ADVANCING EQUITY IN SCHOOLS
FROM REPLICATING INEQUITIES TO ELIMINATING THEM

Accelerate Institute®

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“To promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access”

The United States Department of Education’s mission is one that is echoed by countless schools across the country. In order for all students to have equal access and to achieve at a globally competitive level, their school system needs to be equitable at every level. It needs to meet students where they are and ensure that they receive the necessary supports to be adequately prepared for college, career, and civic life. Yet, our current school system is not set up to be fair.

Local, state, and federal policies and practices have a tremendous impact and ripple effect on our communities and life trajectories. These policies and practices are based on choices that people make, and the biases that are present within them, and can have lasting effects for individuals and groups of people, particularly people of color. The segregation that we see in our communities across the country came to be through a set of discriminatory systemic actions: racial zoning, the demolition of integrated neighborhoods, government-sanctioned segregated public housing, and banks and real estate agencies that would not sell suburban homes to African-Americans. People of color are less likely than white people to have health care coverage, particularly in states that have chosen not to expand Medicaid. There are significant disparities in quality of health care and in health outcome data across groups. And incarceration rates do not mirror our country’s demographics. These disparities have become so embedded within our society and culture, that many don’t realize that they are there, or that they came about through choices that adults made.

Schools, too, replicate the biases and inequities that we see in broader society. Gaps in opportunities exist outside of school and before children arrive to their classrooms. But newer research is confirming what we already knew: that schools, rather than minimizing gaps, further widen them. Schools, or rather, the adults in schools, have the power to exacerbate inequities by the choices they make on which students are sorted where – into higher- or lower-level classes, or which students are given suspensions. These choices have lasting repercussions on student outcomes.
FROM REPLICATING INEQUITIES TO ELIMINATING THEM, CONTINUED

These inequities can be found across all levels of our educational system: from the national level, to the state level, to the district and individual school level. At the state level, for example, funding inequities can have a negative effect on the resources and educational opportunities that districts and schools are able to provide their students. Although some states have made positive changes to their funding formulas, there are still many states where districts that serve high concentrations of low-income students and students of color receive less funding than those that serve whiter, more affluent students.\(^5\) At the district and school level, Black and Latinx students are less likely to be given access to advanced coursework, such as that in gifted and talented, Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), and dual enrollment programs.\(^6\) The root cause varies – the school may not offer any advanced courses, or a counselor or administrator may inequitably assign students to higher-level courses – but they all hinge on a set of systems and adult choices that leave certain students out.

Advocacy work must continue to change policies at the state and federal level, so that districts and schools have equitable access to resources and supports. But there also needs to be a shift in how leaders and educators think about equity within schools. Every school, regardless of its demographic or socioeconomic composition, should be focused on giving students the individual support they need to reach their potential. Equity work, then, cannot be limited to a simple program or practice. Instead, everything that happens during a school day should be done through an equity lens, requiring schools to shift from changing student behavior and mindsets toward changing systems and adult mindsets. For schools to create an equitable education for children, they need:

1. Systems, structures, and adult mindsets that align to the expectation that all students will achieve.
2. A positive, relationships-based culture that fosters student belonging and is conducive to high levels of achievement.
3. Instruction that centers on what (and which) students learned, with supports to make high achievement possible.

Years of research from high-performing schools has shown that with the right leader and the right systems in place, it is possible to give students an equitable education. We have plenty of examples that it is possible, and we know which systems are key. In this report, we will share how we focus on changing systems and adults to transform schools so that students can achieve and thrive.

\(^5\) The Education Trust, Funding Gaps 2018. (February 2018).
THE INTERSECTION OF LEADERSHIP AND SYSTEMS

Transformational Leadership Building Blocks (TLBBs) are the entry point for changing systems

Change starts with the right leader. An effective principal, in partnership with the school leadership team, creates the culture and instills practices that translate into ongoing gains in student achievement and an equitable school environment.

“Advancing equity is not a part of the work, it is the work. It starts with school leaders at the top, making a bold statement that schools are social change ecosystems that exist to close inequities in order to create a more just world. To reverse decades of systemic oppression, we need to break down systems and rebuild them with equity at the forefront. Doing that requires honesty, commitment, and an unwavering belief that it’s the most important thing for kids.”

— Katie Kirley, Executive Director, Steel City Academy (Gary, IN)

In our leadership studies, we have identified nine competencies, or “Transformational Leadership Building Blocks (TLBBs),” that are integral to a leader’s ability to implement meaningful school change.

Principals who “get it” understand the myriad complexities and challenges of leading in a historically underperforming, under-resourced school and community, and are ready to agree to making necessary changes to advance student achievement. They must be goal-oriented, strategic thinkers who can plan, prioritize, and enact strong and efficient systems, structures, and processes for their schools. They need to possess a clear understanding of effective instruction
and the learning standards that guide it. They must be able to make decisions that align to their instructional vision and coach others to improve their instructional practice. Beyond content and instructional knowledge, principals must possess the dispositions to lead. They must have exceptional communication and relationship skills. They must set a standard for professionalism, be self-aware about their own strengths and weaknesses, and have sufficient confidence to learn from coaching. Finally, they must have the resilience to overcome the inevitable obstacles that change agents and strivers for excellence always face. This last disposition is especially critical, given that lasting school improvement happens over time, and stability in school leadership is inextricably tied to ongoing success. Just as schools are continuous works in progress, so are leaders themselves. Truly transformational leaders continue to develop and refine their abilities in the Building Blocks.

