

Supporting Equity in Maine Schools

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Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	1
BACKGROUND	3
<i>Defining Educational Equity</i>	3
<i>History of Educational Equity</i>	4
<i>Measuring and Achieving Educational Equity</i>	5
<i>Understanding Conflicts Around Equity</i>	5
METHODOLOGY	6
FINDINGS	11
<i>Origins of the Districts' Current Equity-Focused Work</i>	11
<i>Actualizing the Work: Objectives and Scope</i>	14
<i>Factors Enabling Productive Equity Work in School Districts</i>	16
<i>Challenges and Obstacles to Productive Equity Work in School Districts</i>	19
<i>What do educational leaders think is needed to support the work going forward?</i>	19
CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS	22
REFERENCES	24
AUTHORS	25
APPENDICES	26
<i>Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol</i>	26
<i>Appendix B: District Case Summaries</i>	30
District A Case Summary	31
District B Case Summary	33
District C Case Summary	35
District D Case Summary	37
District E Case Summary	38
District F Case Summary	41
District G Case Summary	46
District H Case Summary	48

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Introduction

Each year, the Maine Education Policy Research Institute conducts policy research in select topic areas for the Maine Legislature’s Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs. Ideas for studies are proposed in winter by a steering committee of education stakeholders, and final selections are made in late spring by the legislators. The issues that are most pressing at the time the plan is finalized often have a strong influence on which topics are selected. This current study, focused on equity in schools, is a prime example.

In the spring of 2021, there were numerous events at the national, state, and local levels that involved race, racism, class, and inequity in our society. On one front, Maine legislators in the 130th session were deliberating bills seeking statutory solutions to improve racial equity—such as L.D. 2, which would eventually result in a pilot study to develop racial impact statements on proposed legislation. On another front, public school leaders were wrestling with day-to-day challenges of responding to students, parents, and community members who were curious or critical about their districts’ practices – and who came at questions of equity from a variety of perspectives, including conflicting ones. Education practitioners in the field were eager for guidance and role models that were applicable to the Maine context and that would support them in shaping strategies and policies to improve outcomes for students from marginalized groups. Practitioners and school board members also wanted support for managing the sometimes-tense public discourse when disagreements arose. It is in this context that the current study was conceived and selected for inclusion in MEPRI’s FY2021-22 work plan. The following three key questions were the focus of this descriptive inquiry; the subsequent findings can assist policy-makers, educators and the public as they continue supporting equity in Maine schools.

Q1: How are districts in Maine engaging in work focused on equity, including racial equity, during a time of crisis?

Q2: What factors do educational leaders and engaged stakeholders believe contribute to or detract from productive equity work and positive outcomes?

Q3: What do educational leaders and engaged stakeholders believe is needed to achieve educational equity in Maine?

Early in the conceptualization of this study, MEPRI researchers at the University of Southern Maine learned that several school districts in the Southern Maine Partnership (SMP) were working with USM faculty and the Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium¹ (MAEC) to improve practices in their districts. This ongoing “community of practice” was a natural starting place for identifying what districts are experiencing as they engage in efforts to improve education for all their students, with a focus on equity - and inequity - in their districts and schools. Perspectives from this community of practice helped to inform our initial understanding of the equity-focused work that some districts are doing, as well as the successes and challenges they are facing as they engage in the work. However, most of the districts in this study were not a part of the SMP-MAEC community of practice. In fact, the districts in the study have each created - or are creating - their own paths toward more equitable schools and systems. Along the way, they have enlisted experts, engaged a wide-variety of stakeholders, and listened to students as they revised policies, updated curriculum materials, and crafted plans. This report is a reflection of the early work-in-progress. While many districts have recorded substantial accomplishments, the work is ongoing.

¹ The Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium’s Center for Educational Equity (CEE) is the federally-funded Equity Assistance Center for Maine. School districts in Maine can reach out to CEE for free or contracted technical assistance in responding to issues of equity.

Background

As community members in Maine and the U.S., we all share a stake in public education. It is one of the means by which we, as a state and nation, prepare for the future. Our state depends, at least in part, on the capacity of our public education system to develop the human potential of young people with the skills, knowledge, values, and mindsets to meet the challenges of the future that they will inherit. A focus on equity in public education helps to ensure that the human potential of our youth is not neglected or inadvertently malnourished, reduces the costs to society of inadequate preparation, and supports educators in partnering with families and community groups to help every child thrive.

Defining Educational Equity

One broad definition of educational equity is that all students receive the resources they need, when they need them, in order to succeed in school. Other definitions have gone further in describing educational equity. In the case of Maine, in December 2020, a *Joint Statement of Commitment and Support for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in Maine Schools* was published by the Maine Department of Education and various state associations, with the following definition and explication:

“We define educational equity as providing each student a legitimate opportunity to learn, grow, and thrive in school and beyond.

Equity depends on a deliberate and systematic abolition of the inequities that have been sewn into the fabric of American society. These persistent inequities have long disadvantaged students on the basis of race, sex, gender, gender expression, language, physical and intellectual ability, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, indigenous origin, religion, and all aspects of human identity that have been subjugated within our society. We recognize that education is one of many systems that have had a role in perpetuating racial inequities, and that through close examination of our system, we can and must strive to attain diversity, equity, and inclusion of all voices and experiences. We believe this work is central to living up to our promises of providing an outstanding education for every Maine learner and continuing to be a public education system of excellence.”

From inception, this report took similarly broad views of educational equity in order to allow districts and educational leaders to use definitions that best fit their contexts. As you will see,

most districts in the study also used broad definitions of educational equity, with many different actions and initiatives falling under the broad umbrella of equity.

