



Both in-and out-of-school settings have the potential to reduce inequities in children and youth's opportunities and experiences. Yet too often, inequity is compounded across these settings, with students from historically marginalized backgrounds being served by the least resourced schools and also having less access to high-quality and enriching out-of-school-time activities.

—From [*How Do Districts Implement Equity in Afterschool and Summer Programs*](#)

I. Introduction

Achieving equity in education—that is, ensuring every student has the resources and tools they need to succeed—has become a key issue for the nation's schools. Equity doesn't apply just to classroom learning, however; it matters in afterschool, summer, and other out-of-school-time (OST) programs, too. Yet while research on equity in the OST sector in general is growing, equity in OST programs provided by school systems has received less attention from researchers.

This knowledge gap became particularly noticeable in the pandemic's wake, as school districts nationwide, aided by unprecedented federal relief funding, began to see their afterschool and summer programs with new eyes, viewing them as a vehicle to help students recover from instructional loss and cope with the stresses of the last few years.

To help build the knowledge base, University of Virginia researchers, funded by The Wallace Foundation, looked at both how school districts from around the country with strong commitments to classroom equity have approached equity in their OST programming and what challenges they have faced integrating their equity efforts into those programs. Their report, [*How Do Districts Implement Equity in Afterschool and Summer Programs*](#), found that districts promoted equity in a number of ways, from making programs more accessible to providing content in sync with student needs. At the same time, district leaders report that they could be doing a better job of incorporating school day equity goals and strategies into their OST programs and strengthening partnerships with community organizations. Further, greater efforts could be made to purposefully design out-of-school-time programs to meet the specific and diverse needs of the student groups identified in districts' equity efforts.

This brief summarizes a study led by researchers at the University of Virginia. See the last page for full team.

II. Methodology

For the study, the research team selected 10 entities representing nine communities (seven large school districts and three intermediary organizations that partnered closely with large districts) considered to be leaders in the effort to promote educational equity. Four questions guided their inquiry:

1. What does equity look like in the OST (afterschool/summer) programs provided by equity-minded districts?
2. What challenges do the districts face integrating their equity goals and efforts into their OST programs?
3. What actions could districts take to meet these challenges?
4. What further research studies are needed to better inform policy and practice relevant to expanding equity in district-based OST programs?

In 2021 and early 2022, the researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 59 people from the selected communities—a mix of district officials, school personnel, and program/intermediary administrators and staff members.

III. Findings

A. What does OST equity look like in these districts?

1. *Focusing on a broad swath of children and teens historically marginalized by school systems*, including people of color, students experiencing housing or food insecurity, English Language Learners, and those who identify as LGBTQIA. Communities focused their equity efforts differently depending on the populations of students their districts served.
2. *Making programs “accessible” not just “available.”* Districts prioritized access to programs by providing transportation, partnering with outside organizations to address transportation challenges; offering programs for free or offering fee waivers; giving funding to participating teens who otherwise would have to work to support families; and making enrollment easier, through one-stop-shop forms for all district programs, for example, or dropping enrollment requirements altogether.
3. *Aligning program content and staffing with student interests and needs.*

Program content: Districts noted the value of soliciting input about desired programming from students and families and aligning programs with student interests, including social justice and ethnic studies. Districts also mentioned:

- Providing age-appropriate homework help (i.e., literacy for younger students, academic support for middle schoolers);
- Offering programs that fill important needs—enrichment activities such as fine arts/music lessons in high-poverty schools, or programs to broaden the reach of important pursuits, such as chess for girls or STEM for under-represented groups;
- Making sure programs are culturally responsive; and
- Sub-contracting with local organizations that have expertise in working with specific populations of students or running specific types of programs.

Program staffing: A district and an intermediary organization highlighted supporting staff of color through affinity groups and creating combined positions that allowed them to provide full-time positions to school staffers. Others brought in eighth graders and high school students to do service learning or take on paid positions.

4. *Putting funding where it’s needed.* For example, one district created a partnership between a well-resourced and an under-resourced PTA. Others are targeting funding to needed services, such as social and emotional learning in summer programs or hiring staff and specialists focused on diversity, equity and inclusion.
5. *Engaging families.* These efforts can include providing translation services for non-English speakers, soliciting parent input in programming, offering virtual meetings to make it easier for working parents to engage with the school or program, going door to door in communities to enroll kids in programs, and providing family services ranging from free meals to adult education, such as GED classes for parents.

B. What challenges did these highly equity-minded districts face in pursuing equity in their OST efforts?

1. *School-OST connections.* The most frequently discussed challenge was the disconnect between school-day equity efforts and OST programming, with OST being overlooked in districts’ equity

What does an equity-rich district look like?

How did the researchers determine what might characterize a strong educational equity effort by a school district? They reviewed empirical research as well as equity-assessment tools used by school systems and out-of-school-time programs, and they considered several other factors they determined were important to educational equity. From this, they drew up a list of seven broad areas of action school districts could take to advance equity, with specific indicators for each area. They then reviewed districts' websites for evidence of the indicators.

