

# Leveraging the Power of School-Family-Community Partnerships to Support and Sustain Socially Just and Equitable Schools

*This article presents an analysis of policies and practices that perpetuate inequities in schools and what school-family-community (S-F-C) partnerships can do to help breakthrough inequitable conditions in the nation's K-12 schools. Grounded in the framework of critical social justice, the paper builds on the findings of case studies and field reports which provide evidence of the power of S-F-C partners to support and sustain just and equitable schools. Data were collected from the experiences of practitioners and from scholars who combined their theoretical knowledge with research on the impacts of partners in driving equity-focused change.*

**Keywords:** *working for/with equity, socially just and equitable schools, partnerships with families and communities*

**The intent of this study is to build a sense of urgency about the necessity to create an enhanced awareness of educational inequities.** Remediating long-standing inequities in education compels schools to leverage the power of families and communities to support and sustain socially just and equitable schools. Creating the conditions for equitable schools rarely happens behind the closed doors of the schoolhouse. The old paradigm of schools working alone has rendered siloes inoperable and obliges schools to work in partnership with families and communities as co-creators of equitable opportunities for school children. The article provides practical guidance on how schools might leverage the assets of families and communities to support educational equity and sustain schools of justice in times of both change and stability.

The author presents an analysis of policies and practices that perpetuate inequities in schools and what school-family-community (S-F-C) partnerships can do to breakthrough inequitable conditions and remediate the harms in the nation's K-12 schools. Grounded in the framework of critical social justice, this report builds on the findings of case studies and field reports which provide evidence of the power of S-F-C partners to support and sustain just and equitable schools. Data were collected from the authentic experiences of practitioners and from scholars who combined their theoretical knowledge with research on the work of partners to drive forward equity-focused change.

The aim of this inquiry is not to convince readers of the merits of S-F-C partnerships. Rather, it is meant to serve as a guide for all those who are committed to redressing educational inequities and helping students recover from the initial wave of COVID-19 shutdowns and the ongoing learning disruptions which are particularly troublesome for the most marginalized and underrepresented students, their families, and the communities in which they live.

## Critical Social Justice Framework

For the purpose of this paper, the framework of critical social justice is used as *both* a set of ethical principles *and* a process of accountability, transparency and actions that foster diverse, equitable and inclusive schools (Frederking, 2014). The framework of critical social justice grew out of the Belmont Report of 1978 which focused on the basic ethical principles of fairness, beneficence, and justice (National Commission, 1978). In this theoretical foundation, critical social justice is understood as an act of collective engagement in which partners collaborate to identify inequities and work to disrupt inequitable policies and practices that keep far too many children on the margins of schooling and furthest from justice and equity.

The framework inspires partners to weave theory into practice via reflection and policy praxis. Freire (2018) described praxis as critical action and reflection on the world “in order to transform it” (p. 53). Thus, the framework provides a context for sensemaking among partners who aim to pool their expertise, create community-driven solutions to inequities, and engage in actions to co-create socially just and equitable schools (e.g., Mullen, 2021; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017).

## Materials and Methods

The overall approach to this qualitative study was informed by Braun and Clarke’s 2012 guidelines on conducting thematic analyses, whereby patterns in the data are drawn from a review of selected scholarly works and practitioner observations. Analysis was grounded in the theory of critical social justice (Frederking, 2014). As Yanow (2007) recognized, the framework provides a context for interpreting data from case studies of the authentic experiences of practitioners in a variety of settings as well as empirical field reports of original surveys and in-depth analyses of data.

## Objective

The underlying objective of this study was to move S-F-C partnerships to the center of discourse on approaches that foster high-impact, equity-related policies and practices in K-12 schools. Research in the field of educational leadership typically focuses on the design or delivery mode. Missing from many studies is the lived experience of partners engaged in co-designing solutions to problems that cannot be solved by educators acting alone. In the process of actively listening to the concerns of all parties, educators might be more likely to operationalize equity via developing trusting relationships with families and communities, sharing power and responsibility, and building positive and sustained relationships to maximize student learning, safety and belonging (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018).

