



Equity Dispatch

Engaging School Systems as Equity-Oriented Learning Organizations



June 2014



[Visit our Website](#)

Meet the Authors:

The newsletter at Great Lakes Equity Center is written and edited by [Kitty Chen](#), [Erin Macey](#), [Juhanna Rogers](#), [Marsha Simon](#), [Seena Skelton](#), and [Kathleen King Thorius](#).

[Subscribe to our Publications](#)

Equity Spotlight



Kathleen King Thorius, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor of Special Education in Indiana University's School of Education at IUPUI. She received her doctorate in curriculum and instruction with an emphasis on special education from Arizona State

Jump to...

- o [Educate](#): Read how to engage school systems as equity-oriented learning organizations.
- o [Engage](#): Learn about the Great Lakes Equity Center's development and current work.
- o [Empower](#): Explore these resources developed by the Great Lakes Equity Center.
- o [Spotlight](#): Read about the work Dr. Kathleen King Thorius has done to advance equity.
- o [Upcoming Events](#): Attend an event in Region V.

IMPACT: Educate, Engage, Empower--For Equity

Through learning we re-create ourselves. Through learning we become able to do something we never were able to do. Through learning we re-perceive the world and our relationship to it. Through learning we extend our capacity to create, to be part of the generative process of life.

----Peter M. Senge

Educate

Schools as Systems for Learning

Creating the conditions for student learning requires a constellation of interacting elements working together to provide opportunities for students to construct knowledge and to expand existing skills into new areas. Coincidentally, this is the very definition of a system – a group of interacting, interrelated, or interdependent elements forming a complex whole (Merriam-Webster, 2014). Schools are complex systems involving people, policies and practices, interacting with the

primary purpose of preparing young people to become responsible citizens, able to fully participate in, and contribute to, a democratic society, as well as succeed in a global community. Adding to this complexity is the fact that schools are nested within districts, districts within state education agencies and state education agencies operate within state and federal mandates (Kozleski & Artiles, 2012). Each of these levels is reciprocally influencing the others both within and between levels (Kozleski & Artiles, 2012). With the principal purpose of ensuring that every student graduates from high school ready for college or a career, school systems must become learning organizations focused on building and maintaining the capacity to meet the educational needs of all students. At its foundation, a learning organization is one in which the people within the organization have a commitment to continuous improvement at all levels of the system - classroom, school, district and state. It is one where the people in the organization continually expand their capacity to create the outcomes they desire (Senge, 1990). We propose four core practices to help school systems become equity-oriented learning organizations: 1) involve multiple stakeholders with diverse perspectives in collaborative inquiry cycles, 2) support staff in critical reflective practice and professional learning, 3) engage in data-based decision making, and 4) cultivate creativity in problem solving.

Many school systems are challenged by persistent disparities in outcomes between students from historically underserved groups and their white, middle class, non-disabled peers. In *Race for Results*, a policy report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, African-American, and American Indian, Latino /a students and students from low income families were shown to struggle the most on five indicators leading to positive educational outcomes and successful early work experiences. These indicators were 1) fourth-grade reading proficiency, 2) eighth-grade math proficiency, 3) high school students graduating on time, 4) young adults in school or working, and 5) the completion of a post-secondary degree (Annie E. Casey, 2014). Systemic reform efforts have become an important feature in K-12 education to redress these achievement and outcome disparities (Kozleski & Thorius, 2013).

Create Equity-Oriented Learning Organizations as a Way to Achieve School Reform

The call for systemic reform approaches in K-12 education necessitates addressing the responsibility of improvement systems within schools, districts and state education agencies have to appropriately meet the learning needs of diverse students. This perspective places the target of action rightly on the systems' role in enabling students to achieve positive academic and social outcomes. Unfortunately, educators have become inundated with multiple, seemingly "piled on" systems reform initiatives, and too few of these initiatives have demonstrated sustained improvements in student achievement.

One suggested reason for this lack of success is that many school reform approaches have tended to over-emphasize technical interventions while failing to examine critical outcomes such as equity, access, and opportunities to learn (Kozleski & Artiles, 2012). Technical solutions are strategies applied to solve specific and direct programmatic issues or problems related to the operations of an organization (Mulligan & Kozleski, 2009). An example of a technical intervention is the adoption of a new math intervention program to address students' poor math performance, or a revision to a district's investigation procedures for reporting incidents of bullying and harassment to address school safety. While technical solutions are often necessary to improve practices, these interventions alone frequently are not sufficient to bring about long-lasting improvements.