The Accelerate Framework guides equitable systematic change

Effective schools are those that have adopted systems that set themselves up to be healthy, safe environments that are culturally relevant and centered on student learning outcomes. The right school leader can transform an ineffective school into one that leverages systems to advance equity. In these schools, there is a commitment to continuous learning of cultural knowledge and contexts, high expectations for students, data usage to discover and track disparities in academic and disciplinary trends, nurturing and caring for others, and a diverse, culturally responsive staff that are developed through observation and feedback.

Through our extensive studies into the key processes and practices of high-performing schools serving low-income students and students of color, we have developed The Accelerate Framework to guide schools through the systematic transformation process. The framework was tested and refined at the Alain Locke Charter School — one of the top-performing charter elementary schools in Chicago and now a nationally recognized demonstration school—using technology incubator theories of change management.
The Accelerate Framework consists of six main objectives necessary for school success, and each objective contains crucial “drivers” that guide school teams in the systematic implementation of each objective. Drivers build on each other in complexity and higher-order strategies. Initial drivers, which focus on setting values and expectations, must be implemented effectively in order to gain traction on later drivers, such as behavioral interventions and staff accountability.

Shaping policies, systems, and adult mindsets through Accelerate Framework objectives and drivers support a leader’s ability to look at everything through an equity lens. It’s more than about teaching skills; it’s about reflecting on policies, systems, and adult mindsets and how they are impacting student social and emotional well-being and their academic outcomes.

In this report, we detail examples of how leaders changed systems and adult mindsets within their schools to create better opportunities for students. We reference the objectives in our Accelerate Framework but recognize that other organizations or districts may have their own frameworks containing slightly different elements. Those frameworks can be leveraged by looking at the embedded systems and structures through an equity lens or by drawing parallels to our examples.
In our report “Hyper Focus: How to Transform Schools,” we outlined how schools are the unit of educational transformation, but in order to truly improve, they must disrupt the traditional way that they are organized. Instead of focusing on changing students and their behaviors, schools must strategically change their systems so that they are aligned with their school goals. And that school goal must set a specific and high bar for all students, while intentionally driving everyone’s work toward equity.

Schools also must ensure that adult mindsets are aligned with their school goals. New research on implicit bias shows that teacher bias can undermine equity-driven reforms and contribute to the racial disparities that we see in both suspension rate and achievement data. Addressing implicit bias is not quite so easy, though, because we all live in a greater societal context where structural racism still exists, and broad trainings do not always result in individual behavioral changes. Furthermore, the racial and ethnic diversity of our nation’s public schools, where more than half of students are non-white, is not mirrored in the teachers that stand at the front of each classroom. Only about 20% of teachers are non-white. There has only been a slight increase in that number over time, and it’s coupled with a worrying trend showing teachers of color leaving at higher rates than their peers. Focus groups found that teachers of color experienced staff cultures that were not welcoming or inclusive, and they often felt shut out of leadership and advancement opportunities.

To begin the transformation of systems and structures within a school, leaders can leverage the Accelerate Framework Change Management objective to align their school strategies to a rigorous, equity-driven goal. Implementing Change Management within a school hinges on a leader’s utilization of the Transformational Leadership Building Block (TLBB) Strategic Thinking and Planning. To minimize dysfunction within staff culture, leaders can leverage the Accelerate Framework High-Performing Team objective. Within their own practice, developing the get it, communication, and relationships TLBBs are key to a leader’s successful management of a high-performing team. Each of the schools profiled on the following pages are at different stages in their schoolwide improvement and transformation process, but they provide powerful examples of taking action toward equity around changing systems, structures, and adult mindsets.
As principal of Alain Locke Charter School (Chicago), Lennie Jones built a change management system that not only set a high goal for staff and students, but also ensured that they had a strategic plan in place to meet it. She expected each student in her school to be globally competitive and encouraged teachers and students to “dream big.” With that, though, came a plan to “get from point A to point B.” She held a yearly retreat to ensure staff buy-in to the school goal and to brainstorm the key strategies needed to meet it. “Each year we try to build on what we’ve done the year before,” Principal Jones said. “The goal is no longer just to meet expectations, which can be a very low bar for some children. The real goal for us now is to help as many children achieve ‘exceeds [expectations]’ as possible. We want our children to exceed the standard in reading and mathematics.” Throughout the year, the leadership team monitored progress toward the goal and the effectiveness of the key strategies, course correcting when necessary. They also made sure staff kept their focus on the annual goal and key strategies.

