

A Guide to Advocating for Equity in Diverse Schools

Oak Park and River Forest High School is a large, racially and socioeconomically diverse school located in a suburb just eight miles outside of downtown Chicago. With a graduation rate and average SAT scores well above the state average, Oak Park has a reputation as a good school in a diverse community. But a closer look reveals that, while the school is doing very well for some students, it isn't doing nearly as well for others.

Nearly all of Oak Park's White students graduate in four years, while 1 in 10 Black students doesn't graduate on time. About half of the White students take at least one of the many Advanced Placement (AP) courses offered at Oak Park, but only 16 percent of Black students enroll in AP. Nearly 80 percent of White students meet or exceed expectations on the SAT, but just 25 percent of Black students do. And while the school's administrators rarely use exclusionary discipline practices on White students, they suspend more than 1 in 10 Black students every year.

Oak Park isn't the only public school in America harboring racial bias. There are thousands like it, where average school performance and educators' good intentions mask drastic inequities in opportunity and achievement for low-income students, students of color, students with disabilities, and English learners.

For years, improvement efforts have largely overlooked these schools, focusing instead on the lowest performing 5 percent of schools in each state. But most of the students who have historically been underserved by our education system — students of color, low-income students, English learners and students with disabilities — actually attend the other 95 percent of schools, including many that look like Oak Park. We cannot close achievement gaps by focusing improvement efforts on the lowest-performing 5 percent of schools alone.

Schools like Oak Park are often reluctant to confront disparities in opportunity and achievement within their walls — and district and state leaders may be loath to urge them to do so, perhaps due to a lack of political will. Or because the norms, routines, and practices that privilege White children and their families are so taken for granted that school and district leaders genuinely may not realize there's a problem. Or because they lack a vision for how to “do school” differently.

Whatever the reason, pressure from advocates to challenge the status quo and address systemic disparities in opportunity and achievement is critical in these schools. This guide is designed to help advocates ask questions of state, district, and school leaders that may prompt change in schools that have allowed inequities to persist within their buildings for far too long.

AMERICA TO ME

[America to Me](#), a 10-part Starz documentary series, highlights the challenges students, teachers, administrators, and community members face navigating issues of race in a diverse school. Through the lens of the Oak Park community, each episode is a clear and compelling reminder that good intentions aren't sufficient to overcome the racial disparities in opportunity and achievement in many schools in America.

WHAT IS IN THIS GUIDE?

Part 1: Using ESSA to Push for Change ... p. 2

- How can advocates use ESSA to push for change? ... p. 2
- School identification under ESSA ... p. 3
- Who is responsible for what under ESSA? ... p. 3

Part 2: Tools for State- and District-level Advocacy ... p. 4

- Ways your state can support improvement ... p.4
- Approving improvement plans: a district responsibility ... p. 5

Part 3: Questions to Ask About Common Challenges ... p. 6

- School leadership ... p. 7
- Access to strong teachers ... p. 8
- Access to rigorous learning ... p. 10
- Safe and supportive school climate ... p. 14
- Access to high-quality early learning ... p. 17

▶ PART I: USING ESSA TO PUSH FOR CHANGE

How can advocates use the Every Student Succeeds Act

TO PUSH FOR CHANGE IN SCHOOLS THAT ARE “CONSISTENTLY UNDERPERFORMING” FOR ANY GROUP OF STUDENTS?

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) offers an opportunity for equity advocates to continue to push for meaningful action in schools that underserve one or more groups of students. Under the law, districts and schools are required to engage with families and community members to develop and implement a plan for addressing disparities in opportunity and achievement.

Many states have already identified schools that are “consistently underperforming” for any group of students (see *School Identification Under ESSA* below for more information), and those schools will soon develop and implement improvement plans. This guide is designed to help equity advocates monitor improvement efforts and ask questions when local leaders are unaware of or unwilling to make the changes needed to address systemic disparities that often make schools unhealthy, unhappy places for students of color and students from low-income families.

There are many opportunities under ESSA for advocates to push for meaningful change for students.

At the **state level**, advocates can push for:

- **Tools and data** that spur schools and districts to identify inequitable learning opportunities, including per-pupil expenditures at the school level (required under ESSA for the first time ever) that are reported in a clear and accessible way
- Meaningful **engagement** with families of historically underserved students throughout the improvement process
- **Resources and technical assistance**, including sharing evidence-based practices across districts and schools
- **Action** in districts with many schools that consistently fail to meet any student group’s needs.
- **Escalated interventions** if – after getting sufficient time, resources, and support – these schools do not improve

At the **district level**, advocates can push for:

- Rigorous **criteria** for approving improvement plans, including the use of evidence-based interventions that have been shown to work in similar schools
- **Attention to all schools** with inequitable opportunities and outcomes, whether or not they are identified by the state’s accountability system
- District **ownership** of its role in supporting and establishing or revising policies that prompt school leaders to eliminate learning opportunity gaps rather than impeding improvement