Sustainable improvements come from in-depth examination of classroom, school and district cultures in which student learning is situated. School improvement efforts should shift from focusing on fixing problems in isolation relying almost exclusively on technical solutions to enhancing the capacity of the whole system to address

University. Previously, Dr. Thorius was an urban school psychologist. She has also worked for the National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems (NCCRESt) and the National Institute for Urban School Improvement (NIUSI). Currently, Dr. Thorius is the Principal Investigator for the Great Lakes Equity Center, one of ten federally-funded educational equity assistance centers. She led development of the center's design and received funding for its implementation in 2011, along with Co-PIs Dr. Thu Suong Nguyen and Dr. Brendan Maxcy.

Dr. Thorius's research interest in educational equity, particularly special education, originated from her work as a college access program counselor in a Boston high school. From interacting with students, she started to detect the structural issues that prevented students from underserved populations—including students of color, students who are learning English as a new language, and students with disabilities—from accessing higher education. In her later work, she became concerned about students' access to the general education curriculum, including access to robust educational experiences or high-quality opportunities to learn for students from historically underserved populations.

Dr. Thorius is also an advocate of teacher access to professional learning opportunities that help them address the educational needs of an increasingly diverse student population. She seeks to understand both the features of professional learning that lead to improved practice and student outcomes, as well as the process of educators' explorations of how their own cultural histories and experiences converge with schools' and students' cultures to constrain and afford student learning.

Dr. Thorius has a strong record of facilitating partnerships with state departments of education and school districts to create inclusive, culturally responsive educational systems. She has extensive experience developing professional learning resources and providing equity-oriented professional development to states, districts, institutes of higher education, and professional organizations. Dr. Thorius was named the IUUPI Chancellor's Diversity Scholar in 2013, and was co-recipient of a 2.4 million dollar grant from the U.S. DOE in 2008 for the Region IV Equity Assistance Center, the Equity Alliance at ASU. To read Dr. Thorius's publications, please visit

problems by engaging in shared learning. This on-going systemic optimizing must be comprehensive and include mechanisms like leadership structures, stakeholder engagement processes, data systems, and so on. Equity-oriented learning organizations critically examine the patterns of underlying beliefs, practices, policies, structures and norms that may marginalize specific groups of students, and limit these students' opportunities for learning (Mulligan & Kozleski, 2009). As a result of these critical investigations, teams of stakeholders are able to collaboratively learn about contextual factors effecting outcomes and create or identify comprehensive strategies for addressing the policies, practices, procedures, structures and beliefs that are barriers to educational equity.

Recommendations for Creating an Equity-Oriented Learning organization

By going beyond reforming or "correcting" aspects of existing modes of operations to transforming school systems into equity-oriented learning organizations, schools are able to create new ways of "being and doing" to better respond to the strengths and needs of diverse learners. Grounded in research and practice-based information, we recommend the following core practices for supporting the development of equity-oriented learning organizations.

Involve multiple stakeholders with diverse perspectives in collaborative inquiry cycles

School systems increase the capacity to engage in equity-oriented organizational learning by involving multiple stakeholders with diverse perspectives in collaborative inquiry cycles. In these collaborative spaces, educators and members of the learning community, including students and families use tools (e.g. data) and various participant structures to examine existing classroom, school, district and state policies, practices, traditions, routines, beliefs, knowledge, etc., with the expressed purpose of uncovering inequities and determining those factors contributing to educational inequities (Engestrom, 2004; Gutierrez & Vossoughi, 2010). Together, stakeholders - educators, families and community members create new innovations to address shared concerns.

Support staff in critical reflective practice and professional learning opportunities

Supporting administrators, teachers and staff to engage in critical reflective practice and continuous professional learning opportunities is an essential part of becoming a learning organization. Ongoing critical analysis and evaluation of one's practice allows a refocusing of existing knowledge and helps educators to generate new knowledge about their individual professional practice (Larrivee & Copper, 2006). It is important that educators consciously consider the ethical implications and consequences of teaching practices, with self-reflection, deep examination of personal beliefs, and assumptions about students and learning (Larrivee, 2000). In addition to critically reflecting on one's practice, educators should also participate in relevant quality professional learning opportunities. Successful systemic change requires a long-term commitment to high quality job-embedded professional development that generates knowledge and skills (Lateer-Huhn et. al. (2008).