Principal Joán Álvarez of IDEA College Preparatory (McAllen, TX) leads with relationships and empathy at the forefront, while also being tough and demanding. With a belief that success means all students, he set a school goal of 100% of students attending a four-year college, while acknowledging that the goal is just the beginning; what’s important is “what the goal compels us to do.” As such, he starts the school year with an annual family picnic, where he meets with students and parents and talks to them about the college goal and how they will all work together to get there. Class instruction is adjusted based on data that focuses on the success and needs of individual students. Principal Álvarez also sets yearly personal goals for himself, asking for teacher input on his top goal. Then, each week, he reports on the school’s top goals in the newsletter, sharing his and the team’s progress. Everyone on staff is pushing toward the same high goal for students, in an environment where everyone feels supported. “Every student’s graduation tassel is a proof-point of success by design,” says Principal Álvarez. “That’s a motto I lead in all I do.”

In founding Steel City Academy (Gary, IN), Executive Director Katie Kirley hit the ground running, setting a high goal for academic growth. When students enroll in her middle school, they are screened and given individual academic plans to catch them up to grade-level standards. Although Executive Director Kirley was a strong instructional leader and could motivate her staff, she realized that she needed to be a change agent within her school. With an 80/20 strategic plan as her guide, she developed an aggressive monitoring system, where her team meets on a weekly basis to monitor the progress of all student groups, or “squads,” toward their school goals. She created systems to analyze inequities and lead the creation of plans to course correct. And she managed her team so that every person within the building knew their responsibility toward meeting the shared school goal.

Student achievement and wellbeing should be at the forefront of any decision that adults within the school make. School systems, structures, and practices should be implemented and changed only after first asking “How will this decision impact students?” When problem-solving, adult action to remove barriers to student success should always be prioritized, even if this is more difficult.

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12 Joán Álvarez is now in a leadership role at IDEA, overseeing multiple campuses.
When Eva Stevens became the principal of Heatherbrae Elementary School (Phoenix, AZ), she set a vision of high expectations and constant learning for everyone – not only for the students, but for the teachers and parents as well. Although some of the inherited staff bought into the new vision, many did not. Principal Stevens had to set clear expectations and non-negotiables for staff. “You can’t change their heart necessarily, but you can change behaviors. So we were aiming at changing behaviors right away,” she says. “I think it took three or four years before we moved our campus to the way our campus is today, simply because there were barriers that were just phenomenal in terms of attitudes, and of individual belief systems that were in conflict.” For subsequent staff vacancies, a hiring process was set that aligned to the expectations and Principal Stevens always ensured that staff were consistently held accountable to their job expectations.

Executive Director Katie Kirley’s team expectations at Steel City Academy (Gary, IN) are built around candid conversations about race and bias. Her efforts as a leader to recruit, interview, and retain staff is based on alignment to the mindset that inequities should be tackled within schools. The school’s professional development sequence increases trust and vulnerability over time, while her team builds its own awareness of culture and biases and their resulting responsibilities to students. Executive Director Kirley has lost some staff members along the way who did not believe it was critical to have these conversations, and while she worked to unpack staff perspectives, she is unapologetic about her expectations about what she believes the work is in her school. “I know the character of the people in this city and the incredible potential of our kids,” she says, “and we set out to redefine the model and the results for our kids and our community.”
Kashawndra Wilson, principal of Noble-Hansberry College Prep (Chicago), is building the capacity of her leadership team after several years of turnover. Because of the newness of her team, she is focused on building a culture of trust, which started with clarifying her vision, values, and priorities, as well as the team’s roles and responsibilities. She uses her passion and care for students as a way to motivate her staff to do the necessary work to meet school goals. As the leader, she worked to develop her skills in relationship building so that her team understands that she cares about them as people. She leverages one-on-one meetings to build individual team member’s confidence and skills, and to give them more responsibilities so that they can take ownership over their decision-making role. Throughout the school year, she is checking to make sure they are being systematic as a team: Are they continuing to reduce pockets of inconsistency? Are they continuing to build and maintain trust between the team and the rest of the staff? “Having a strong team is key,” she says, “we can’t do this work without everyone being at the top of their game to support kids.”

As a white male leading a school that is composed almost entirely of students of color, Principal Drew Goltermann at Ednovate-East College Prep (Los Angeles) worked to hire a team that was reflective of his student body; about 75% of staff are of color. He had to go beyond simply hiring who he thought were the right people, though, and really challenge himself to listen to and act on their insight, while continuously asking “what am I missing?” Valuing and trusting his leadership team’s ideas, for example, directly led Principal Goltermann to change the school’s advisory curriculum. Where it previously focused on student organizational and planning skills, it now focuses on topics related to race and equity, including units on understanding anti-Black bias in Latinx culture, Native American heritage, and race in elections. Students and staff have a specific space to be seen and heard, and to talk about their identity.

The interactions and cooperation of school leadership, teachers, and staff should produce a combined effect greater than the sum of the separate effects. All school staff have shared ownership of the school’s big goals and see their individual work as a part of meeting that big goal. All school staff respect each other’s skill sets and leverage their complimentary talents, shifting responsibilities as needed.