History of Educational Equity

A focus on equity is not new in education. It is a story of expanding rights to a free and public education, starting with the establishment of public schools, continuing through the rejection of separate / segregated schools for different races with *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and Title IV of the Civil Rights Act (1964), on through Title IX (1972) prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sex, and the Equal Educational Opportunities Act (1974) requiring accommodations for non-English speakers, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (1975) supporting students with special education needs in the least restrictive environment. In our state, the Maine Human Rights Act also provides the right to freedom from discrimination in education on the basis of sex, sexual orientation or gender identity, a physical or mental disability, ancestry, national origin, race, color or religion. All of this is far from a comprehensive overview of the history of equity in education; it is simply a reminder of some of its legal foundations.

In addition to legal foundations, issues of educational equity have waxed and waned along with societal changes and advocacy. As an illustration of this, researchers Jurado de Los Santos, Moreno-Guerrero, Marín-Marín and Soler Costa (2020) investigated the use of the term “equity” in a selection of research articles from 1948-2019. They noted a dramatic increase in the study of equity from 2005 onward, with different “driving themes” emerging in different periods of time. “Sex differences” and “diversity”, for instance, were driving themes in the first period they studied, while more recently, “school improvement”, “access”, and “race” have been prevalent. It wouldn’t be surprising to find similar results in a review of headlines in Maine newspapers.

Table 1. Equity’s Driving Themes from 1948-2019 According to Jurado de Los Santos, Moreno-Guerrero, Marín-Marín and Soler Costa (2020)

1948-2006	2007-2011	2012-2016	2017-19
sex differences diversity	mathematics gender	gender social justice	school improvement access race

In more recent history, the COVID pandemic and reverberations from the murder of George Floyd also have had their impact on equity work in schools. Crises often have the greatest impact on the most vulnerable and least advantaged students, and that is what we are seeing in data coming to the forefront now, more than two years after the pandemic began. Meanwhile, the topic of racism and calls for anti-racist work have become more mainstream amidst widespread public shock at the video footage of George Floyd's death. We are still learning about how these two societal waves will shape education.

Measuring and Achieving Educational Equity

Despite a long history of working towards greater educational equity and progress in some areas, the achievement of educational equity, as measured by any number of indicators, remains elusive. In fact, one challenge for educators and policy-makers is that there is not a definitive set of measures for educational equity. In 2019, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine released a consensus report, *Monitoring Educational Equity*, outlining a framework for indicators of educational equity that could serve to measure: (1) differences in achievement, attainment and engagement; and (2) “equitable access to resources and opportunities, including the structural aspects of school systems that may impact opportunity and exacerbate existing disparities in family and community contexts and contribute to unequal outcomes for students” (p.3). Building on this report, in April 2022, the U.S. Department of Education released its Equity Action Plan, which includes details about building an educational equity dashboard with the suggested indicators from the National Academies report. Tools such as this may become useful in the future as districts and schools hone their equity-focused strategies.

Understanding Conflicts Around Equity

It is no surprise that the combination of a complex topic like equity, a bedrock community institution like school districts, and stakeholders' care and passion for youth and their own children might lead to confrontation. Equity often strikes the philosophical core of public schools, for example: (1) Do schools replicate society, or do they aim to build something better for the future? And, who decides what “better” looks like and how are those decisions made? (2) How are resources distributed? Do students who need more, receive more? And, if so, how do

we decide who needs more? (3) How is “merit” determined in the educational system and how does it intersect with different types of privilege or advantage? Answers to these questions change over time and they will continue to change going forward. Educational leaders and policymakers will continue to need navigational support.

Methodology

The study team used a collective, exploratory case study approach to document the “what,” “why,” and “how” of the current work that districts and schools are engaged in related to equity, including racial equity. The collective approach allowed researchers to explore differences and commonalities within and among cases. The exploratory approach was deemed appropriate due to the uncertainty of what the outcomes would yield, as well as the expectation for multiple and different findings across cases. This methodology allowed for in-depth interviews with school district leaders in conjunction with an analysis of district documents to provide thorough descriptions of how the equity work began, what the work consists of, perceptions of both challenges and successful strategies to support equity work in schools, as well as resources needed to move the work forward. The study received approval through the Institutional Review Board at the University of Southern Maine.

Since this was deemed an exploratory investigation, we looked initially for cases that would shed light on Maine’s diverse public school districts and the variety of approaches to equity work that districts are taking. We identified the following broad criteria for inclusion:

1. The district is a regular public district or school.
2. The district has stated publicly that they are engaged in equity work.
3. The district also has one of the following characteristics: a notable equity agenda is evident, the district was nominated for inclusion by state equity leaders, or the inclusion of the district complements the geographic or economic diversity represented in the collective group of cases.

Based on these criteria, a non-exhaustive list of 13 districts from seven counties were identified as potential candidates for inclusion. Superintendents and, in some cases, Assistant Superintendents were contacted by email with information about the study and a request for an

interview. Follow-up emails and phone calls were used to reach districts that did not respond to an initial outreach message. One district declined to participate, noting that the district was already stretched thin and could not dedicate time to the inquiry. A second district considered participating but ultimately did not join the study. Three other districts did not respond to our invitations. Subsequently, the case study sample includes a total of eight school districts representing diverse regions of the state and four counties: Penobscot, Oxford, Cumberland and York. Collectively, the four counties account for more than 50% of the State's population. Of note is that the five non-participating but invited districts are, in different ways, more racially and ethnically diverse than the districts included in the study. On the other hand, the eight districts included in the study reflect the student demographics that are more typical across the state.