At the **school level**, advocates can join a **school improvement committee** and start conversations about specific challenges, learning opportunity gaps, and what school and district leaders are doing about them. Advocates can push for:

- **Data** on access to **learning opportunities, broken down by student groups** within the school
- **Evidence-based strategies** to address challenges identified by the data (e.g., disparities in course access or discipline practices)
- **Meaningful and ongoing engagement by schools** with parents and community members of underserved students

School Identification Under ESSA

ESSA requires the lowest-performing schools over all, known as Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI) schools, to create and implement an improvement plan. But the law also requires the following types of schools to take action:

- **Targeted Support and Improvement (TSI):** Schools that are “consistently underperforming” – that is, failing to meet the needs of any group of students, as defined by the state
- **Additional Targeted Support and Improvement (ATSI):** Schools that are badly underserving any group of students (that is, as badly as the bottom 5 percent of schools needing overall improvement)

Unfortunately, few states gave any indication in their ESSA plans of how they plan to support schools in which a student group is being underserved. Moreover, many states set expectations far too low, seeming reluctant to single out underperforming schools or ensure that schools that are underserving student groups take any meaningful steps to improve. (See our [Trends in State ESSA Plans](#) report for more information.)

This means that advocates must pay attention – and draw attention – to schools that are identified as underserving any group and to those schools that, while not identified under the state’s accountability system, need to address disparities in opportunity and outcomes within their walls.

Who is responsible for what under ESSA?

Leaders at every level – state, district, and school – make many key decisions that impact the education students receive. They also have specific responsibilities under ESSA to improve – or facilitate improvements in – schools that are consistently underserving any group of students.

State responsibilities under ESSA: States must provide technical assistance – and intervene – in districts serving a significant number of schools identified for support. Additionally, if a school that is failing to effectively educate any group of students (ATSI) doesn’t show sufficient improvement within a certain number of years (as determined by the state), the state must reclassify it as a CSI school and provide it with the same level of support as the lowest performing schools.

District responsibilities under ESSA: ESSA makes clear that districts play a critical role in improving TSI schools. The law makes districts responsible for approving improvement plans for TSI schools and taking “additional action” if a TSI school doesn’t improve on the timeline set by the district.

School responsibilities under ESSA: TSI schools, in collaboration with the community, must submit an evidence-based improvement plan to the district. ATSI schools are required to do the same – and their plan must identify and address resource inequities.

► **PART II: TOOLS FOR STATE- AND DISTRICT-LEVEL ADVOCACY**
6 WAYS YOUR STATE CAN SUPPORT IMPROVEMENT
IN SCHOOLS THAT ARE CONSISTENTLY UNDERSERVING ANY GROUP OF STUDENTS

Many important decisions about how to better serve all students will be made by district and school leaders. But states make a number of key decisions that can either support – or derail – the improvement process in schools with consistently underserved student groups.

Ask your state leaders: “Do/will you support improvement in schools that are consistently failing to meet the needs of any student group by ... ?”

1. Providing a needs assessment tool or template that prompts districts to:

- a. Examine a wide range of data on resources and learning opportunities, such as access to strong teachers, access to rigorous coursework, and a positive school climate
- b. Disaggregate all data by student group
- c. Compare measures of opportunity (e.g., access to rigorous coursework) and achievement (e.g., performance on state assessments or graduation rates) between schools in the district and between student groups within each school

2. Providing or helping districts collect and analyze data necessary to complete the needs assessment

3. Requiring that, to receive school improvement funding, districts develop an improvement plan with evidence-based strategies that address the area(s) of greatest need *for the students who are underserved*

Evidence in ESSA: There is a wealth of research about what works in education. See this [advocacy guide](#) for questions you can ask to ensure that any proposed interventions or strategies are evidence driven and that your state leaders will urge and support district and school leaders to select interventions that have been shown to improve student outcomes.

4. Requiring that, in every phase of the school improvement process, districts engage the families and community members of the students who are being underserved

5. Providing support to district and school leaders by:

- a. Curating and distributing information on evidence-based strategies that have been successful for the student groups schools are struggling to serve
- b. Offering technical assistance to local leaders on evaluating and selecting strategies that best meet the needs of the students the school is struggling to serve and are appropriate for the school’s context
- c. Creating networks of districts (or schools) with similar challenges or providing support from intermediary organizations with a track record of success
- d. In efforts to improve teacher preparation and the educator pipeline, prioritizing districts with a substantial number of schools that are underserving some student groups and coordinating this work with school improvement efforts (for more on this, see [Tackling Gaps in Access to Strong Teachers](#)).