## Methods

Policy analysis was used as the research method in this qualitative study (Browne et al, 2018). The procedures for policy analysis include identifying the issues, assessing the pros and cons of current policies/practices, and identifying breakthroughs in equitable policies and practices. Policy analysis yields particular benefits; e.g., an increased understanding of why policies are

enacted or rejected and an expanded knowledge base on ways to dismantle inequities in K-12 schools and engage allies in advocating for socially just and equitable schools.

Data were analyzed following an iterative process of data reduction. Post-hoc text analysis of the narratives in the case studies and the contents of the field reports was employed to identify commonly recurring patterns and themes. Further categorization and refinement of the data was used to inductively unpack potential actions and drivers for equity-focused change.

### **Data Sources**

Data were drawn from two bodies of knowledge; i.e., pragmatic knowledge as sourced from over 40 contemporary case studies of practitioner experiences and structured knowledge as sourced from extant field studies conducted by specialists in the field. While the qualitative data cannot be generalized across broad populations, the review of published cases and field studies offered an anecdotal understanding of the work of partners in various contexts.

Data sources were purposefully selected for relevance to the intent of the study. Field reports and case studies were intentionally selected to identify the ways in which partners collaborated to redress the harms of inequitable systems of education, dispel stereotypes and move toward social justice. Selection of data included reports from strong advocates of social justice who recounted the harms of oppressive systems of power and privilege along with cases and field studies from scholars and practitioners who leveraged the work of partners to support and sustain socially just and equitable schools. As a caveat, purposeful sampling risks a degree of confirmation bias. Thus, readers are advised to be cautious in adapting the findings in their unique settings.

### ***Counter Narrative: A New Dialectic***

This study serves as a counter-narrative to the dominant narrative of social justice opponents who exploit their biases to deny justice and exert themselves to perpetuate inequities in the nation's schools. The study provides an account of how partners countered the dominant narrative by offering a new dialectic—an intentional approach to surface biases and stereotypes, disrupt oppressive systems, and restore the purposes of a democratic education. As Gardner (1988) observed in his civic-minded work, community engagement serves to counteract injustice, redress entrenched interests, and regenerate democratic values.

### **Research Question**

One essential question guided the policy study: How might partnerships with S-F-C be leveraged to disrupt educational inequities and breakthrough the systemic and structural barriers to just and equitable schools?

### **Findings**

The approach for examining the power of S-F-C partnerships was organized around the findings from a review of policies and practices that perpetuate inequity and the findings from a review of breakthroughs in policies and practices that support socially just and equitable schools.

### **Findings: Policies and Practices that Perpetuate Inequity**

The U.S. education system has a long history of inequities that result in deep disparities for students, schools, families, and communities. Equity gaps widened during the long-term COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing periods of disrupted learning. Scholars identified a host of inequitable policies which soared both during and in the aftermath of the pandemic. Accounts of inequitable practices seized the headlines of the nation’s leading education websites and newsletters. While it was not the purpose of this inquiry to provide a thorough summary of the policies and practices that perpetuate educational inequities in schools and communities, a synopsis of the findings is contained in Table 1.

**Table 1. Synopsis of Findings from Reports of Inequitable Policies and Practices**

<b>Prime Indicators of Exclusionary Policies and Practices</b>	<b>References</b>
Disproportionate suspension and expulsion policies that thrust youth into the criminal justice system	McNeel, 2022
Funding policies that reward affluent schools at the expense of undeserved schools	Darling-Hammond, 2019
Policies that track marginalized students out of high-quality advanced coursework	Kolluri, 2018
Punitive attendance practices and tardiness policies that place students at risk	Childs & Grooms, 2018
Punishment for students speaking their first language outside the classroom	Shvidko, 2017
Statutory bans on what books children can read, discriminatory dress codes, biased behavior management, and overidentification of marginalized children in special education	Woo et al., 2020
Violence against people of color, deportation of undocumented immigrants, and episodes of religious and cultural backlash	McCray et al., 2021
Additional examples of contentious issues appearing in the headlines of the national media: Rising incidents of racialized bullying Denial of access to health care for transgendered youth Erasure of Indigenous cultures in textbooks Punitive actions for students participating in protests for Black Lives Matter Stereotypes about the achievement of Asian American students Lunch shaming by branding students experiencing poverty with visible hand stamps Curtailed access to equity trainings Violations of rights for refugees and migrant students	Various National Media