Table 1 below provides an overview of the eight districts and respective interviewees that participated in this study. To protect the identities of participating districts, data has been rounded according to specifications noted in the table. Student population in participating districts ranged from approximately 1000-3000 students, and 90-97% of students were White. Free and Reduced Lunch participation rates ranged from 5%-60%, the percentage of English-only families ranged from 94%-100%, and the percentage of students receiving Special Education services ranged from 10%-30%. For reference, according to 2020-21 data from Maine's ESSA Dashboard, on average, 88% of students in Maine are White, 37% are designated Free and Reduced Lunch², 3% are English Learners, and 17% are receiving Special Education services.

² Free and Reduced Lunch rates, though familiar to many educators and the public, are underreported because free lunch has been extended to all Maine students. Because of this SNAP participation data is also included. For reference, in 2018 33% of Maine families with children under 18 participated in SNAP.

Table 1. Summary Description of Selected Districts and Interviewees

Number of Districts	8 districts included
Counties Represented	4 counties represented: Cumberland, York, Penobscot, Oxford
Student Population - District Ranges ³ (Rounded to nearest 1000.)	1000-3000 Students (No district included in the study is considered “small ⁴ ”.)
Race and Ethnicity for Student Population - District Ranges ⁵	90-97% White
Income Level Estimates - District Ranges ⁶ (FRL rounded to the nearest 5%.)	0-31% of families receive SNAP benefits 5%-60% Free or Reduced Lunch (FRL) participation
Home Language ⁷	94-100% English only
Special Education ⁸ (Rounded to the nearest 5%.)	10-30% with Individualized Education Plans
District Locales ⁹ (Districts can be made up of different locale types.)	Rural Fringe (evident in 6 districts) Midsize Suburb (evident in 4 districts) Rural Distant (evident in 2 districts) Small Suburb (evident in 1 district) Town Distant (evident in 1 district) Small City (evident in 1 district)

³ Student population data were compiled from Maine’s ESSA Dashboard.

⁴ While none of the districts in our study is very large, none of them meet the standard for “small” set by the U.S Small, Rural School Achievement Program eligibility criteria: “To be considered small, an LEA must have a total average daily attendance (ADA) of fewer than 600 students *or* exclusively serve schools that are located in counties with a population density of fewer than 10 persons per square mile,” (SRSA Eligibility)

⁵ Demographic details on race and ethnicity were compiled using data from the Nation Center for Education Statistics Education ACS-ED District Demographic Dashboard 2015-19.

⁶ Data on SNAP and Free and Reduced Lunch were compiled from the NCES-EDGE home page and Maine’s ESSA Dashboard, respectively.

⁷ Home language estimates were compiled using data from the National Center for Education Statistics Education ACS-ED District Demographic Dashboard 2015-19.

⁸ Student participation rates in special education were compiled from Maine’s ESSA Dashboard.

⁹ Locale categories were compiled using the National Center for Education Statistics Local Lookup tool.

(Table 1, Cont.)

Districts with 2 Interviewees	5 / 8
Superintendents Interviewed	6
Assistant Superintendents Interviewed	4
Curriculum or DEI Leaders Interviewed	3

Data collection included an individual or pair interview with district administrators from each of the eight participating districts. Interviews with district administrators (n=13) typically included the district superintendent and/or assistant superintendent or, in three cases, the district director of curriculum or DEI leader (n=3). All together, 13 unique voices with diverse perspectives and experiences contributed to this study.

All interviews were conducted via Zoom video-conferencing and were audio-recorded and transcribed for data analysis. Interviews ranged from 35-80 minutes each, and most were about one hour in length. Semi-structured interview questions and prompts were developed following the OECD's implementation framework for effective change in schools¹⁰. The interview questions (see Appendix A) were provided to participants ahead of time, and the interviews covered all relevant topics. Interview transcripts were read closely to develop a descriptive, narrative profile of the equity initiatives in each district. The research team examined the findings across all eight districts to identify the dominant themes and reach consensus on the conclusions and implications from the study.

In addition to the interviews, document analysis of equity-related plans, policies and communications provided an additional level of clarity, confirmation and detail as to the work being performed. Documents collected for analysis included recent equity policies and regulations, guides, recent audits and reports, and major equity-related communications. The document analysis provided a substantive context for the 'how,' 'what,' and 'why' of the district's equity work, as well as a rich resource for identifying common themes among the districts' vision and execution of the work. Document artifacts also serve an important role in corroborating data gathered from interviews, elaborating on those interpretations, or in some cases contradicting them (Rossman & Rallis, 2017).

¹⁰ OECD (2020), "An implementation framework for effective change in schools", *OECD Education Policy Perspectives*, No. 9, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/4fd4113f-en>.

Delimitations / Limitations of the Study

It is worth noting that this study focused on school districts that more typically resemble districts in the State of Maine as a whole, as opposed to exceptional districts, like Portland or schools administered by the Bureau of Indian Education, that have a disproportionate degree of racial and ethnic diversity relative to the rest of the state. As such, districts with an established record of leadership experience in equity work stemming from their large diverse communities were not included in this study and have not informed the study's findings and recommendations. There is certainly much to learn from these diverse schools and districts. At the same time, there is value in understanding how districts with a predominantly White population in our mostly rural state are working to advance equity, including racial equity. If Maine as whole is hoping to advance an equity agenda in a positive manner, it will necessitate the support and engagement of these types of districts.