School staff continuously educate themselves on broader issues around equity to inform the work and confront internal bias. In valuing all perspectives and voices, school leaders should actively think about who is and is not included in the conversation and work to include them.
The work is hard, and it is important to find joy and be thankful to each other while building strong and positive relationships. School staff should recognize the efforts and accomplishments of others and celebrate contributions to the whole even during the busiest and most difficult times. School culture should be one where staff feel valued and developed, and mistakes are embraced as a part of the process of continually learning to be better.

When Principal Karem Gomez first arrived at Acero-Octavio Paz Elementary (Chicago), she knew she needed to shift the adult culture to one built on trust, transparency, and vulnerability. She started by modeling these qualities herself and coaching her leadership team on how to build it into their meetings with teachers. “The leadership position is often dehumanized; we are expected to have all the answers, and to have everything planned with no room for error,” she says, “but in order to have buy-in from staff, you need to let them know that you are human and honor your mistakes.” Principal Gomez created a set of high expectations and non-negotiables for her staff. When she institutes changes, she involves them in the process to get them on board, and also provides development support before they are held accountable to the change. For example, when she wanted to make classroom set-ups work better for all students, she invited teachers to see the piloted changes in action in a subset of classrooms. She used the same “pilot” strategy when changing to a new, higher-level ELA curriculum. Teachers heard from her why she thought the change in curriculum was important and had an opportunity to ask questions, and she worked with them to invest the necessary resources, planning support, and instruction delivery support. Although it took two years to fully transition to the new curriculum, teachers realized that the quality of student writing was positively impacted by the change.
When the results of the Civil Rights Data Collection were first released, it shined a light on the disparities in discipline rates between white students and students of color. Specifically, it showed that Black students accounted for 15.5% of all public school students, but represented about 39% of students suspended from school. Unpacking school discipline data even further shows that Black girls face the greatest need for learning environments that reduce racial and gender biases, for they are the most likely group to be disciplined based on their cultural identity rather than their actions. Other nationwide data shows that more than 7 million students were chronically absent in the 2015-16 school year, having missed 15 or more days of school. High schoolers were more likely to be chronically absent than elementary and middle school students, and students of color were more likely to be chronically absent than their white peers. Missing a large number of school days has a negative impact on student learning and outcomes and can indicate a greater underlying problem at the school level. School-related factors, such as low-level instruction, fewer challenging course offerings, and poor relationships with teachers, are all strongly associated with high chronic absenteeism rates. These are all factors that adults in schools have direct control over and can impact in a positive way.

There is a growing recognition that students’ social-emotional development and wellbeing is important, and that it can positively impact academic outcomes. Most public schools have incorporated some type of social-emotional learning into their curriculum. Contextual factors, such as societal realities (e.g., racism, sexism, homophobia), individual realities (e.g., socioeconomic status, family dynamics, experiences in schools, access to opportunities), and cultural background all influence social, emotional, and academic development. However, many social-emotional learning efforts focus on developing competencies in students and fall short in recognizing the assets that students bring that can be built upon and supported. And they are often not incorporated into a broader school culture with systems and adult mindsets that would create an equitable learning environment. The two must work in tandem. Furthermore, adults must build their own internal social-emotional capacity and skills before they can teach those skills to their students.
A POSITIVE, RELATIONSHIPS-BASED CULTURE THAT FOSTERS STUDENT BELONGING AND IS CONDUCIVE TO HIGH LEVELS OF ACHIEVEMENT, CONTINUED

To transform a school’s student culture into one that fosters student belonging and challenges them to thrive, leaders can leverage the Accelerate Framework Aspirational Environment and Constructive Environment objectives. Within their own practice, applying the “get it” and relationships TLBBs aid in ensuring that students feel valued for who they are. Each of the schools profiled below are at different stages in their schoolwide improvement and transformation process, but they provide powerful examples of taking action toward equity around building a positive, relationships-based culture.

Schools seek to model fairness and justice, where student experience and culture is honored, and needs and personal goals are cared for. School staff welcome diversity among each other and their students, respecting the personal histories that everyone brings to the table and fostering a sense of belonging for all.

One of the ways in which Principal Liz Jamison-Dunn creates a positive student culture at Catalyst-Circle Rock (Chicago) includes involving the broader community. Each year, the school organizes a “Men Take Your Child To School Day,” where fathers, grandfathers, and other men of the community greet students before the school day begins. Students line up to receive love and support from them, then they all participate in a celebratory breakfast together. Inspired by similar initiatives around the country, as well as research showing that children whose fathers take a more active role in their lives have better academic and social outcomes, this male community involvement has changed the narrative about Black father figures on the west side of Chicago. It has also contributed to the high attendance rates at the school.