Engage in Data-based decision making

Data-based decision-making is a vital part of being a learning organization. Administrators, teachers, staff, and students, as well as family and community members need to understand the array of data available for gaining a deep understanding of the factors contributing to current outcomes. It is important that educators expand their notions of relevant school data beyond numerical state and local testing data. Qualitative information including perception data, personal narratives and environmental observations should be collected and reviewed in combination with quantitative data to provide a broad picture of a

here. Her most recent publication is a book co-edited with Dr. Elizabeth Kozleski entitled [Ability, Equity and Culture: Sustaining Inclusive Urban Education Reform](#), published by Teachers College Press.

Upcoming Events

Illinois

July 22-25, 2014

[Summer Leadership Academy, 2014](#)

[Sponsored by Illinois Education Association](#)

Normal, IL

Indiana

July 17, 2014

[The 2014 Education Conference](#)

[Presented by Cummins Inc. and ICRC](#)

Indianapolis, IN

Michigan

July 29-31, 2014

[2014 Summer Leadership Conference](#)

Marie, MI

October 30, 2014

[Legislative, Education & Advocacy Day \(LEAD\)](#)

Lansing, MI

Minnesota

June 12-13, 2014

[Minnesota Early Intervention](#)

[Summer Institute: Evidence-based Practice for Working with Youth Children and Their Families](#)

Collegeville, MN

Ohio

June 16-18, 2014

[OERC Conference: Connecting Research, Practice, and Policy](#)

Columbus, OH

June 18, 2014

[Half-Day Learning Session hosted by Ohio Education Research Center](#)

Columbus, OH

August 1, 2014

[The Ohio STEM Equity Pipeline Workshop](#)

Columbus, OH

Wisconsin

June 23-27, 2014

[Introduction to Autism Spectrum](#)

particular situation. Equity-oriented learning organizations use data to help stakeholders decide the priority areas of concern and to examine the root causes for the identified concerns. Data are also collected for monitoring the efficiency and impact of implemented strategies.

Cultivate Creativity

School improvement efforts typically focus on problems that are frequently a result of engrained practices and norms within the cultures of the organization. Learning organizations require and often cultivate creativity. Creativity is the ability to think of new possibilities and see existing activities, structures, resources etc. in different ways (Yousie & Harjee, 2014). Creativity allows people to go beyond traditional ideas, patterns and relationships to create new meaningful ideas, interpretations or strategies (Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993). In learning organizations, people are afforded the time and space to be innovative thus, translating creative ideas into tangible new products, processes, structures etc. for responding to existing and future challenges (Yousie & Harjee, 2014).

Core Practice in Action

Two schools in Wisconsin committed to addressing disparities in disciplinary actions between student groups focused on engaging authentic school and family partnerships in their improvement planning efforts. Using a participant structure called Learning Labs, educators, families, university consultants and community members collectively examined issues related to school discipline within each school's context (Thorius, Rodrigues & Bal, 2013). The Learning Labs provided a routine place, time, and set of norms for interactions within which educators, families and community members engaged in collaborative inquiry cycles (Bal, 2011). During meetings participants were able to reflect critically on current classroom and school practices affecting student behavior, examine school-wide data, and to learn together about core elements of positive behavior interventions and supports. The teams of diverse stakeholders thought creatively about the types of social interactions desired by educators and those desired by families and community members. After a series of meetings, participants in each school implemented Culturally Responsive Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports – a multi-tiered framework of behavior supports and interventions that focus on transforming school cultures that reproduce behavioral outcome disparities and marginalization of non-dominant students and families into safe, inclusive, and supportive school climates for all students (Bal, 2011; Thorius, Rodrigues & Bal, 2013; Bal, Thorius & Kozleski, 2012).

Read more about this project in the [*Equity by Design: Remediating the Role of School-Family Partnerships in Systemic Change within Culturally Responsive Positive Behavior Interventions & Supports*](#) practitioner brief found on the Great Lakes Equity Center's website.