In addition, this study deliberately concentrated on examining the district's equity work from the perspective of top district leaders. This allowed for a consistent, efficient framework from which to execute the study and to make comparisons across the districts - during a year when schools and districts were still overburdened with staffing challenges and COVID management. It also provided insight into the roles that district leaders play in implementing work of this nature. Thus, other valuable perspectives – such as those of teachers, students, school board members, and community members – have not been thoroughly explored, though they have been captured to some extent through our document analysis of meeting minutes, student activities and organizations, committee work and professional development initiatives.

Findings

In this section, we provide an overview of the findings across the case studies of the eight districts that participated in this inquiry. We begin by discussing the origins of the current wave of equity work in schools and districts and describe how the work is being defined and actualized. Next, we discuss the factors and strategies that district leaders identified as either contributing to or detracting from progress and success. Finally, we discuss the supports that educational leaders believe would help in advancing educational equity in Maine.

Origins of the Districts' Current Equity-Focused Work

All of the districts participating in this study identified equity as a core value. For example, several noted that a desire for greater equity is what led to the creation of public schools, to greater inclusion for students with special education needs, to federal Title I resources for districts serving low-income populations, or to federal McKinney-Vento legislation in support of youth and families experiencing homelessness. In other words, equity work is nothing new in schools. Recent equity work, particularly in the last three years for most of the eight districts in this study, has led to more intentional focus on how race and ethnicity affects the experiences of youth and employees in schools – while also continuing to address factors like family income, (dis)ability, and gender. Even though evidence of inequitable experiences and outcomes for Maine's youth of color has been available for some time, districts in the study noted several factors that influenced the current wave of work, including: a student-centered focus, increases in diverse students and families, preparing youth for global futures, racism and bias experienced by students and staff, the murder of George Floyd, and moral responsibility.

Student-Centered Focus: In a variety of ways, all districts in this study emphasized the importance of maintaining a student-centered focus. In some instances, this meant using data on student outcomes as a basis for discussing equity and making plans. Outcomes used by district leaders included achievement and graduation rates, of course, but also measures of belonging like climate and culture assessed by student surveys and behavior management records. Other examples of student-centered focus included student input surveys and focus groups, inclusion of students as stakeholders in Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) committees, and student complaints related to equity violations. While a student-centered approach has been central to

many school and district initiatives in recent decades, in this instance, educational leaders also emphasized its importance because of the current political context, which has included backlash against equity initiatives, particularly around the topic of race and gender expansiveness. District leaders noted that this work was about their students and the need to do better by them.

Increase in Diverse Students and Families: Most district leaders noted that changing demographics across Maine, not just in the urban centers, has meant that there are diverse students and families everywhere. Even relatively small numbers of students and families of color, or students and families that represent the rainbow of gender expansive identities, require educators, schools and districts to see their work from these diverse perspectives. Educators have had to ask, for example: How are these students and families, who are a part of our communities, represented in district curricula? Or, how will we ensure that our English Learner students are able to use all the district resources that our English-only students can access?

Preparing Maine Youth for Global Futures: District leaders also noted that this work was driven by the need to prepare students for futures of diverse contexts in a global world. In interviews, equity statements and strategic documents, there was evidence of districts' recognition that Maine students would need to be culturally competent to navigate the dynamics of diverse workforces and post-secondary educational experiences. In brief, cultural competency requires awareness of one's own cultural framework, knowledge of others' cultural backgrounds and skill in navigating and adapting to differences. Educators want Maine students to have access to the world of opportunities that exist on our planet - and that means preparing them to learn with, work with, and adapt to differences.

Complaints of Racism and Bias Experienced by Students or Staff: At least four of the districts in our study had experienced recent, high profile incidents of students or staff - either of color or with gender expansive identities - speaking out publicly about racist or biased treatment in their schools. Another participating district made reference to incidents of racist behavior in the district that had been addressed by administrators but not publicly exposed. These incidents motivated educational leaders and community members to engage more deeply and broadly in anti-bias and equity work.

Personal and Societal Response to the Murder of George Floyd - Community Call to Action: Seven of the eight districts that joined in this study identified the death of George Floyd as a galvanizing event for focusing on equity in the district. Several of the educational leaders noted that, unlike previous racist events that had happened in other parts of the country during the course of their careers in education, there seemed to be an expectation from some members of the community that educational leaders would say something and that school districts would do something in response to the murder and subsequent societal unrest. One district leader, in particular, spoke eloquently about the need to view this event from the perspective of a Black student in the classroom: if educators stayed silent or inactive on something so egregious as the murder of George Floyd, then it would be akin to educational malpractice. At the same time, George Floyd’s death surfaced a variety of views on race in school communities, raised questions about the role of schools and districts in responding to racism and advancing equity - and district leaders had to navigate this while also overseeing red, yellow, and green plans for schools during the initial height of the pandemic.

Moral Responsibility: Licensure requirements in Maine note that educators are expected to be of “good moral character,” and educational leaders in four of the districts emphasized the moral component of equity work. They discussed “doing what’s right,” reallocating resources so that budgets between different schools were more equitable, and committing to action in the face of evidence from students who had been harmed by racist behavior, by other biases, or by systems that ignored or disadvantaged them. None of these leaders felt they had the answers, they just knew it was “right” to commit to advancing equity in their districts.

In the themes above, we gain insight into the “why’s” behind the current wave of district equity work, but these do not help us to understand what “equity work” actually looks like in schools. In the next section, we outline what districts are doing to support equity in schools.