Principal Joán Álvarez of IDEA College Preparatory (McAllen, TX) uses a strength-based mindset to guide his approach to school culture. His vision, values, and goals for students recognize them for who they are and the stories that they bring with them. As such, he treats everyone like family. “I believe every student, every teacher, every administrator, every parent, has a story. When you listen to the story, you make such a strong connection. And then when someone feels ready to give up or not try their best, you can bring them back to that story and help them remember their why.” Students want to come to school because they feel known and cared for as students and as people. As a first-generation college graduate himself, Principal Álvarez works closely with students, parents, and school staff to ensure that all students have the support that they need to be on-track to college.
When Dave Trejo, principal of Environmental Charter Middle School – Gardena (Gardena, CA), reflects back on his time as a teacher, he says that "being a male Latino teacher in a predominately low-income Latino community meant a whole lot more than just being a teacher. For some of my students, I was one of many positive role models in their life. For others, I was one of few. For some I was the first male in their life that would love them, that would love them appropriately, that would be positive, that wanted nothing more for them than for them to be the best version of themselves. And I have never met anyone who has invested in themselves before someone that they cared about, loved, respected, and admired invested in them first." He uses that insight to influence his school’s culture, stressing “habits of happiness,” daily gratitude reflections, and reminding teachers to examine their lessons and to ensure that they are relevant and engaging to students, and to check for student connection and relationships.

When Steven Ward took over as principal at Aspire Hanley Middle School (Memphis, TN), he was met with significant student culture issues. Because of the deep trauma living within the broader Memphis community, he knew that his students would not be able to focus on their education until their needs were met. In particular, he noticed that students did not feel safe. There were daily fights at the school, and students didn’t show pride in their school or their learning. Although Principal Ward could have immediately instituted a set of rules and consequences, he chose to first focus on building an aspirational environment that would give students pride in their school and community, while also meeting their need to feel safe. He focused on getting students to want to come to school to learn through values, traditions and making the school a place that could help them succeed in the future. Principal Ward learned the background of the Orange Mound neighborhood, and used that as centering point, hiring a local artist to paint murals inside the school. With a limited budget, he was able to re-brand the school, painting the doors with school colors, hanging signs outside of the bathrooms that read “College for Certain,” and decorating the classrooms with college names. He met with every 5th grader, asking them what they did or did not like about school, using that information to guide any changes he was considering. By his second year as principal, there were zero fights on campus because students felt strongly that they did not want to disrespect their school. The culture shift led to academic gains as well, with the school reaching the highest student growth rating on the state accountability system.
School behavioral systems support and positively motivate students.

**Jody-Anne Jones**, principal at North Star Academy Clinton Hill Middle School (Newark, NJ), uses her morning walkthrough time to check on her “buddies,” or students who need extra support or attention on a particular day. While correcting behaviors and encouraging students to be leaders for other students, she remains focused on problem-solving so that students can remain in their classrooms. Students and staff understand the expectations, and Principal Jones holds staff accountable for upholding the expectations. As a result, all classrooms are conducive to learning.

**Principal Dave Trejo of Environmental Charter Middle School – Gardena (Gardena, CA)** pairs a restorative justice approach to student discipline with a management system of consequences so that students feel that their experiences are heard, while learning how to build positive relationships, and understand the impact of their actions. He strategically engages parents, bringing people into dialogue without alienating them. Although his school is predominately Latinx, Principal Trejo is also conscious of confronting anti-Blackness, creating a safe space for all students and members of the community.

In the 2018-19 school year, **Catalyst-Circle Rock (Chicago) Principal Liz Jamison-Dunn** noticed an increase in student trips to the dean’s office, resulting in consequences that kept kids out of valuable learning time. Transferring ownership to the whole school community, she instituted several changes to motivate her students and build their leadership skills, which resulted in a significant decrease in referrals and suspensions and an overall improvement in the school’s culture. She adopted a weekly public rewards system, where homerooms competed for dojo points to win wrist bands, class signs, and parties. Students have their own notebooks to track their academic and behavioral points and they encourage and cheer for each other to help their class meet its goals. Struggling students benefit from a character-building program stemming from a partnership with the local sheriff’s department. Additionally, to further develop student self-motivation and leadership, the school infuses elements of leadership development into daily activities. Principal Jamison-Dunn regularly meets with the student council and has implemented many of their proposed changes, highlighting for students the importance of exercising their civic duty and making their voices heard.
INSTRUCTION THAT CENTERS ON WHAT (AND WHICH) STUDENTS LEARNED, WITH SUPPORTS TO MAKE HIGH ACHIEVEMENT POSSIBLE

As we highlighted in our report “Driven by Learning: How the Forcing Function Pushes Schools Toward Excellence,” most schools are not looking at their data with enough frequency to know exactly where students are at in their learning. They also aren’t able to make the necessary changes to ensure that students meet their achievement targets. In the absence of actionable data, educators end up making decisions for students based on assumptions. And far too often, low-income students and students of color are given access to low expectations, below grade-level assignments, and remedial instruction. Students can only do as well as the assignments and instruction that they are given. By making assumptions about whether certain students can or can’t learn challenging content, adults make the decision to close doors to students for them. Educators must aim higher for their students, and school leaders should develop teachers so that they are able to help students meet the higher bar. Research on teacher quality shows that most teachers do not improve much each year, and professional development is not consistently helping them improve.