- 6. Having a concrete plan on what to do if a substantial number of a district's schools that underserve some student groups fail to improve outcomes, such as:**
- Required engagement with external district/school support teams;
 - Limitations on uses of state funds; or
 - Limitations on eligibility for competitive grants

Promising Practices in States

Committed to building its capacity to share evidence-based practices across the state, the **Tennessee Department of Education** established an [in-house research team](#). The team evaluates statewide initiatives, studies the implementation of new pilot programs, and shares real-time, actionable data with state and district leaders.

The **Florida Partnership**, [a collaboration between the College Board and the Florida Department of Education](#), is an example of the powerful role states can play in increasing access to advanced coursework for Latino students. By providing technical assistance and professional development to participating districts, the Partnership has significantly increased access to Advanced Placement (AP) coursework for Latino students, while also increasing the number of Latino students earning a 3 or higher on AP exams.

Since 2008, **Colorado** has invested almost \$60 million to hire 270 additional counselors and provide professional development at more than 300 low-income middle and high schools throughout the state through grants from the Colorado School Counselor Corps. In participating schools, graduation rates have risen significantly and dropout rates have declined.

Approving School Improvement Plans for TSI Schools: A District Responsibility

District leaders play a key role in school improvement, and district-level policies and procedures can support – or impede – the improvement efforts of school leaders. Under ESSA, district leaders are also responsible for approving improvement plans of schools that are identified as consistently underserving any student group. This gives district leaders the leverage to prompt school leaders to identify and address within-school inequities with evidence-based strategies.

Ask your district leaders: **“To receive approval of their improvement plan, do/will you require that schools that consistently underserve any student group ... ?”**

- 1. Develop an improvement plan based on results of a needs assessment that examines inequities in access to learning opportunities between student groups within schools**
- 2. Identify evidence-based strategies that target the area(s) of greatest need *for the students that are underserved*, rather than schoolwide challenges**
- 3. Specify persons responsible, timelines, and expected outcomes for the proposed strategies**
- 4. Engage the families and community members of the underserved students in every phase of the school improvement process**

Also ask: “Do you have a concrete plan on what to do **if schools fail to improve**, which could include ...?”

- Required engagement with an external school support team that has a solid track record of improving similar schools
- Equity-focused coaching for school leadership teams
- Re-evaluation of whether the principal is the right match for the school

Districts not only review and approve improvement plans, but they play a pivotal role in fostering improvement – for example, by hiring educators, providing professional development, and allocating resources. Subsequent sections include questions for district leaders on these topics, and more.

► PART III: QUESTIONS TO ASK SCHOOL OR DISTRICT LEADERS *about common challenges in schools that are consistently underserving any group of students*

The remainder of this guide suggests specific questions to ask at the district and school levels to drive attention to and prompt change in schools that underserve one or more student groups. These schools may face a number of challenges. Some may be allocating their resources – people, time, and money – in ways that shortchange the students who most need additional support. Adults in these buildings may lack training to meet the needs of all students. Or they may require coaching to challenge their own biases and build inclusive, culturally sustaining learning environments that respect and empower students of all racial and linguistic backgrounds. The questions below are intended to help prod district and school leaders to change their educational practices to better serve all students. Beneath each question are examples of what to look for and beware of in their answers.



School Leadership

Principals are commonly viewed as middle managers in charge of building operations and compliance. But they have the power to shape teaching and learning conditions. Schools that consistently struggle to serve a group of students need equity-oriented leaders who believe all children can succeed, set high expectations for students and adults alike, and are committed to identifying, discussing, and improving the systems that can perpetuate inequities within their walls. Use these questions to prompt district leaders to ensure that school leadership is a focus of their improvement efforts.

1. How will district leaders identify the principal who is the best fit for each school that is consistently underserving groups of students?

Look for:

- District leaders consider whether current leadership is an appropriate match for the school, and consider input from community
- District has a differentiated profile and selection process for leaders going into schools that consistently underserve some student groups and can name specific criteria used in candidate selection, such as:
 - Having a track record of substantially improving achievement for historically underserved student groups
 - Demonstrating a firm belief that all students can achieve at high levels and a willingness to change systems and practices accordingly within the school

Beware of:

- District promotes people to principal only on the basis of longevity
- District does not hold leadership to account when school is underserving any group of students

2. What supports will the district provide to leaders of schools that consistently underserve one or more groups of students?