## **Findings: Breakthroughs in Policies and Practices**

This section provides a synopsis of selected case studies and field reports that provide evidence of the ways schools worked together with family and community partners to redress the inequities which grew as a consequence of the pandemic. During the COVID-19 pandemic, schools faced heated disagreements over what could be taught or discussed in class, conflict over school closure and the shift to distance learning, and sharp differences over vaccinations, masks, and quarantines.

When schools reopened, educators called upon stakeholders to help redesign the conditions needed for recovery. The nation's First Lady, herself a community-college educator, issued a caution about the work ahead: "Even as our schools are reopened, we know that recovery isn't always the same as healing. Our students are still wrestling with the aftershocks of this pandemic—the isolation, anxiety, and sorrow" (The Whitehouse, 2022, para. 22).

Despite the ongoing concerns, surprising progress was made in the effort to move toward recovery and healing. In a survey on the impacts of the pandemic, school administrators reported a majority of families and staff were expressing high levels of concern about students' academic needs and their social-emotional and mental health (IES, 2022). In response, more than half of all schools in the nation implemented collaborative actions to address the concerns. New initiatives formed to connect schools with local networks of families and communities. Schools used the opportunity of the shutdown to engage with local stakeholders in novel ways; they worked together to disrupt inequities and took risks to innovate in pursuit of equity. As Qarooni (2022) observed, partners opened space for "curiosity and critical conversation as well as the generational knowledge that is essential to raising a more equitable society" (p. 34).

### ***Findings from Case Studies***

The case studies examined in this inquiry demonstrate the practical ways in which schools engaged families and local communities as allies and activists during intense periods of disturbance and discord, e.g., via learning hubs, whole-child education, cultivating trust, responsive and relational approaches, community initiatives, and leading through the lens of equity.

The narratives in the case studies reveal how partners cultivated trusting relationships centered on equitable solutions to a quality education. Working together, they explored context-specific remedies to confront inequitable conditions and renorm schools as just places of learning in which students' histories, heritages and identities were valued and respected. They challenged inequities, took action to disrupt systems of exclusion and committed to drive equitable policies and practices forward for social justice. Partners recognized that the harms of inequitable policies and practices were incalculable and needed to be disrupted by what Drucker (2008) called purposefully abandonment. As Budge and Parrett (2022) observed, the act of rebuffing inequitable policies and practices can strengthen the resolve of partners to engage in practices that offer the promise of equity in schools and systems. A synopsis of the findings from case studies is contained in Table 2.

**Table 2. Synopsis of Findings from Case Studies of Practitioner Experiences**

<b>A Review of Findings from Case Studies</b>	<b>References</b>
Uplifting schools as learning hubs of the community via high-dosage tutoring and other supports to accelerate learning in safe and caring pandemic learning pods	Robinson et al., 2021 Bryk, 2015
Bridging with families and schools to power-up schools as the center of the community's support of student learning and development	Vegas & Winthrop, 2020
Making whole-child education the norm via integrated approaches to curricula and wraparound supports for K-12 students	McBride-Murray et al., 2021
Engaging families and communities in the development of holistic webs of protective support services; e.g., early learning options, summer programs, school-based health clinics, and ethnic studies	Lynch et al., 2022 Tucker, 2021
Pivoting to virtual instruction to ensure continuity of instruction for whole-child education	Lake & Weisberg, 2021 Toner, 2022
Cultivating trust with stakeholders via listening and valuing families' funds of knowledge via community walks, Kiva talking circles, affinity clubs, and sharing relevant artifacts from students' home cultures to create identity-safe schools	Hernández & Darling-Hammond, 2022 Safir & Dugan, 2021
Developing an inclusive atmosphere of trust and rapport with the community and mobilizing community advocacy to build socially just and equity-focused schools	Radd et al., 2021 Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017
Fostering a restorative climate for learning, via dialogue, empathy interviews, and trusting connections	Webb, 2021 Smith et al., 2018
Enriching learning in settings by awakening new knowledge and fostering sensemaking of past, present, and future learnings	Weick, 1995
Partnering with the community to fulfill the promise of equity for historically marginalized and underserved students and families	Gerzon-Kessler, 2022
Organizing community initiatives via sharing leadership and power with nondominant families on how schools operate	Hong, 2019
Collaborating on actions for equity to reduce opportunity gaps	Reville & Sacks, 2021
Leading through the lens of equity via prioritizing social justice in multi-ethnic schools	Stevenson, 2007