Actualizing the Work: Objectives and Scope

The landscape of possible initiatives that districts might take under the umbrella of equity is extensive. In terms of the “what” districts are doing in the name of equity, several themes surfaced in our interviews and document analyses. First, districts are engaged in internal discussions and conversations with stakeholders around how they will define and actualize educational equity, either implicitly or explicitly. Often districts have adopted a district-wide Diversity, Equity and Inclusion statement. Many have begun reviewing their policies and practices from the perspective of equity. All of the districts have focused some of their efforts on making their curriculum more inclusive and representative of diverse student populations. Professional development in a variety of areas related to equity has also been emphasized in all districts. Some districts have also engaged in efforts to reduce bias in hiring and diversify the educator workforce.

Broadly Defining Educational Equity: In general at this stage in their work, where most districts in the study had been intentionally engaged in a renewed equity agenda of some sort for 2-4 years, districts seemed to be operating with a loose or broad definition of equity focusing on every student getting what they need to succeed in their educational pathway. In determining the scope of initiatives, most districts took a broad view regarding which subpopulations warranted additional attention by choosing to emphasize that equity was about differences in outcome or experience based on a variety of characteristics: income, sex, gender identity, indigeneity, race/ethnicity, religion, language, and (dis)ability. Two districts in the study emphasized the importance of addressing race and ethnicity specifically, particularly in terms of the Black experience, because of the long history of anti-Black racism in the United States. In discussing district equity initiatives, educational leaders were more focused on activities like DEI committees, audits, policies, new student programs, curriculum reviews, elevating student voice, professional development, and diversifying staff. There was not a common set of measures of educational equity used across districts.

Adopting a District-Wide Diversity or Equity Statement: All eight school districts have established a diversity or equity statement of some sort, or are in the process of developing one. Key components of this include engaging the board and securing their support, which is not

always certain, working with outside consultants and community members who have expertise in diversity and equity work, and incorporating input from students through representation or student surveys.

Many districts view their statement as playing a critical role in articulating the meaning of the work, as well as serving as the district's conscience to ensure that they "follow through". In this regard, the statement serves as both a road map and a source of accountability for the district and stakeholders.

Reviewing Policies and Procedures Through an Equity Lens: The districts vary in the type of policies they have amended and/or adopted. Common policies reviewed in light of DEI include Nondiscrimination/Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action, Students Rights and Responsibilities, Student Code of Conduct, Bullying, Student Expression, Dress Code, Discrimination and Harassment/Sexual Harassment, and Transgender and Gender Expansive Students.

Districts have encountered mixed responses from school boards towards equity-focused policy revisions. Some boards view this as being crucial to the work, while others are hesitant to make changes driven solely by 'equity.' In the latter case, districts have found that equity training for the board is necessary in order to build greater understanding of what this means in the education setting and to move the work forward.

Promoting Inclusive and Representative Curriculum: All the districts have identified curriculum as a fundamental component of DEI education. The process for expanding the materials is not new, per se, however there is a greater emphasis on teaching practices that are sensitive to and promote greater representation and inclusivity, as well as methods for teaching controversial issues.

Examples of curriculum resources that have been utilized include the Learning for Justice Social Justice Standards, Washington State's Screening for Biased Content in Instructional Materials tool, versions of Duke University's "You don't say?" campaign, The Can We? Project, NSRF Tuning for Equity Protocol, Diverse Book Finder, Next Generation Learning Challenges Discussion Protocols Designing for Equity, and the Culturally Responsive Scorecard developed by New York University.

Professional Development: All the districts have placed a heavy emphasis on the need for professional development for teachers, staff, administrators, board and community members. Trainings have focused on implicit bias (both in general and in hiring practices), diversity, inclusive classrooms and schools, affirmative action, bullying-recognition and response protocols, discrimination awareness and harassment protocols.

In addition to formal training, administrative teams, teachers and staff have engaged in book studies and discussions on anti-racism, white supremacy, unconscious privilege, and the history of racism in the United States, among other topics.

Reducing Bias in Hiring and Creating a More Diverse and Representative Educator Workforce: Many districts noted the need to have more representation among the administration and educator workforce. To satisfy this need, districts have adopted new platforms for recruiting a broader range of candidates, received training on implicit bias in hiring practices, and in some cases have made experience with DEI an explicit requirement for positions.

Factors Enabling Productive Equity Work in School Districts

Despite some of the difficulties that districts must navigate in advancing equity in their districts, particularly around race and gender expansive identities, interviews with district leaders who participated in this study surfaced a number of factors that enabled productive equity work in their districts, outlined below. Challenges and obstacles to productive work follow.

First, Internal Learning Opportunities: Several districts noted the benefit of having had a year for school and district administrators to engage in equity-related training or book studies a year prior to launching equity initiatives in their districts. While this wasn't possible in all cases, those that were able to accomplish this felt more prepared to engage stakeholders in collective work.

Transparent and Public Audits: Three of the districts used equity audits conducted by a third-party as one of the initial steps for learning about areas of district work that might require attention. Audits were particularly useful, and perhaps necessary for progress, in districts where students or staff members publicly described experiencing racism or bias in the district.

Creating a DEI Committee: Seven of the eight school districts created a committee specifically designated for steering the DEI work in the district. This seems to suggest the degree to which the districts recognize the importance of this work and their commitment to following through with concrete action in the form of hosting student summits, professional development, policy revisions, etc.