Look for:

- Principals are supported by supervisors or coaches who have experience raising achievement for historically underserved student groups, have a reasonable case load, and are accountable for the support they provide
- District leaders are responsive to school leaders' requests (e.g., for additional bilingual teachers) and judicious about the demands placed on principals' time for districtwide initiatives, so that principals can focus on addressing disparities within their buildings

Beware of:

- Principal supervisors have large caseloads (> 10)
- Principals receive little or no support when it comes to hiring or deciding how best to use people, time, and money
- Principals are required to devote extensive time to district mandates

Access to Strong Teachers

Teachers are the most important in-school factor for student success. But students of color and low-income students are more likely than their White and higher-income peers in the same school to be assigned to teachers who are new, lack certification in the field in which they teach, or have low evaluation ratings. What's more, students of color are far less likely than their White peers to encounter teachers who look like them. This lack of teacher diversity has real consequences for students of color, who are more likely to [attend school regularly](#), perform [higher](#) on [end-of-year assessments](#), [graduate high school](#), and go on to college when they are exposed to a teacher of the same race. Use these questions to urge school and district leaders to ensure that improving teaching quality and increasing teacher diversity are integral parts of their school improvement efforts.

1. How are decisions made about which teachers teach which classes?

Look for:

School leaders to:

- Know who their strongest teachers are and have a strategy for assigning them to students who are struggling (district leaders may need to enable this through collective bargaining)
- Assign teachers with appropriate training to students with disabilities and English learners
- Make it clear that helping students who are behind academically to improve is a valued – and vital – skill set for teachers in the school

Beware of:

- Assignments based only on seniority or teacher preference

2. How will the district support principals' efforts to assign strong teachers to underserved students – and how will it hold principals accountable?

Look for:

- The district shares data on the placement of strong teachers
- Professional development and coaching focus on making strategic staffing decisions and creating a school culture that values teaching struggling students
- The retention and equitable assignment of excellent teachers are criteria in district leaders' evaluations of principals

Beware of:

- District-approved improvement plans fail to pair struggling students with strong teachers

3. In which areas are teachers struggling to serve students who are languishing? What will district and school leaders do to support teachers in those areas?

Look for:

- Specific answers, such as culturally proficient teaching practices, teaching academic vocabulary to English learners during regular classroom instruction, or providing structured literacy instruction for students with learning disabilities
- Evidence-based strategies for developing teachers' knowledge, skills, and dispositions to better teach underserved students, such as in-person or web-based coaching
- Support or subsidies for earning special education or English learner/bilingual certifications
- Partnerships with area teacher preparation programs to ensure new teachers come with essential content knowledge, evidence-based pedagogy (including research-based teaching of reading for elementary teachers), culturally proficient teaching practices, and specific training on supporting the success of English learners and students with disabilities

Beware of:

- Answers that blame students and/or the community
- Descriptions of activities that don't match teachers' and students' most urgent needs
- A lack of consequences for refusing to change practices

4. How will the district support the recruitment and retention of teachers of color?

Look for:

- Disaggregated data on teacher demographics at the district level, as well as on hiring, turnover, compensation, and teachers' perceptions of their working conditions
- Targeted funding for induction, mentoring, and ongoing professional development and districtwide training in cultural competence, racial equity, and unconscious bias
- Administrative support and targeted opportunities for the advancement of diverse teaching populations, including district-level recruitment strategies (e.g., partnerships with preparation programs that reflect the racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity of the students and community) and retention strategies (e.g., support networks)

Beware of:

- A lack of publicly available information on teacher diversity (demographics, hiring & turnover data disaggregated by race)

Promising practice: Assigning the best teachers to the students who need them the most

Teacher selection and placement were keys to the success of Jack Britt High, a large, racially diverse high school in Fayetteville, North Carolina, whose outcomes for historically underserved students far outstrip state averages. When Conrad Lopes, Jack Britt's founding principal, established the school in 2000, he sought teachers who not only knew their subject well, but were committed to ensuring students learn it, too. And he was adamant about placing the best teachers with the students who needed the most support. "We took our best teachers and put them in the remedial classes," said Lopes.

Lopes' successor maintained this commitment to hiring and supporting teachers who build meaningful relationships with students and expect the best from them – and to pairing the strongest educators with the students who need them most. [Today, Jack Britt](#) continues to be a leader in North Carolina, graduating more than 90 percent of its students – White, Black, Hispanic, and low-income students included – in a state that graduates only 80 percent of students over all. Learn more about Jack Britt in Karin Chenoweth and Christine Theokas' book [Getting It Done: Leading Academic Success in Unexpected Schools](#).

Access to Rigorous Learning Experiences

Every student deserves to have rich, well-rounded, and rigorous learning experiences that prepare them for the college or career of their choice. But in many U.S. schools, students of color, low-income students, English learners, and students with disabilities are far less likely than their peers to take and succeed in rigorous and college-level courses. Use these questions to prod district and school leaders to implement practices and systems that provide all students – especially historically underserved students – with rigorous learning experiences and promote their success.

1. Do all students receive instruction and classroom assignments that reflect the high expectations of the state's college- and career-ready (CCR) standards?

