**How Does an Equity Audit Work?**

By [Sarah D. Sparks](http://www.edweek.org/ew/contributors/sarah.sparks_3549540.html) on September 17, 2015 5:52 PM



If structural discrimination doesn't require conscious racists or sexists, how can school leaders recognize it and work to counter it?

"These [education] institutions get so big and difuse that even if you are able to identify what is going on in your immediate environs, trying to figure out how to fix that is overwhelming," said Amanda Lewis, a sociologist at the University of Illinois at Chicago, who studies equity issues. "Everyone could see a piece of the puzzle, but putting it all together was trouble."

Equity audits may be one route. In the Ferguson-Florissant, Mo. district, for example, new Superintendent Joseph Davis is examining differences in school resources, teacher placement, discipline rates, and Advanced Placement participation by race and socioeconomic level. (For more on how the district is digging into these discrepancies, check out my colleague [Denisa Superville's Q&A with Davis](http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2015/09/16/qa-fergusons-new-schools-chief-shares-agenda.html).)

While these reports historically have come mainly in response to state or federal investigations of discrimination, the flood of education data available now can make them easier for individual school leaders to conduct. And persistent achievement and discipline gaps, even in otherwise well-performing districts, could spur more leaders and researchers to try.

Discrimination "doesn't come from people who are trying to hurt kids," said Catherine Lhamon, the assistant secretary for the Office for Civil Rights in the U.S. Department of Education. "It comes from people who think this is a good way to run schools, making a decision not based on the kids in front of them."

**Equity Audit Indicators**

In one Education Administration Quarterly analysis, researchers led by Linda Skrla, the education leadership chair at the University of the Pacific in Stockton, Calif., identified [12 basic indicators for equity audits in three areas](http://eaq.sagepub.com/content/40/1/133.abstract):

* **Teacher-quality equity**: including teachers' years of experience, highest level of education, the number teaching outside of their certification area, and average teacher turnover.
* **Programmatic equity**: the proportion of students disciplined or assigned to special education, gifted and talented programs, and bilingual education.
* **Achievement equity**: Including state assessment performance, dropout rates, the proportion of students on college-preparatory tracks, and the participation and performance of students on college entrance exams such as the ACT or SAT.

A school that differs 10 to 20 percent from the district average on one of these items—or a class within a single school that differs— can point to inequities. Say, for example, a district's average teacher experience and education levels all fall within a 20 percent range for middle schools. An equity audit may uncover that schools with a majority of black and Hispanic students had 60 percent teacher turnover each year, while mostly white schools had teacher turnover of only 10 percent. Digging further, a principal might find that within one school with roughly equal numbers of black, Hispanic, and white students, 90 percent of the white students were in an "honors" track, where teachers had very little turnover, while 90 percent of black and Hispanic students at the same school were in regular classes with high teacher turnover.

**Creating Policies with No 'Opt Out'**

Interviews with individual teachers and staff can bring out how seemingly neutral policies turn discriminatory, found Lewis and University of Wisconsin-Madison education associate professor John Diamond, co-authors of the 2015 book[*Despite the Best Intentions*](http://www.amazon.com/dp/0195342720/ref%3Dasc_df_01953427203895738?smid=ATVPDKIKX0DER&tag=pricegrabbe05-20&linkCode=df0&creative=395097&creativeASIN=0195342720&ascsubtag=1442522934_7f87b6e6825f5cec524d2ccdfda8ace6_1941_402_1852446956_6848). In a five-year study of one high school, they found that hall monitors and teachers tended to call out black students for dress code and other minor rule violations significantly more than white students, in part because they knew white students' parents were more likely to raise a fuss if their kids got in trouble, or ask that they get out of punishment because they were "good kids."

"School districts need to recognize, if it's their practices and policies leading to inequities, then they need to change those," Lewis told me. "If the policies are too punitive, they should change; people shouldn't just be able to opt out of them. If there is an important reason to say people cannot be in the hall without a pass, then that needs to be true for everybody."

For a detailed look at an audit, check out this [2014 equity report for Atlanta public schools](http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0CB0QFjAAahUKEwjD78WQ9_7HAhXFKh4KHfwjBKM&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.atlantapublicschools.us%2Fsite%2Fhandlers%2Ffiledownload.ashx%3Fmoduleinstanceid%3D48320%26dataid%3D44054%26FileName%3DAPS%2520Equity%2520Audit%2520Report%2520final.pdf&usg=AFQjCNEMovsiUD6d_eRmANNropkvChjwOQ&sig2=-k9SkuFhNSnI51rKenWG_g).