A common practice among the DEI Committees is to create sub-committees that focus on a specific area of DEI. For example, the Curriculum and Instruction sub-committee is responsible for reviewing the current curriculum for bias, inclusion and representation, and adding materials to the curriculum. The Professional Development sub-committee plans in-service DEI training for teachers and staff. The Policies and Procedures sub-committee examines existing policies through an equity lens. The Student Leadership Committee plans DEI events for students, as well as forming student groups such as a Student Civil Rights Team or affinity group.

Districts have encouraged a range of community members to serve on their DEI Committee and/or sub-committees. Overall, districts have reported strong interest and participation from the community. Including stakeholders from outside the district in their DEI work has further supported and strengthened the district's efforts by forging bridges with natural allies such as city or town DEI committees, religious organizations, and local social justice groups.

In this model, the DEI Committee plays a central role in defining, directing, and executing the district's work. In a majority of the districts, the superintendent and/or assistant superintendent (or both) serve as chair of the DEI committee or as chair of a sub-committee. District leaders who took on the role of chairing DEI committees noted that it was a way to demonstrate the importance of the work.

In two districts in our study, superintendents did not visibly serve as key leaders of the equity work and, in both districts, interviewees expressed some trepidation about the degree of backlash that might come from certain subpopulations in the community if the districts advanced “too far” into issues of race / ethnicity or gender expansiveness.

Partnering With External Consultants: All the districts have sought additional support through external consultants, community partnerships, and educational resources. Many districts noted that they would not have been able to carry out the work had it not been for the constant and reliable guidance they received from their external consultants, most of whom had experience facilitating diversity and equity initiatives in other settings or organizations.

Resources and consultants used by the districts include, among others, consultant Lawrence Alexander of Carney-Sandoe Associates, consultant Kate Stitham of Integrative Inquiry Consulting, consultant Regina Phillips of Cross Cultural community Services, consultant Steve Wessler, consultant Jennifer Chace of the Source School, consultant and author Alex Myers, the Mid Atlantic Equity Consortium, DEI materials provided through the Maine Department of Education, Upstander Academy, Community Change, Inc., Southern Maine Partnership's Equity Learners and Leaders Community of Practice, Maine Intercultural Communication Consultants, The Holocaust and Human Rights Center of Maine, and Seeds of Peace.

Attention to Communication: Consistent with an emphasis on transparency, educational leaders in the study have emphasized the importance of communication around equity topics. Most of the districts maintained dedicated DEI webpages where meeting minutes, agendas, supporting documents and other resources could be shared with the public.

Awareness of Political Landscape in the District and Community: While a majority of districts experienced robust support for equity initiatives, educational leaders noted a need to be aware of the political landscape in the district and community. Most educational leaders hoped to progress in a way that did not alienate others or create division, but they noted that the current political climate often made that challenging.

Availability of Resources: The availability of resources to hire consultants, offer training, add additional staffing, and conduct audits was instrumental in enabling districts' success. Several of the districts were able to use ESSER funding to support work they were doing to advance equity. In two cases, the superintendents did not expect their districts to take on the burden of these costs once the ESSER period expires in 2024.

Challenges and Obstacles to Productive Equity Work in School Districts

Districts also faced challenges and obstacles to productive equity work. The challenge of navigating a complex political landscape was real, and a lack of models for doing the work meant that all districts were forging their own trajectories.

Navigating a Complex Political Landscape to Keep the Focus on Youth and Education: To varying degrees, about half of the districts in the study experienced resistance to their equity initiatives in some form by a vocal, and sometimes aggressive, minority. In two districts, educational leaders expressed that they had to be particularly cautious about moving too fast with their districts' equity work in order to avoid inflaming some stakeholders. Influence from organized groups like No Left Turn in Education have also created conditions in some districts in Maine where educators and board members reported feeling unsafe.

Lack of Models, Particularly for Predominantly White Districts: Districts are learning how to engage stakeholders in this work and advance equity for Maine students as they go, but there are few clear models for districts to follow. Each district is mapping their own course using a variety of consultants and resources.

State Resources - In Development: Specific supports for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion at the Maine Department of Education are housed under resources for Social Studies and are limited. The MDOE hired its first Director of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in November 2021. While this is promising, easily accessible support and information are still in development.

What do educational leaders think is needed to support the work going forward?

Educational leaders from each of the eight districts were asked to consider possible support mechanisms that might be needed for advancing this work in all Maine schools. Suggestions included:

- **Dirigo - Diversity, Equity and Inclusion:** Even though many of the equity initiatives that districts are engaged in are already supported by federal and state civil rights and educational legislation, the general public is poorly informed of these foundations for equity work. Continued, ongoing public messaging that provides public support for educational equity and civil rights could help develop a more informed public.
- **Identify or Create Alternative Sources of Funding, Post-ESSER:** For some districts in particular, funding will “make or break” their revitalized equity work. Once ESSER funds expire in 2024, these districts will need alternative sources of funding to sustain their efforts.
- **Resources for Equity Audits:** Develop or provide resources (human, financial or a tool of some sort) for equity audits at the Maine Department of Education for districts that want to engage in these. Include a common set of measures focused on educational equity that districts can use to track their progress.
- **Connect DEI to Maine Learning Results:** Engage Maine curriculum specialists to make even clearer the connections between diversity, equity and inclusion and the Maine Learning Results. Vet any developed or suggested resources thoroughly. Maine educators must be sure that any of the resources available through the MDOE will stand up to full public scrutiny.
- **Support Professional Learning on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion or Establish an Equity Community of Practice for a Cohort of Districts:** Several districts noted the benefits of learning and working with other districts on DEI topics. Continuing to grow and identify high quality resources for professional learning in this area would benefit educators and staff across the state. One district noted that training isn’t just needed for teachers and administrators, it’s necessary for bus drivers and support staff as well.
- **Increase protection and support for educators:** The capacity to address educational inequities is essential to school improvement work and to ensuring success for all Maine