Look for:

- All students receive assignments that are aligned with the state's CCR standards, promote high-level thinking, provide writing opportunities, and are relevant to students' lives
- Tasks are appropriately supported to meet the needs of all students, especially English learners and students with disabilities
- Teachers have professional learning opportunities to hone their knowledge and skills on developing high-quality assignments
- The curriculum is well-rounded (beginning in P-5), with equitable access to science, social studies, the arts, secondary career and technical education, and other courses

Beware of:

- Students of color, low-income students, English learners, and students with disabilities are disproportionately assigned to less rigorous classes

2. How do the curriculum and instructional materials incorporate the cultures and backgrounds of students?

Look for:

- Active efforts to ensure that instructional materials, texts, and classroom tasks reflect the cultures and backgrounds of students
- Curriculum resources that include diverse authors and texts that are inclusive of all students
- Ongoing professional training to help teachers avoid using materials in ways that perpetuate cultural, religious, and gender stereotypes

Beware of:

- Resistance or indifference toward building cultural diversity into the daily curriculum
- Learning about different cultures is limited to a single unit or lesson per year

3. Are students from underserved groups expected to complete a college- and career-ready curriculum that aligns with the minimum standards required by your state's higher education institutions?

Look for:

- All students are automatically placed on a college- and career-ready pathway that meets minimum requirements for entry into the state's higher education institutions
- There is clear and accessible communication (in multiple languages) with students and families about course requirements and diploma options that will prepare them for and give them access to postsecondary opportunities
- There are full-time school counselors who regularly review and support the progress of each student

Beware of:

- Students have to opt into a college-and-career ready pathway
- Students from underserved groups are disproportionately placed on a pathway that does not lead to a CCR diploma (e.g., tracking)
- There is inadequate funding for appropriate support staff (e.g., to maintain the ASCA recommended counselor-student ratio of 250:1)

4. How are course failures addressed to ensure that students remain on track for graduation and college-and-career readiness?

Look for:

- Early warning systems that identify students who may be in danger of failing, including early and ongoing communication with students and families
- Opportunities for students to retake courses or make up coursework that maintains rigorous college-and-career academic standards
- Supports for struggling students experiencing unforeseen life events

Beware of:

- No system to alert families and students about imminent course failures or when students go off track
- Credit-recovery programs that lack rigor and prevent students from progressing in other course sequences
- An unwillingness by school leaders to review or address potential disparities in course failures

See this [advocacy guide on Early Interventions for School Improvement](#) for additional questions to ask about what states and districts are doing to help schools identify students who are falling off track and to intervene when problems arise.

5. How is instructional time structured to maximize student learning, especially for students who may need additional support?

Look for:

- Existing instructional time – within the school day and school year – is maximized with learning opportunities that keep students engaged (e.g., building/classroom routines, minimal classroom disruptions)
- Students who need extra support have it built into their day, so they do not miss out on electives
- Students receive extra support from the teacher and support staff during class
- After-school and summer learning opportunities and programs are aligned to college- and-career-ready standards

Beware of:

- Large blocks of time in which instruction does not take place (e.g., at the beginning/end of the day or period)
- Students only receive extra support outside the classroom or at the expense of participation in other classes or break time

6. How will you increase the participation and success of underserved students in advanced courses (e.g., Honors, AP/IB, dual enrollment) that maximize their options after high school?

Look for:

- The school encourages and supports all students to participate and excel in advanced courses and offers open enrollment or access based on multiple measures (e.g., academic performance, placement assessments, teacher recommendation, student/family input)
- Clear communication with families about the benefits of advanced-level classes and opportunities to enroll in them
- Support systems for students enrolled in advanced courses to ensure success

Beware of:

- White and affluent students are enrolled in advanced courses at much higher rates than students of color and low-income students
- Barriers to participation in advanced coursework (e.g., an overreliance on a single measure to determine entry)
- Limited communication with families
- Little or no support for students in advanced courses who need extra help

Promising practice: Eliminating barriers to participation and success in advanced coursework

By changing outdated assumptions and policies about Advanced Placement, Alhambra High School, a large, racially diverse school outside of Los Angeles, dramatically increased access to and success in rigorous coursework, especially for Latino students. The school used to make students get a teacher recommendation to enroll in an AP course. But that left teachers – including some who harbored biases about which students are “AP material” and which aren’t – as the gatekeepers. Now, the school’s open-enrollment policy lets any student who wants to take an AP course to enroll.

School leaders also use the master schedule to enroll students in classes that match their interests, and they use student data to convince teachers that underserved students can succeed in rigorous courses. Meanwhile, the school’s instructional leadership team offers additional resources and support to AP teachers, acknowledging that AP is challenging for educators and students alike. AP teachers get off-site training, and new AP teachers often have an opportunity to teach one section with the support of a mentor.

Thanks to these changes, more than a third of students at Alhambra – and half of Latino students – take at least one AP exam. And more than two-thirds of students who take an AP test pass it. This is higher than the national averages, on all accounts. To learn more about how Alhambra’s leaders are helping more students succeed in advanced courses, read our report: [Systems for Success: Thinking Beyond Access to AP](#).