Conclusion

School systems that are engaged as learning organizations for advancing educational equity evolve into dynamic systems that not only are able to understand, influence, and manage the changes necessary to meet the current demands of educating diverse learners, but are also well-positioned to address future realities and challenges as they emerge (Schon, 1983).

Have a question or comment about this article? [Share it here!](#)

Engage

Disorders
La Crosse, WI

October 8-9, 2014
[Technology Conference for Special Education 2014](#)
Wisconsin Dells, WI





In October of 2010, Dr. Kathleen King Thorius, Dr. Thu Suong Nguyen, Dr. Brendan Maxcy and Dr. Donna Hart Tervalon, Center Director, proudly announced the opening of the Great Lakes Equity Center at Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis. As the federally-funded equity assistance center for Region V (Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin), the Great Lakes Equity Center was established to provide assistance to state and local education agencies in the areas of race, gender, and national origin equity to promote equal educational opportunities in K-12 settings.

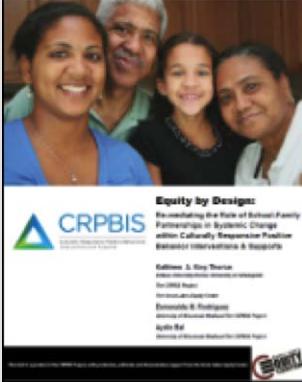
Great Lakes Equity Center's work is grounded in the understanding that equitable educational systems value students' experiences, heritage, and language and use these as an integral part of classroom learning (Gay, 2010; Klingner et al., 2005). Building on work done at other equity-focused institutions, the Great Lakes Equity Center's approach to technical assistance prioritizes collaborative, critical inquiry into policies and practices. Through the use of tools, close examination of data, and dialogue across stakeholder groups, the Great Lakes Equity Center and its partners acknowledge disparities in opportunities to learn and forge a path toward more equitable access and participation for all students.

In its first three years, the Center has received over 35 requests for assistance and has partnered with numerous organizations throughout Region V, including multiple school districts and state departments of education. It has also hosted a number of events, including two Equity Leaders Institutes, two State Equity Leaders' Summits, and two EquiLearn Focus Sessions. In addition to maintaining an online library of equity-related resources and articles, the Great Lakes Equity Center has produced two dozens newsletters, four practitioner briefs, and three podcasts.

In the coming year, as the Great Lakes Equity Center continues its service on behalf of students in Region V, Center staff will launch a set of Equi-Learn online courses, which are asynchronous, online learning modules that participants can engage in at their own pace and in the comfort of their own setting. All Equi-Learn eLearning modules include activities through which participants construct knowledge and enhance their skills and sense of agency in areas related to advancing equitable practices in everyday, school-related spaces. The Great Lakes Equity Center will also host an Equity Leaders Institute Regional Conference in the fall of 2014 and publish equity toolkits for educators and parents.

As the Great Lakes Equity Center continues its work, the current Center Director director, Dr. Seena Skelton, Assistant Directors, Dr. Marsha Simon and Ms. Camille Warren, and principal investigators, Drs. King Thorius, Nguyen, and Maxcy want to acknowledge and appreciate all of the partnerships that have contributed to its growth and the champions of equity who have done and continue to do courageous work on behalf of children in Region V and beyond.

Something to Read!



Equity By Design: Re-mediating the Role of School-Family Partnerships in Change within Culturally Responsive Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports

School-family partnerships within Culturally Responsive Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (CRPBIS) function toward creating school cultures that: (a) from the start, position families as equal partners with school practitioners in determining the

goals, activities, and desired outcomes for local CRPBIS implementation; (b) center student and family analysis of crucial avenues for building safe and inclusive schools; and (c) attend explicitly to institutional structures that have hindered such partnerships in the past and seek to remediate them through collaborative inquiry. Read about how two districts engaged in such partnerships...

Something to Hear!

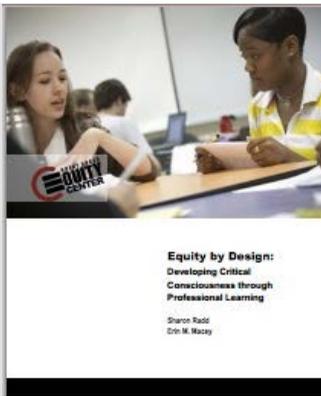


Peer-mediated learning has emerged as a promising practice to transform the classroom experiences of both students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers, preparing all students to live and work in a democratic, pluralistic society. This podcast complements our Equity by Design brief, [Using Peer-Mediated Learning to Advance Equity for All Students](#). Listen to this [podcast](#) to learn more about this transformative version of peer-mediated learning. You can also access the transcript of this podcast [here](#).