youth. However, several participants in this study reported being bullied or harassed by individuals who disagreed with the district equity goals, or feeling intimidated after witnessing such attacks on others. All educators and board members deserve to work in safe environments and should not be subjected to personal abuse during the course of fulfilling their duties. Accordingly, the proposed LD 1939 (An Act To Protect School Administration Officials from Harassment and Abuse) was supported in the spring of 2022 by the Maine School Management Association, the Maine Principals Association, the Maine Education Association, and the Maine Curriculum Leaders Association. While the bill ultimately was not supported by the Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety, it generated much discussion about the need to safeguard our public employees. In light of the severe staff shortages facing our school districts this issue merits continued policymaker attention to help ensure safe and productive working environments and prevent further attrition.

Conclusion and Implications

Historically, if we consider equity work in Maine schools with a very broad stroke, we see that it has been divided up into separate categories with each focused on a particular student population. Special educators, for instance, have focused their efforts on students with individualized needs and education plans, Title I staff have provided supplemental services in schools with high populations of students from low-income families, English Learner educators have worked with multilingual students to ensure that they had full access to the curriculum, and our Talent educators have served students who demonstrated capacity for further enrichment or acceleration. Perhaps schools addressed diversity and inclusion through social and emotional learning curricula, through school culture-building activities, through Civil Rights Teams and other student clubs, or through certain units in the curriculum. When racist or biased behavior interrupted schools and communities, responses were inconsistent; maybe it was addressed or maybe it was brushed off.

Now, considering the cases in this study, we see evidence that Maine is entering a new phase where expectations for how schools and districts address DEI have changed. A district equity committee and a district equity plan seem to be the new prerequisites. Equity committees are the spaces where diverse stakeholders from within and outside schools can come together to understand the equity issues that face schools on a regular basis, to consider the data available, and to create plans and differentiated strategies for addressing the pressing issues that are facing local schools and districts. In addition to these new (to Maine) structures, district leaders see addressing race/ethnicity - instead of ignoring or overlooking it - as a prerequisite for all school systems and curriculum leaders, regardless of the racial/ethnic make-up of the community and student body.

As our eight case study districts created their own pathways to build support for DEI initiatives in their districts, they have developed a loose model for action, which is similar to other models that have been used for navigating complex situations (like COVID, for example). This model is made up of the following components:

- A standing district DEI committee with a variety of stakeholders, which also may be complemented by school-level DEI teams
- An equity or DEI statement of values and/or purpose
- Board level engagement (for example, through committee involvement, approval of an equity statement, or adoption of an equity component in a strategic plan)
- Use of third-party expertise in DEI - sometimes for professional development, and sometimes for an audit of district work, data and policies
- Regular public communication
- Use of Data, including student voice and input (for example, through surveys and/or a system of reporting incidents of bias)
- Development of differentiated supports or strategies based on identified equity issues
- Establishment of Civil Rights Teams in all schools
- Identification of tools for curriculum review to assess cultural competency and bias
- Professional learning for all: administrators, board members, DEI committee members, staff

As districts in this study continue this work on their own, we see opportunities for other districts to learn from them, especially if districts are just beginning or rejuvenating their DEI efforts. We also see opportunities for state-level actors to support schools and districts in ways that might lead to: common definitions of DEI and related terms, a greater public understanding of the “why” behind DEI work (including everyday examples), clear(er) connections between DEI and the Maine Learning Results, a repository of vetted and quality resources, and reassurances that school leaders will be protected when public input exceeds the bounds of civil discourse and becomes harassment.

After two long pandemic years, we can only expect the need for increased focus on educational equity to grow. While negative high profile incidents and news stories can lead some educators to shy away from DEI-related work in public, the experience of districts in this study indicate that there is broad support and encouragement for these efforts. A strong state-level voice, with accompanying resources and adequate protections, would further advance educators, districts - and ultimately students and families - as they continue to create strong, equitable educational communities in our state.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Supporting Equity in Schools: District Leader Interview

Introduction and Purpose

Thank you again for contributing to this study and supporting your district’s participation.

During this interview, I’m/we’re hoping to gather your insights and reflections about your district’s work to advance equity, including racial equity. Our discussion today should last about 45-60 minutes.

I/We will be recording our conversation for accuracy. You should have received the Consent for Participation in Research form and also a list of questions that will guide our conversation. (We may not ask every question, and follow-up questions that aren’t listed here may be asked.)

Did you have any questions about those documents before we begin? Or was there anything you wanted to discuss before we get started?

As a quick recap, I’ll just reiterate that:

1. Your participation is voluntary. You can withdraw at any time without penalty.
2. This is a confidential conversation. Your identity and the district’s identity will be protected.