Leaders can reference the Accelerate Framework Data-Driven Culture objective as they use evidence to help students achieve at higher levels and the Black-Belt Teaching objective as they are transforming curriculum and instruction. Within their own practice, leaders should lean heavily on instructional knowledge, “get it,” strategic thinking and planning, and resilience TLBBs. Each of the schools profiled below are at different stages in their schoolwide improvement and transformation process, but they provide powerful examples of taking action toward equity around instruction that makes high achievement possible.

Rigorous instruction is provided to all students, furthering their opportunities to achieve rather than curtailing them.

As principal of CICS-Avalon (Chicago, IL), Lindsey Robinson said “When I think about digging deep into our mission, it’s not just about sending scholars to college, but sending them prepared to grapple with the content they are going to see. A big part of our mission is about putting rigorous content in front of scholars and letting them do the work.” To help students meet such a high bar, Principal Robinson and her team continually analyze and act on their data. Teachers collect and analyze student data daily and meet with leadership team members weekly to evaluate and discuss student progress. Milestone assessments are given 3–4 times per academic year. As a result of these data touchpoints, Principal Robinson and her team adjust how their time is spent: observing classrooms, coaching teachers, participating in data meetings, or having culture meetings.

Guided by research showing the link between 3rd grade reading proficiency and future academic outcomes, Navigator-Watsonville Prep School (Watsonville, CA) has set a goal of ensuring that every single one of their students is reading on grade-level by 3rd grade. Because a large percentage of her students enter school behind, Principal Andrea Hernandez breaks down that big goal into smaller, incremental goals that increase each month. The goals are posted and visibly tracked so that staff can see the progress being made over the course of the year. Teachers use daily, targeted trackers so that they know what students need to move to the next level and to help them make lessons more targeted. In addition to the in-the-moment checks for understanding that teachers do with students in phonics, there are monthly fluency checks. Students that are not meeting the targets get additional interventions after school to build their skills. During remote learning, teachers and the leadership team have been problem-solving how to keep young students engaged while also ensuring consistency in delivery across phonics groups.
School staff collect, analyze, and act on data to improve student achievement. Instructional practice and programming are continuously improved based on what works and are grounded in data.

The data that school leaders choose to monitor should align with their views on equity, ensuring that all groups of students are getting the support they need to achieve at high levels and to close any gaps that might exist between groups. Principal Jackson Sprayberry and his staff at Valor College Prep (Nashville, TN) and Executive Director Katie Kirley and her staff at Steel City Academy (Gary, IN) consistently collect and monitor subgroup data based on where research has shown that inequities are most apparent, even though it looks slightly different at their respective schools based on their unique student populations. At Valor College Prep, in addition to looking at the data by race/ethnicity, special education status, and family income, they also examine the data for their English Learner and Middle Eastern North African groups. At Steel City Academy, they pay additional attention to their data for Special Education students and students who are multiple grade levels behind, as well as their suspension rates for African-American boys. Director Kirley admits that drilling the data down to the most challenged groups requires honesty and vulnerability and can often feel daunting. “As school leaders, we want to see our successes because we know we are all working so hard,” she says, “but facing the brutal facts of where we fall short and where we need to go is how we will move the needle.”

Angela Johnson-Williams, principal of Providence Englewood Charter School (Chicago) has focused the last two years on building a data-driven culture at her school. Previously, other than using end-of-year report card data to gauge student performance levels, the school primarily relied on subjective information to determine areas of improvement. Principal Johnson-Williams implemented a scoreboard system for collecting and analyzing data on a monthly basis, creating consistency across the way that teachers examine what students have learned. “Because I was so excited, my staff was interested in trying it. I may not have brought everyone along at first, but I was able to target my high-influence staff members, get them on board with my plan, and trust that they would help me bring the remaining staff along.” Now her school has a visual that allows all staff to quickly identify where the students are learning or not learning, and a common language when talking about the data. Because of this, they can focus their conversations on targeted strategies that are grounded in evidence, and have started work to compare their monthly, internal data to state and district assessment data as a check on rigor. Staff are so committed to collecting and analyzing data that they were able to carry over the scoreboard system into their current remote learning environment.
Already a strong operational leader at her school, **Tyson Daniel, principal of CICS-Lloyd Bond (Chicago)**, has worked to build her skills as an instructional leader. She prioritized spending more time in classrooms observing teachers and focusing on the quality of instruction. Through frequent meetings with her leadership team, she connects classroom-level data to school goals and expectations for learning based on the standards. After reviewing the completion of her strategic plan at the end of the previous school year, she realized that small group instruction was still an area of growth for her school. She made that an area of focus, and instituted several strategies to improve, including incorporating paired teachers, scheduling teachers to observe their peers in other classrooms, and recording exemplar lessons so that others could learn from them. Although the shift to remote learning created some major challenges, they have adapted their strategies so that coaches provide professional development around small group instruction, and model it for staff that are struggling in this area.