### ***Findings from Field Report***

Reports from researchers in the field suggest evidence-based practices and policies to co-create equitable and just schools. Scholars provided in-depth analyses of interventions to mitigate the social, economic, and cultural barriers to educational equity, e.g., via extended learning options, academic and social emotional learning, inclusive practices, mentoring and coaching support, equitable funding, and collaboration.

The field reports reveal how S-F-C partners were able to mitigate intolerance and breakthrough the chilling effects of the systemic and structural barriers to an equitable education. Partners responded in innovative ways to ensure student access to the supports needed for recovery, regardless of location or circumstance. They recognized the trauma in the aftermath of multiple pandemics, challenged the polarized climate, resisted deficit thinking, responded with

empathy, and remained cautiously optimistic in the work to move educational equity closer to reality. A synopsis of the findings from field reports is contained in Table 3.

**Table 3. Synopsis of Findings from Field Reports**

<b>A Review of Findings from Field Reports</b>	<b>References</b>
Extended learning options via comprehensive initiatives to support safe and equitable learning both in and out-of-school	Simkin et al., 2021
Academic and social and emotional learning interventions via after school and summer programs, counseling services, attendance advocates, and high-impact tutoring	Diliberti & Schwartz, 2022 Mullen, 2021
Inclusive practices via a respectful exchange of assets, celebrations of success, and culturally-affirming relationships	Hesbol, 2013
Mentoring and coaching support as a resource to cultivate emotional resilience and raise aspirations	Aguilar, 2018
Equitable funding streams via differentiated funding, strategies to attract a diversified workforce, training in culturally relevant pedagogies, and a windfall with COVID-19 relief funds	Darling-Hammond, 2019 Barnum, 2022
Collaborative initiatives to advance parent-school ties whereby families serve as cultural brokers to help mediate issues, close learning disparities, and reclaim schools of justice	Ishimura, 2020
Community-responsive practices in which partners redistribute roles and responsibilities, share power for goal setting and planning, and participate in collaborative decision making	Duncan-Andrade, 2022
Cross-sector collaborations to promote child and family resilience and the adaptive capacities of the community to help students bounce back from disrupted learning and thrive	Masten & Motti-Stefanidi, 2020
Collaboration with governments and non-profits to increase broadband and close the digital divide, via online curricula, large-scale videoconferences, webinars, and virtual EdCamps	Vincent-Lancrin et al., 2022
Trauma-informed practices to increase family engagement and seek remedies to promote equitable policies and practices	Toppo et al., 2022
Equity as a shared value and objective that enables cross-sector collaborators to resist polarized climates and implement equitable policies and practices	Al-Refaei, 2022 Qarooni, 2022 Turnbull et al., 2022
Asset-based thinking via recognizing the assets of next-generation families as a predictor of children's development, educational attainment, and success in school and life, particularly among communities of color	DeMatthews, 2015 Weiss et al., 2018
Empathy and ethnocultural connections with communities to resist the erasure of heritage languages and Indigenous cultures, and nurture resilience and healing	Khalifa et al., 2019 Sosa-Provencio et al., 2020
Constructive problem talk to foster identity interconnections among partners who work together to cultivate emotionally safe and inclusive learning spaces	Jones & Kessler, 2020
Community-based equity audits to shape the development of shared goals and joint decision making, centered on equitable solutions to inequities	Green, 2017 Skrla et al., 2009

