes?
 - a. How are RETs associated with student and staff perceptions of schools' climate/environment?
 - b. How are RETs associated with student test scores?
 - c. How are RETs associated with outcomes for students of color furthest from educational justice?

Mixed Methods of Early RET Implementation

To address these questions, we conducted mixed-methods analyses triangulating across: (1) district-wide RET Early Implementation survey data; (2) in-depth qualitative case studies of four schools with RETs embedded in a district-level RET initiative case study; and (3) district-wide quantitative analyses to estimate RET effects on school climate and student achievement. Together, our mixed methods analyses of early implementation suggested critical insights for refining partnership efforts to cultivate systemic racial equity and for integrating analytic processes across methods within RPP work.

The 2016-2017 RET Early Implementation Survey was completed by 559 educators in 32 schools with RETs, with the aim of illuminating RET practices and approaches, understanding their organizational conditions, and developing baseline data about culturally responsive practices and desired supports.

We used the results of the survey and district-level partnership deliberations to identify four schools for year-long qualitative case studies to deepen understanding of early RET implementation. The four focal schools (two elementary schools, one middle school and one high school) each had Racial Equity Teams established in the first or second year of the initiative and were purposively selected from different geographic regions of the district. They featured

different types of programs and RET foci identified in the survey (restorative discipline, family engagement, culturally responsive instruction and school-wide de-tracking). At each of the case study schools, we conducted interviews, observations, and documents analyses to identify school-specific and cross-case themes. We also collected and analyzed district documents, observation field notes from RET Institutes and workshops as well as research-practice partnership meetings and focus group data across two years.

Our quantitative analyses examined how RETs are associated with student perceptions of school climate, staff perceptions on working conditions, and student test scores from 2011-12 through 2017-18. We used district longitudinal data and applied an event study in a dynamic difference-in-differences framework. Our analysis compared the changes in the outcomes for RET schools before and after RET teams with the changes for schools that never had RETs during the same period. Our models controlled for students' race/ethnicity, home language, special education and advanced learner status, school contexts, and neighborhood socioeconomic status. School fixed effects account for time-invariant heterogeneity among schools. We also estimated effects separately for students of color furthest from educational justice.

Findings

The findings presented below draw from analyses of survey data, qualitative case studies, and climate and achievement data. Analyses of the 2016-2017 RET Early Implementation Survey suggested substantial variability between RETs in terms of their primary focus, ranging from restorative discipline, family engagement, and culturally responsive instruction to school-wide de-tracking initiatives, policy analyses, grading practices, and mentoring for African American students. Despite this broad range of approaches to addressing racial equity, most teams used their time to build foundational understandings of race and equity concepts through professional development opportunities for their staff. Reviewing data related to disparities and improving instructional practice were the least reported activities of RETs across all three cohorts. This mirrored the focus of district trainings, which focused on teaching teams language and concepts specific to race and equity prior to addressing other facets of change. These findings raised key questions about the extent to which teams were being supported in translating theory into practices that affect student learning, a focus which the team of union-based teacher leaders subsequently sought to address.

We also examined the organizational conditions within which RETs were operating. Although these 32 schools reported relatively conducive conditions for learning about racial equity, we also found that educators of color experienced their school's climates as significantly less conducive to such learning.

To deepen our understanding of the opportunities and challenges identified in the survey, our in-depth cross case findings highlighted key themes in the work and potential impacts on the overall school: (1) RETs were fostering foundational racial literacies and explicit conversations about race and equity, a major shift from the dominant race-evasive culture of schools; (2) teams

identified the need for guidance and expertise in translating theory and racial literacies into instructional and schooling practices; (3) teams perceived principal support, access to all-staff professional development time, and sponsorship as critical to their ability to engage the broader school community in racial equity work; and (4) teams highlighted several key barriers to their ability to make change, from resistance from other educators in their buildings to insufficient in-house expertise and autonomy to address institutional and systemic sources of inequities.

We triangulated these qualitative findings with quantitative analyses. The barriers and challenges to implementation identified in our qualitative analyses suggested limited early-cohort RET impacts on student- and school-level outcomes. Indeed, findings from the quantitative analyses revealed no systemic patterns of RET effects on student average perceptions on school climate, teachers' average perceptions on working conditions, and school average test scores. Although at the aggregate of RET cohorts we did not see statistically significant patterns, the case studies encouraged us to look more closely at the variation in practice across individual schools to identify promising practices as a starting point for co-design. Moreover, our quantitative analyses also lack more proximal measures of RET impacts, such as measures that capture teachers' culturally responsive practices. Developing and validating new measures then became one of the foci for the next stage of our partnership.

Implications

Despite the barriers to implementation, our case study and RET survey findings illuminated seven characteristics or conditions in which RETs perceived effectiveness in achieving their stated aims to address inequities in their schools. Such teams:

- Engaged in explicit race and equity talk within *and beyond* their teams;
- Cultivated trust as part of a community of practice to engage in racial equity work;
- Accessed expertise to leverage racial literacies towards developing innovative equity-focused practices;
- Had principals who sponsored their work and provided regular access to the full staff and resources;
- Shared leadership with school-based and community-based members/entities;
- Addressed both individual-level educator practice *and* organizational policies and practices implicated in inequities;
- Recognized the need to differentiate supports to account for the broad range of knowledge, skills and expertise in their school-community.

As a new phase emerges in our partnership, we are continuing to evolve our theory of systemic change to reflect the continuing balance between top-down accountability from the district/union, bottom-up leadership from the RETs, and the “horizontal” influences of other related equity initiatives in the district. We anticipate continued: (1) collaboration on developing a system of equity measures, with a particular focus on student, family, and staff survey

measures; (2) partnership to refine, align, and improve district racial equity work; and (3) participatory design work to support schools with RETs in evolving their practices to help realize educational justice.