School Climate

Students who experience a positive school climate tend to have a [stronger sense of self](#), higher attendance rates, and [higher completion rates](#). But within the same school, students' experiences may vary drastically by race. Students of color may be chastised or punished for failing to conform to the White norms and standards that dominate most American schools. In multiple studies, White and Asian students reported higher levels of safety, support, and connectedness than their Black, Latino, and Native American peers within the same schools. Use these questions to press district and school leaders to ensure that all students and adults have positive experiences in school.

1. How will school leaders establish and communicate high expectations for all students and adults?

Look for school leaders to:

- Ensure that teachers routinely review disaggregated data for themes/patterns by student group. These data form the basis for discussions about what's working (or not) for particular groups in a school and what can be done to create a positive school climate for all students
- Engage families, students, and all faculty in developing a shared understanding of academic and behavioral expectations and high-quality instruction and hold staff responsible for implementing any changes
- Communicate high expectations for all students frequently (e.g., "All students are college material") and demonstrate how those beliefs manifest in the school building

For example:

- Collaborative planning is solutions-oriented and based in disaggregated data
- High-quality student work is displayed throughout the school
- All students are enrolled in college- and career-ready prep curriculum
- Establish a clear code of conduct for students and adults with input from school personnel and underserved students and families

Beware of:

- Inconsistent or insufficient use of disaggregated data during collaborative planning
- Rhetoric about high expectations without evidence about how they manifest in the school building

2. How will the school leadership team build trust and improve relationships between adults and underserved students?

Look for:

The school leadership team demonstrates how they ensure:

- Perspectives of underserved students are included in decision-making. For example, leaders review and act on results of disaggregated school climate surveys
- Staff receive bias training so that they are aware of the explicit and implicit messages they send to students
- Teachers establish and communicate clear expectations and classroom procedures and provide frequent feedback to students
- Staff encourage students to be caring and respectful of one another, and teachers model such interactions in the classroom
- Curriculum and teachers' lesson plans draw on the diverse interests and experiences of students

Beware of:

- Answers that blame students and/or the community
- No clear schoolwide behavioral and/or academic expectations
- The school's processes and procedures are primarily reactive (i.e., after negative behaviors) and punitive, rather than preventive

3. How will the school leadership team foster relationships with families and the community, and communicate that families are necessary partners in school improvement?

Look for:

School leadership team to show that they:

- Have an infrastructure to support family engagement, such as a decision-making parent advisory council, and that it is representative of the student population
- Encourage teachers to communicate with families early and often about how students are doing – not just when there is an issue
- Seek input from the families of children from underserved groups on how the school can support students, and follow up with families on what's being done as a result
- Translate materials/meetings for non-English speaking parents, provide food and childcare during school events, and schedule parent/teacher conferences and other events at times that enable working parents to participate

Beware of:

- No infrastructure to create and/or maintain connections with families of children from underserved groups
- No meaningful opportunities to involve parents in school improvement efforts
- Parent involvement that does not reflect the entire school population
- Materials and/or meetings are not translated and there is little effort to bridge the communication gap with non-English speaking parents

4. How will the district help school leaders and staff to improve the school climate for underserved students?

Look for:

- District provides training and support on collecting and analyzing quality school climate data
- District provides ongoing training and support on building a positive school climate for all students and implementing alternatives to exclusionary discipline (e.g., implicit bias, cultural competency, empathy, and restorative justice training)
- District has a plan – with timelines – to engage the families of underserved students
- District routinely examines its policies (e.g., codes of conduct, staffing processes) to ensure they don't undermine school climate
- District has staff dedicated to building and maintaining relationships with community organizations and other agencies to ensure that underserved students receive the supports they need in and out of school (e.g., mental health services)

Beware of:

- No training/support on collecting school climate data
- One-time professional development on school climate-related issues
- Limited engagement with community members
- District allows the use of corporal punishment in schools

5. How will the school leadership team ensure that students of color, low-income students, and students with disabilities are not disciplined more harshly or more often than other students?