The table below lists each area and examples of its indicators.

| Equity Area | Equity Indicator |
|---|---|
| Physical and Contextual Landscape | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Makes efforts to achieve classroom integration when students self-segregate in the classroom (e.g., teams for contests, groups for instruction, or other forms of classroom organization) • Expresses the value of and integrates the assets of school, home, and community so that everyone can engage from positions of strength as equals |
| Systems and Administration | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has an easily accessible mission statement that clearly articulates equity goals • Has a policy-based, formalized process to investigate student and family reporting of discrimination or bias (in instruction, discipline, etc.) • Has strategies/policies to address disparities |
| Teaching and Learning | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultivates teachers who invest in and take personal responsibility for student success (e.g., meeting with students before/after school to support them, engaging in professional development to learn how to “teach” culturally and linguistically diverse students, and embracing student success and their failures as their own) • Provides teachers with and encourages the use of equity-focused or culturally responsive curricular materials • Encourages and supports teachers to socially and academically empower students |
| Social-Emotional Learning and School Climate | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses social-emotional learning as a framework to examine the importance of the range of adult and student identities and assets, reflect on and appreciate diversity, and foster inclusive environments • Provides meaningful ways for students, families, and community partners to be active partners in the planning and implementation of social-emotional learning and play a role in district decision-making |
| Professional Development | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides opportunities for staff at all levels and in all roles (teaching and non-teaching staff) to obtain training regarding districts' educational equity priorities and concerns relevant to specific populations • Provides staff members with training to increase their effectiveness in working with diverse populations • Integrates knowledge and content from diversity, equity and inclusion professional development into the school curriculum |
| Family Engagement | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has a system in place to gather input from all families • Creates opportunities for family participation (e.g., dinner nights, parent informational nights, flexible schedules) • Has trained parent-community liaisons, family coordinators, or similar staffers • Provides transportation for families that need it |
| Community Connectedness | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has people in positions of power who reflect the cultural or ethnic diversity of the community • Has translators on staff • Uses nontraditional means to engage with the community, such as home visits or events at local community centers (e.g., churches, cultural centers) |

initiatives. The administrative silos in which equity and OST offices were housed in many districts often hampered purposeful planning for how to use OST to advance districts' equity goals.

partners said that inconsistent communication on district-wide approaches inhibited them from closely integrating school-day curriculum and practices into the OST programs.

2. *School-community partnerships.* Partnerships with the community organizations that help carry out programs are often not strong enough. Researchers noted lots of variability among partnership models. Some community-based organizations enlisted as

3. *Funding.* Lack of and disjointed funding for high-quality programs for all who need it is a persistent problem, cited by interviewees across the board. Many factors are at play here, including that programs for historically marginalized students who do not

attend Title I schools were ineligible for some sources of financial support, such as federal Title I and 21st Century Community Learning Center funding, that districts often rely on for OST programming. Districts themselves often do not allocate enough to OST programs, interviewees said. Uncertainty also surrounds what will happen with pandemic-introduced programming that was supported by federal COVID-19 relief funding once that funding ends.

4. *Programmatic challenges.* Access to OST programs remains a top challenge. When the number of OST slots is limited, decisions must be made about which students should be given priority enrollment. This can at a minimum sustain and at worst amplify existing inequities. In some cases, a lack of sufficient space for programs in school buildings limited the capacity to serve more students. Further, districts often experience high staff turnover related to the low pay offered to OST personnel, making it difficult to recruit and retain qualified workers, and thus undermining staff-youth relationships, which are known to be a major contributor to youth well-being. Although OST programs may have adopted social-emotional practices like “opening circles,” OST staff members generally did not have access to the professional development and training on social-emotional learning that was offered to school personnel.
5. *Leadership.* Top-down approaches did not always provide flexibility for individual schools and programs to respond to the needs of their specific communities and to what families say they need and want. District and school leaders also need training and support for how to design policies that prioritize equity. Although districts were selected to participate in the study because of their identified, prioritized equity efforts, not all district and school leaders were equally committed to equity, and while flexibility was seen as important, a strong commitment from the top was also needed. Another barrier cited was leadership turnover at the district level.

IV. Recommendations

Based on what they heard, the research team offers recommendations.

School and district leaders should consider:

- Integrating school-day equity supports into OST programming, such as professional development opportunities, culturally responsive/sustaining programming, and mental health supports;
- Identifying opportunities to capitalize on new partnerships, spaces, and routines that emerged during COVID (such as OST tutoring and technology support to students);
- Focusing more on integrating districts’ equity efforts into OST programs;
- Partnering more directly with local community-based organizations; and
- Clearly communicating the district’s commitment to equity and its equity goals, but also providing flexible structures for school and OST program leaders to identify needs within their own communities.

Funders and district leaders should consider:

- Providing support for more partnerships between districts and local community-based organizations and/or intermediaries, including resources such as space and financial support, greater communication, and the inclusion of the community organizations in districts’ decision making.

Funders should consider:

- Looking for ways to help communities sustain programs that were implemented with federal relief funds but that are at risk of being dismantled as these dollars disappear.

This brief summarizes findings from a study about equity in out-of-school-time programs run by school districts. The researchers who carried out the study, based at the University of Virginia’s Youth-Nex Center, are: Valerie Adams-Bass, Daisy Camacho-Thompson, Nancy L. Deutsch, Michael Lyons, Ashlee L. Sjogren, and Abigail Amoako Kayser, with contributions from Kimalee Dickerson and Latisha Ross. The full research report is [How Do Districts Implement Equity in Afterschool and Summer Programs? A Report to the Wallace Foundation](#). The study was commissioned by The Wallace Foundation, and the brief was written by Cassandra West.
<https://doi.org/10.59656/YD-OS3009.001>