## Discussion

### Emerging Themes, Patterns, and Strategies for Equity-Focused Change

Text analysis was conducted post-hoc after the indexing of the narratives in the experiential case studies and the contents of the evidence-based field reports. The text analysis aimed to unpack the preliminary interpretations of the data and to further identify potential answers to the research question on how partnerships with S-F-C might be leveraged to disrupt educational inequities and breakthrough the systemic and structural barriers to just and equitable schools. The text analysis yielded the following commonly-recurring themes, overlapping patterns, and high-potential strategies used by S-F-C partners to co-create the conditions for just and equitable schools.

#### *Commonly-Recurring Themes in Case Studies*

Three commonly-recurring themes were identified in the text analysis, namely, (1) holistic webs of support, in which partners support high-impact tutoring, learning hubs, digital resources, early learning approaches, and extended day and summer programs; (2) wraparound services, in which partners foster whole-child education, community organizing, school-based health clinics, and mentoring to nurture resilience and healing; (3) a culture of safety and care, in which partners cultivate culturally sensitive environments via appreciative inquiry, listening walks, Kiva circles, restorative practices, dialogue, empathy interviews, trust and affirmations for identity-safety.

#### *Overlapping Patterns in Field Reports*

Three overlapping patterns were identified in the text analysis, namely, (1) community-responsive practices, in which partners redistribute roles and responsibilities, share power for goal setting/planning, and participate in collaborative decision making, resource equity, trusting and culturally-affirming relationships, and adaptivity to partner needs; (2) social and cultural allyship in which partners promote an exchange of assets using equity maps, constructive problem talk, and advocacy with policy makers for socially just schools; and (3) respectful and reciprocal interactions, in which partners support consistent communications and further the shared responsibility to dismantle inequitable funding policies, reduce barriers to access, foster inclusive communities, and eliminate threats to academic and social and emotional well-being.

#### *High-Potential Strategies—Purposeful Actions and Drivers for Equity-Focused Change*

Key strategies emerged following the iterative process of data reduction in which the data were reviewed, summarized, and organized inductively under emergent headings and subheadings (Neale, 2021). Categorization and refinement of the themes and patterns, as derived from the experience of scholars and practitioners, revealed high-potential actions and drivers that S-F-C partners might use to build awareness of injustices, take action to leverage the power of partners, and drive change centered on socially just and equitable schools.



**Key Actions.** Analysis revealed the following key actions to help build the adaptive capacity of partners to engage in equity-focused action; namely, (1) Engender respectful, responsive and reciprocal relationships among schools, families, and community members; (2) Ensure a culture of safety, well-being, belonging and inclusion for the identity-safety of all stakeholders; and (3) Take steps to know and value the assets and resources of the community's cultural identity, especially among underserved and nondominant families and community members.

**Key Drivers.** Analysis revealed the following key drivers used by partners to drive change and help break through the systemic and structural barriers to just and equitable schools; namely, (1) Redistribute shared power for goal-setting, planning, and policy direction for systemic change; (2) Collaborate with stakeholders of all identities and diverse contexts; and (3) Prioritize community-driven remedies to counter social justice challenges in the local area.

*A Proviso.* Powerful strategies such as the aforementioned actions and drivers may assist partners in the work to support and sustain socially just schools and help make educational equity a reality. However, the strategies that work in one setting may not necessarily work elsewhere. Care must be taken to adapt the approaches to specific contexts by taking account of “differences in the policy framework, the needs of the partner, and the local issues to be tackled” (Förschner, 2006, p. 3). To avoid overconfidence in the recommended actions and drivers, readers are encouraged to explore other references and emerging developments that may have been missed herein.