Look for:

The school leadership team shows that they:

- Regularly review disaggregated school climate and discipline data to identify disparities
- Establish ambitious, but attainable numeric goals for reducing racial or ethnic discipline disparities with staff, student, and family input
- Implement evidence-based alternatives to exclusionary discipline and corporal punishment (e.g., restorative practices and positive behavioral supports) and provide ongoing training and feedback to teachers on implementing these approaches
- Provide all teachers with training on culturally sustaining classroom management techniques informed by an understanding of implicit bias
- Hire support personnel (e.g., counselors and social workers) and ensure that all school staff — including school resource officers — are trained in de-escalation practices

Beware of:

- Discipline and broader school culture strategies not informed by data
- Lack of ongoing training or resources to support the use of alternative disciplinary practices
- Responses that blame students and fail to acknowledge adults' role in the disparate use of exclusionary discipline

Promising practice: Building a positive school climate for all students

When a school leader challenged a school counselor at St. Louis Park High School in Minneapolis to address the fact that nearly half of the ninth-graders had failed at least one course, she developed the BARR method – for Building Assets, Reducing Risks. BARR is designed to foster intentional relationships between teachers and students and uses student-level data to achieve positive academic, social, and emotional outcomes for all students. Teachers, staff, and school counselors meet regularly with parents to discuss students – who are grouped into cohorts that take core classes together and attend short lessons designed to develop students’ social-emotional skills. This allows teachers to build relationships with students and identify their strengths and areas for improvement. Thanks to the BARR approach, St. Louis Park cut the failure rate for ninth-graders from 50 percent to 25 percent.

BARR has since been implemented at dozens of schools across the county and has been [shown to improve student outcomes](#). Among the schools that have had great success with BARR are those with diverse student bodies. For example, a large, racially diverse high school in Southern California [cut the failure rate for ninth-graders in half](#) and closed the gap between Latino students and their peers just three years after implementing BARR.

Early Childhood Education (ECE)

Early childhood programs have long-term benefits for children. Numerous studies show that children who participate in high-quality early childhood programs that focus on physical, social-emotional, and cognitive health and development have better long-term outcomes than children who do not have access to programs. But these programs often fail to reach those who would most benefit. Young children from low-income families are less likely to be enrolled in early childhood education programs, as are children of color — particularly Latinos. Use the following questions to urge school and district leaders to ensure that children — especially children of color, low-income children, English learners, and children with disabilities or developmental delays — have access to high-quality early childhood programs and that they are supported through planned transitions as they move into kindergarten.

1. What efforts have been made to understand the experiences of children from underserved groups before they start school?

Look for:

- A needs assessment process that includes information on which early childhood programs serve which communities
- Knowledge of community-based care programs, especially those that serve children of color and low-income children, among elementary teachers and school leaders
- Surveys of family experiences prior to school entry, including a home language and developmental survey, that inform school practices

Beware of:

- A lack of knowledge about community programs
- No mechanism to gather information from families about children’s experiences

2. How do school and district leaders promote communication and continuity between early childhood programs — especially those that serve children of color and children from low-income families — and elementary schools?

Look for:

- School-level partnerships with Head Start and other early childhood programs to continue family support services and other comprehensive supports
- Information on children’s development is shared between educators in early childhood programs and elementary teachers and school leaders
- Shared expectations and standards for what children should know and be able to do as they move through programs from birth to third grade, including developmentally appropriate behavioral expectations
- Invitations for educators from local early childhood programs to participate in professional development opportunities at elementary schools

Beware of:

- No connections to Head Start or other community-based childcare programs
- No established system for sharing child and family information to optimize academic and social-emotional success

3. What is the process for inviting families with young children (in pre-K or kindergarten) into the school community?

Look for:

- Schools introduce young children and their families to new classrooms and teachers before the first day of school, with multiple opportunities to become familiar with school routines, home visits from teachers, and orientations for families to meet school staff offered in multiple languages
- Training for teachers to help them effectively engage families of color, low-income families, and families who speak a language other than English
- Developmental screenings and assessments for young children (that are appropriate for English learners and children with disabilities/developmental delays) before entering school
- Materials and resources about early childhood and kindergarten programs are available throughout the community (in libraries, laundromats, grocery stores, and religious sites, for example) in a variety of languages

Beware of:

- No process for welcoming families with young children to school
- Form letters for families that focus on school paperwork rather than family supports

4. How are district and school leaders working or supporting efforts to increase access to high-quality early childhood programs for children of color and children from low-income families?

Look for:

- Ongoing professional development for teachers and other school staff on best practices for working with culturally and linguistically diverse children and families, and children with disabilities/developmental delays and their families
- Funding strategies that support the expansion of high-quality early childhood programs, including blended funding streams, private-public partnerships, and new local tax sources
- The development and expansion of bilingual programs for all children, home visits, and full-day and year-long programs to meet the needs of working families
- Grants and other funding for early childhood programs that prioritize services to low-income families, families of color, and the communities in which they live
- Support or subsidies for educational advancement of early childhood educators (including bilingual educators)

Beware of:

- Efforts that do not explicitly involve and meet the needs of families of color and low-income families



Questions About Inequities Between and Within Schools

The improvement process should begin with a close analysis of various data to pinpoint learning-opportunity gaps within the school. Unfortunately, while district and school leaders often look at achievement data, they may fail to examine data by student group. That's where advocates come in. By asking key questions that go beyond overall averages and get to the heart of the experiences and outcomes of different student groups, advocates can keep the focus on equity. Below, we highlight the differences between general and equity-focused questions and provide some examples of questions (and indicators) that may prompt conversations about disparities in opportunity and achievement, both within and between schools. Please note that the indicators listed here are just samples, and not an exhaustive list. Moreover, your school/district may lack enough data to respond to all of these questions.