When he was in graduate school, **Lamont Browne** tutored students in the honors program of a diverse local school. He noticed that in the 8th grade section, only two of the honors students were Black. “A very diverse school, a very homogeneous honors class,” he said. Those numbers stuck with him during his teaching career and later when he became principal of struggling **Eastside Charter School (Wilmington, DE)**. To ensure that all students were being taught at a high level, he transitioned his staff to a curriculum that was vertically aligned from grade to grade and to the state standards. Teachers received training on curriculum mapping and connecting assessments to the standards. Students receive individualized or small group instruction based on frequent assessment outcomes. Student groups are revised about every six weeks based on the data, and teachers use meetings to help better use the results to place students in the right groups. Finally, teachers receive professional development every week that is built off the goals the leadership team has set for the year.

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*School staff commit to carrying out their best work so that all students reach their potential, holding each other and their leaders to high standards and holding themselves and others accountable. Schools coach teachers to a high level of instruction.*
When Monique Gayles became the middle school principal at East End Prep (Nashville, TN), one of the first things she tackled was the low rigor and inconsistent quality of teaching that she witnessed across classrooms. Although she could see the inconsistencies, she needed the data to clearly demonstrate it to her leadership team and staff. When she selected a new, schoolwide curriculum, some staff members expressed concern that it would limit their individual practice. Even though she didn’t have complete buy-in for the new curriculum, Principal Gayles still held teachers accountable to consistently teaching to it, not wanting to lose sight of her end goals. Ultimately, she was able to leverage the monthly classroom data, as well as a new instructional coach, to show teachers that setting a high bar for rigor and pairing it with instructional support was leading them to high growth in student performance. The school’s strategic plan was grounded in a growth mindset for progress monitoring and incorporating a walkthrough checklist with clear expectations for each performance category. Because teachers received concrete feedback from their colleagues, could visit other classrooms to observe, and could utilize the video library of exemplars, there was a higher level of trust and a community feel to the teaching staff. And because the data was showing improvement, teachers wanted more of it and were more bought-in to the systems and curriculum that had been put in place.
CREATING BETTER SCHOOLS FOR ALL STUDENTS

The current national conversations around racial equity have pushed us all to reexamine the way we think about opportunity, bias, and social challenges in our country. Though the conversations have been a positive first step toward confronting the problem, many Americans are still skeptical that they will lead to real change in policy and practice. As the places where children spend most of their time learning, we want our schools to reflect the world that we would like to see; to reduce inequity rather than increase it. In order to do that, we must rethink the way that we approach schooling, shifting from a focus on changing student behavior and mindsets to changing systems and adult mindsets.

For schools to be equitable, they need:

1. Systems, structures, and adult mindsets that align to the expectation that all students will achieve.
2. A positive, relationships-based culture that fosters student belonging and is conducive to high levels of achievement.
3. Instruction that centers on what (and which) students learned, with supports to make high achievement possible.

State and federal policies that put student needs first are necessary to create country-wide change. Of equal importance, though, are the decisions and actions of adults in each individual school and district. Decisions within a school can be difficult “because they impact so many different lives,” says Principal Monique Gayles. “Every kid is more than a data point on paper, they are real people that we are trying to mold. I knew that I wanted what was best for kids, and that I could help to shape the world by leading with my heart.”

To meet our country’s goal of equal access and educational excellence, all schools must work toward eliminating inequities. This is not only the work of educators in schools serving students of color; it is the work of all of us. When we are shooting high for all students, we leave no one out and can focus on how to best support students in accomplishing their goals. That is the power of leveraging effective school leadership and high-level systems to create equitable education environments.

TAKING ACTION TOWARD EQUITY

By considering the following action steps, you can work to ensure you are not replicating inequities but rather eliminating them, no matter what framework guides your leadership and school.

Systems, structures, and adult mindsets that align to the expectation that all students will achieve.

- Student achievement and wellbeing should be at the forefront of any decision that adults within the school make. School systems, structures, and practices should be implemented and changed only after first asking “How will this decision impact students?” When problem-solving, adult action to remove barriers to student success should always be prioritized, even if this is more difficult.
- School staff know the expectations and are committed to meeting them. Everyone feels a shared responsibility for student successes and challenges and measures impact not only on academics, but also social and emotional development.
- School staff continuously educate themselves on broader issues around equity to inform the work and confront internal bias. In valuing all perspectives and voices, school leaders should actively think about who is and is not included in the conversation and work to include them.
- The interactions and cooperation of school leadership, teachers, and staff should produce a combined effect greater than the sum of the separate effects. All school staff have shared ownership of the school’s big goals and see their individual work as a part of meeting that big goal. All school staff respect each other’s skill sets and leverage their complimentary talents, shifting responsibilities as needed.
- The work is hard, and it is important to find joy and be thankful to each other while building strong and positive relationships. School staff should recognize the efforts and accomplishments of others and celebrate contributions to the whole even during the busiest and most difficult times. School culture should be one where staff feel valued and developed, and mistakes are embraced as a part of the process of continually learning to be better.
A positive, relationships-based culture that fosters student belonging and is conducive to high levels of achievement.