Something to Use!

Developing Critical Consciousness through Professional Learning

Critical consciousness, defined as an active state of seeking to identify the beliefs and language that obscure systemic inequities, is a central component of



transformative professional learning. Practitioners can use the two tools described in the brief - reflection journals or blogs and critical communities of practice - to create psychologically safe spaces in which to examine assumptions and alter practices.

Reference List:

Educate:

- Annie Casey Foundation (2014). Race for Results: Building a Path to Opportunity for All Children. Retrieved June 5, 2014 from <http://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/AECF-RaceforResults-2014.pdf>
- Bal, A. (2011). *Culturally responsive school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports framework*. Madison, WI: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.
- Engeström, Y. (2004) New forms of learning in co-figuration work. *Journal of Workplace Learning*, 16, 11-21.
- Gay, G. (2010) *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Gutierrez, K. D. & Vossoughi, S. (2010). Lifting off the ground to return anew: Mediated praxis, transformative learning, and social design experiments. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 61, 100 - 117.
- Kozleski, E. B., & Thorius, K. A. K. (2013). *Ability, equity, and culture: Sustaining inclusive urban education reform*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Kozleski, E. B. & Artiles, A. J. (2012). Technical assistance as inquiry: Using activity theory methods to engage equity in educational practice communities. In G. Canella & S. Steinberg (Eds.), *Critical qualitative research reader* (pp.431-445). New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Lai, M. K., & McNaughton, S. (2013). Analysis and discussion of classroom and achievement data to raise student achievement. In K. Schildkamp., M. K. Lai., & L. Earl (Ed.), *Data-based decision making in education* (pp. 23-47). Springer Netherlands.
- Larrivve, B., (2000) Transforming teaching practice: Becoming the critically reflective teacher. *Reflective Practice: International and Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, 1, 294-300.
- Lateer-Huhn, A., Poth, R., Schaeffer, K.R., Skelton, S.M., Stine, K., and Stollar, S. (2008) Practices in professional development: Moving school systems to an integrated, Three-Tier Model of academic and behavior supports. In J. Grimes & A. Thomas, *Best Practices in School Psychology IV*, Bethesda, MD: NASP.
- Mulligan, E. M., & Kozleski, E. B., (2009) A framework for culturally responsive cognitive coaching in schools. NIUSI-LeadScape. Retrieve May 19, 2014 from http://www.niusileadscape.org/docs/FrameworkCulturally_Web_031810.pdf

Osterman, K.F., & Kottkamp, R.B. (1993) *Reflective practice for educators: Improving schooling through professional development*. Newbury Park, California: Corwin Press.

Schon, D., A., (1983) *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Senge, P. M. (1990). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*. New York, NY: Doubleday/Currency.

Thorius, K.A.K., Rodriguez, E.M., & Bal, A. (2013). Equity by design: Remediating the role of school-family partnerships in systemic change with culturally responsive positive behavior interventions & support. Retrieved June 5, 2014 from http://glec.education.iupui.edu/assets/files/2013_CRPBIS_Brief_FINAL.pdf

Yousie, K., & Harjee, N. (2014) Creating: The critical linkages, Retrieved June 9, 2014 from http://www.banffcentre.ca/leadership/library/pdf/creating_value.pdf

Engage:

Gay, G. (2010). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Klinger, J. K., Artilles, A. J., Kozleski, E., Harry, B., Zion, S., Tate, W., Duran, G. Z., & Riley, D. (2005). Addressing the disproportionate representation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education through culturally responsive educational systems. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 13(38). Retrieved June 2, 2014 from <http://epaa.asu.edu/ojs/article/view/143>

Disclaimer:

Great Lakes Equity Center is committed to the sharing of information regarding issues of equity in education. Reference in this newsletter to any specific publication, person, or idea is for the information and convenience of the public and does not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of Great Lakes Equity Center. The contents of this newsletter were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. However, these contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.