Topic	GENERAL QUESTION (Focuses on school/districtwide challenges)	EQUITY-FOCUSED QUESTION 1 (Focuses on inequities within schools)	EQUITY-FOCUSED QUESTION 2 (Focuses on inequities between schools)
Question Structure	What is the percentage of X in your school or district?	Are low-income students, students of color, students with disabilities, and/or English learners in this school more or less likely to experience or have access to X than their peers? By how much?	How does the percentage of X in this school compare to other schools in the district? In the state?
Access to Strong Teachers	What percentage of educators in our school or district are <i>first-year teachers</i> ?	Are low-income students, students of color, students with disabilities, and/or English learners at this school more or less likely to be taught by <i>first-year teachers</i> than their peers? By how much?	How does the percentage of <i>first-year teachers</i> in this school compare to other schools in the district? In the state?
ASK THESE SAME QUESTIONS ABOUT:			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers who receive a highly effective rating on their evaluation • Teachers who receive an ineffective rating 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers who are brand new to the subject/grade they are teaching • Teachers who are not certified in the subject they're teaching 	
Well-Rounded Curriculum	What percentage of students in our school or district <i>complete a college-and-career ready course of study</i> ?	Are low-income students, students of color, students with disabilities, and/or English learners at this school more or less likely to <i>complete a college-and-career-ready course of study</i> than their peers?	How does the percentage of students <i>completing a college-and-career ready course of study</i> in this school compare to other schools in the district? In the state?
ASK THESE SAME QUESTIONS ABOUT:			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students taking at least one elective, such as art, music, or theater per year 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students completing at least one high-quality Internship/work-based learning experience 	

Topic	GENERAL QUESTION (Focuses on school/districtwide challenges)	EQUITY-FOCUSED QUESTION 1 (Focuses on inequities within schools)	EQUITY-FOCUSED QUESTION 2 (Focuses on inequities between schools)
Advancement Opportunities	PARTICIPATION: What percentage of students in our school or district <i>take at least one AP course</i> ?	Are low-income students, students of color, students with disabilities, and/or English learners more or less likely to <i>take at least one AP course</i> than their peers? By how much?	How does the percentage of students who <i>take an AP course</i> in this school compare to other schools in the district? To statewide averages?
	SUCCESS: What percentage of students who take an AP course in our school or district <i>successfully complete it?</i> (i.e., earn a 3 or higher on the AP test)	Are low-income students, students of color, students with disabilities, and/or English learners more or less likely to <i>successfully complete AP classes</i> than their peers? By how much?	How does the percentage of students who <i>successfully complete an AP course</i> compare to other schools in the district? To statewide averages?
	<p style="text-align: center;">ASK THESE SAME QUESTIONS ABOUT:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>International Baccalaureate (IB) courses</i> • <i>Dual enrollment courses</i> • <i>High school-level courses in middle school</i> • <i>Gifted and talented or other enrichment programs (in elementary school)</i> • <i>Honors classes</i> 		
School Climate	What proportion of students are <i>suspended by the school or district</i> each year?	Are low-income students, students of color, students with disabilities, and/or English learners more or less likely to be <i>suspended</i> than their peers? By how much?	How does our school's <i>suspension rate</i> compare to other schools in the district? In the state?
	<p style="text-align: center;">ASK THESE SAME QUESTIONS ABOUT:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Students suspended in school</i> • <i>Students who are chronically absent</i> • <i>Students suspended for discretionary offences</i> • <i>Students who report on school climate surveys that they feel welcome at school, feel safe and supported, have a strong relationship with at least one adult in the school, etc.</i> • <i>Students expelled</i> • <i>Families who report on climate surveys that they feel welcome, their concerns are heard and addressed, and they receive clear information about how their child is doing</i> • <i>Students subjected to police involvement and arrests</i> • <i>Students experiencing bullying</i> 		
Access to High-Quality Early Learning	What percent of young children in our district are <i>enrolled in a high-quality early learning program</i> ?	Are low-income students, students of color, students with disabilities, and/or English learners at this school more or less likely to be <i>enrolled in a high-quality early learning program</i> ? By how much?	How does the percentage of young children <i>enrolled in high-quality early learning programs</i> in our district compare to other districts? To the state average?
	<p style="text-align: center;">ASK THESE SAME QUESTIONS ABOUT:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Children who demonstrate proficient Kindergarten readiness skills</i> • <i>Children who attend a school with an evidence-based social and emotional learning (SEL) curriculum</i> • <i>Children who attend a bilingual early learning program</i> 		