- Schools seek to model fairness and justice, where student experience and culture is honored, and needs and personal goals are cared for.
- School staff welcome diversity among each other and their students, respecting the personal histories that everyone brings to the table and fostering a sense of belonging for all.
- School behavioral systems support and positively motivate students.

Instruction that centers on what (and which) students learned, with supports to make high achievement possible.

- Rigorous instruction is provided to all students, furthering their opportunities to achieve rather than curtailing them.
- School staff collect, analyze, and act on data to improve student achievement. Instructional practice and programming are continuously improved based on what works and are grounded in data.
- School staff commit to carrying out their best work so that all students reach their potential, holding each other and their leaders to high standards and holding themselves and others accountable.
- Schools coach teachers to a high level of instruction.

With gratitude to the leaders and schools featured in this report.

For more in-depth school case studies, visit the resources section of our website: accelerateinstitute.org/resources
## Featured Schools and Leaders

**Systems, structures, and adult mindsets that align to the expectation that all students will achieve.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>School Name</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>Grades</th>
<th>Student Demographics</th>
<th>Income Demographics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lennie Jones</td>
<td>Alain Locke Charter School</td>
<td>Chicago, IL</td>
<td>K-8</td>
<td>99% African-American</td>
<td>92% low-income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joán Álvarez</td>
<td>IDEA College Preparatory</td>
<td>McAllen, TX</td>
<td>6-12</td>
<td>96% Hispanic</td>
<td>82% low-income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katie Kirley</td>
<td>Steel City Academy</td>
<td>Gary, IN</td>
<td>7-12</td>
<td>93% African-American</td>
<td>low-income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eva Stevens</td>
<td>Heatherbrae Elementary School</td>
<td>Phoenix, AZ</td>
<td>K-5</td>
<td>85% Hispanic, 8% African-American</td>
<td>92% low-income</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**A positive, relationships-based culture that fosters student belonging and is conducive to high levels of achievement.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Student Demographics</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liz Jamison-Dunn</td>
<td>Catalyst Circle Rock</td>
<td>Chicago, IL</td>
<td>K-8</td>
<td>98% African-American</td>
<td>86% low-income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joán Álvarez</td>
<td>IDEA College Preparatory</td>
<td>McAllen, TX</td>
<td>6-12</td>
<td>96% Hispanic</td>
<td>82% low-income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dave Trejo</td>
<td>Environmental Charter Middle School</td>
<td>Gardena, CA</td>
<td>6-8</td>
<td>79% Hispanic, 14% African-American</td>
<td>89% low-income</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Instruction that centers on what (and which) students learned, with supports to make high achievement possible.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Student Demographics</th>
<th>Income Demographics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jackson Sprayberry</td>
<td>Valor College Prep</td>
<td>Nashville, TN</td>
<td>9-11</td>
<td>13% African-American, 20% Hispanic, 15% Middle-Eastern North African</td>
<td>26% low-income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katie Kirley</td>
<td>Steel City Academy</td>
<td>Gary, IN</td>
<td>7-12</td>
<td>93% African-American</td>
<td>75% low-income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angela Johnson-Williams</td>
<td>Providence Englewood Charter School</td>
<td>Chicago, IL</td>
<td>K-8</td>
<td>97% African-American</td>
<td>86% low-income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lindsey Robinson</td>
<td>CICS Avalon</td>
<td>Chicago, IL</td>
<td>K-8</td>
<td>97% African-American</td>
<td>90% low-income</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
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<th>City</th>
<th>Grades</th>
<th>Student Demographics</th>
<th>Income Demographics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Steven Ward</td>
<td>Aspire Hanley Middle School</td>
<td>Memphis, TN</td>
<td>6-8</td>
<td>99% African-American</td>
<td>75% low-income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jody-Anne Jones</td>
<td>North Star Academy Clinton Hill Middle School</td>
<td>Newark, NJ</td>
<td>5-8</td>
<td>86% African-American, 13% Hispanic</td>
<td>93% low-income</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>City</th>
<th>Grades</th>
<th>Student Demographics</th>
<th>Income Demographics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Andrea Hernandez</td>
<td>Watsonville Prep</td>
<td>Nashville, TN</td>
<td>K-3</td>
<td>99% Hispanic</td>
<td>85% low-income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tyson Daniel</td>
<td>CICS Bond</td>
<td>Chicago, IL</td>
<td>K-6</td>
<td>98% African-American</td>
<td>81% low-income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lamont Browne</td>
<td>Eastside Charter School</td>
<td>Wilmington, DE</td>
<td>preK-8</td>
<td>92% African-American</td>
<td>87% low-income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monique Gayles</td>
<td>East End Prep</td>
<td>Nashville, TN</td>
<td>K-8</td>
<td>77% African-American</td>
<td>46% low-income</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>