### **Conclusions: A Roadmap to Socially-Just and Equitable Schools**

The recommendations from this study provide evidence of the power of school, family, and community partners to help breakthrough educational inequities and move schools forward for recovery and reparation of persistent inequities. Based on the results of this study, it can be concluded that high-impact, equity-minded policies and practices not only help schools recover from periods of challenge and change, but also work to support and sustain socially-just and equitable schools. The narratives illustrate how partners worked to disrupt long-standing inequities, took action to engender respectful and reciprocal relationships, and worked together to drive change centered on equitable solutions to the problems of practice in K-12 schools.

### **Implications: A Pathway to Educational Equity**

The lessons learned provide a counter-story to the extraordinary times of chaos and turmoil in education. The accounts reported herein reveal how the aftershocks of the pandemic gave rise to new opportunities for partners to co-create a path forward to educational equity. The narratives demonstrate how S-F-C partners joined forces to combat the impacts of disrupted learning, pooled their assets and resources, and shared leadership and power over how schools operate. Schools weaved together the experiences of local families and communities to reclaim educational equity and center social justice in schools and systems. The lessons may have implications for other public and private elementary and secondary schools which serve students of distinct identities in urban, rural, and tribal settings.

The findings provide powerful insights on why partnerships are urgently needed to help

disrupt the oppressive systems of power and privilege that hinder rather than prepare students for success in school and later life. When partners collaborate to strengthen the protective factors that foster educational equity, they can help turnaround the barriers to learning and increase the resilience of students to persevere despite significant obstacles.

Long-term investments in equity-focused actions and drivers are central to the work of ensuring a more equitable future for generations of children to come. Schools which engage families and communities in meaningful and mutually beneficial ways are more likely to uphold policies and practices that employ “the community’s cultural, social, intellectual and political resources to promote student learning and school improvement” (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015, p. 16).

### **Significance: High-Potential Actions and Drivers for Equity-Focused Change**

The recommendations from this study may be useful for academics and practitioners who are invested in developing strategies to renorm schools as socially just places of learning in times of rapid cultural change and soaring inequities. Equity-focused actions that reinforce asset-based understandings of students and families can help amplify community-driven policies in multiple settings. Likewise, equity-focused drivers that focus on disruption of inequities can positively contribute to more equitable systems of education.

The work of S-F-C partners in supporting and sustaining just and equitable schools is still unfinished. As Lindsey and colleagues (2010) remarked over a decade ago, sustainable partnerships must begin with a shared commitment to social justice and a joint understanding of the “historical policies and practices that have led, whether intentional or not, to disparities in student achievement” (p. 124). Further research using the method of action research—in which diverse stakeholders share their experiences and resources—may yield additional implications for reflection and action to support and sustain just and equitable schools.

It is important to acknowledge that the answers to the question of equitable schools may not be uniformly embraced by all educators. With staggering losses in school enrollment and subsequent hiring freezes in the long shadow of the pandemic, there were less support staff to provide dedicated tutoring and other interventions to help offset student setbacks in learning. As one weary teacher noted, we were “burdened by multiple disruptions to learning, and underappreciated for how much schools were already doing to support students in our care” (J. Jacobson, personal conversation, October 18, 2022). While there are no easy solutions to relieve the pressures on schools, it is hoped that the narratives cited in this inquiry may serve as a roadmap for families and communities to help ease the burden and support the wide-ranging role schools play in providing an equitable education that equips students not only to strive but thrive.

The old paradigm of schools working alone has rendered siloes inoperable. In the face of mounting demands and pressures, “schools can’t be held responsible for providing the social safety net to address all the problems facing education” (D. Bower, personal conversation, October 18, 2022). Equity-focused change starts with the lived experience of partners who are engaged in co-designing solutions to problems that cannot be solved by educators acting alone.

Addressing the systemic and structural barriers to an equitable education will necessarily involve strategies that move *from* the isolation of the schoolhouse *to* engaged partnerships with families and communities. Processes that embrace families and communities can help build the capacity of schools to counteract historical inequities and move toward recovery. The reforms

most likely to be sustained in the future compel schools to work in solidarity with partners of all identities and contexts. In times of rising discord and division in schools and society at large, it becomes even more essential to leverage the power of S-F-C partners as collaborators and allies in co-creating a more resilient and hopeful future of education, working for and with equity in mind.

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