Topic	<p>INTERVIEWER COPY</p> <p>Supporting Equity / Racial Equity in Schools: Superintendent Interview</p>
<p>Origin Story</p> <p>Perceived and actual need</p>	<p>Q1a. Origins. What are the origins of the current work focused on equity, and particularly racial equity, in schools and districts?</p> <p>One of things we’re looking to understand is what is driving the current wave of equity-focused work. Can you tell me the “origin story” of this work?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How did this work get started? - What is driving the work in your district? - What have been some of the key events and moments in that story? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Perceived and actual (evidence-based) need ● Path(s) taken (e.g. curriculum/instruction, social-emotional, management of incidents of bias and racism) ● Key events and moments
Objectives and Scope	<p>Q1b. Objectives and Scope: How are schools and districts defining and actualizing the work?</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Vision, goals, rationale ● Stakeholders, including students, engaged and heard ● Key messages and communication to stakeholders ● Strategies used ● Plans developed ● External resources and partnerships engaged ● Internal resources, policies (official or unofficial), tools
Conducive Context and Success	<p>Q2a. Conducive Context and Success: What factors have enabled productive work and contributed to progress and success?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Definitions and indicators of progress and success ● Foundations in place to support work/success ● Resources instrumental to success
Adverse Context, Challenges and Obstacles	<p>Q2b. Adverse Context, Challenges and Obstacles: What factors have challenged, interfered with, or detracted from productive work, progress and success? If applicable, how have these been managed or surmounted?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Foundations absent or underdeveloped ● Direct challenges or obstacles (including the pandemic) ● Resources missing or underdeveloped ● Supports required to move forward ● Avenues for managing or surmounting adverse context, challenges and obstacles
Future Outlook and needs	<p>Q3. Future of Educational Equity in Maine: What do educators and engaged stakeholders believe is needed for a future where educational equity is realized in Maine, particularly as it intersects with race and ethnicity?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Staff and systems ready and equipped to meet diverse student needs ● Supports from communities and policy-makers
Conclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Is there anything else you'd like to add related to the topics we've discussed today? ● Or, Is there something I might have missed, or a question I should have asked but didn't?

Document requests:

- District and school equity related plans (most informative plan from district level and school level in each district)
- Any recent equity policies/regulations/guides
- Any recent audits/reports
- District and school equity-related communications (major communications only)

Appendix B: District Case Summaries

Note: The following narrative case summaries provide a high-level overview of the origins of each participating district's equity work, the initiatives that were discussed in interviews, and the perspectives of district leaders. Pseudonyms have been used throughout in place of district names, location names, and the names of district leaders. Gender-neutral language is also used throughout. In some cases, we made identifying details more obscure.

District A Case Summary

Following an investigation into complaints of racist behavior in one of its schools, District A took actions to address the reported incidents and also developed a comprehensive diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) plan. The plan included establishing a number of district committees, with diverse internal and external stakeholders, to oversee and guide the work. New staff positions were also added, a formal DEI statement was drafted, and regular professional development focused on implicit bias and cultural competency was established.

During the interview with Superintendent Brooklyn and the district's designated leader of DEI initiatives, Denver, the superintendent demonstrated a commitment to equity in a number of concrete ways: sharing leadership of one of the district DEI committees, allocating federal funding for the purpose of more diverse recruiting, and increasing support staff to assist students on their paths to graduation.

In addition, as further evidence of the district and community support for equity, a school board member also chairs one of the DEI committees. Brooklyn and the district's leader of DEI work emphasized the importance of having visible district leaders out in front as role models and to demonstrate the district's commitment. Authoring a diversity statement "to push the work forward" and help diverse stakeholders come together was a critical initial step.

Denver, the district's designated leader of DEI work, noted that the role has "two legs." One leg focuses on policy compliance in relation to Title IX and affirmative action, the other leg focuses on being proactive through supporting staff and "diverse student needs." A primary goal is to examine the data in order to better understand the issues and problems that District A faces, for as Denver noted, "we can't address what we don't know." The need to "better quantify and qualify what's happening in the schools," as well as staying in tune with the "changing demographics" is seen as being essential to the work.

In terms of examples of the "changing demographics" that have come to the forefront in terms of equity, district leaders highlighted: students and families with gender expansive identities, the growing wealth disparity in the region, and refugees who were relatively new to the district.

Both leaders emphasized the need and desire to “build a [DEI] community, both in the district, and then more broadly across the state.” Denver noted the value to their district of “connecting with folks in other districts who are doing similar work and being able to connect on that.”

Central to District A’s philosophy is the idea that it is a disservice to students to not prepare them for the diverse world they will be entering as young adults. Denver points out, “we’re not doing our students justice if we’re not positioning them to be global leaders.” The need to engage in open and honest discussions of differences, critically examining social justice issues, and understanding and developing one’s identity are imperative for students’ future success in a diverse, globally connected world. Denver compares the need to prepare students to be global citizens to other well-established academic initiatives such as those that focus on STEM, Humanities, and Visual and Performing Arts.

Another critical piece to DEI work highlighted in the interview was the importance of supporting educators. Denver noted the stress and pressure teachers are facing in the form of public backlash and “career-ending publicity around doing this work.” The need to “support and empower our teachers with the skills they need to have those really tough conversations” is crucial. A concrete example of this is providing teachers a list of accessible and acceptable terms. Due to the quickly evolving nature of identity terminology, clarification surrounding terms such as queer, BIPOC, trans, etc. is important. “Helping our teachers navigate the ever-changing name and pronoun thing, it’s hard work ...” Part of the hard work stems from a fear of “getting it wrong.” Denver notes that “more than not wanting to help our students, everyone is terrified to get it wrong.” Helping teachers, staff and communities to navigate the rules, processes and policies is one piece of the puzzle for helping to create a school and community culture where diverse students can thrive.

A clear theme that ran throughout the interview was the importance of being transparent with the public in pursuing DEI work. Denver notes, “putting it [DEI] up front and leading with bravery” are central values to doing this work well, as is ongoing communication with stakeholders that represent diverse perspectives and understanding.

Connecting with the community, broadly speaking, was identified as a challenge. Denver noted that, when it comes to interest in DEI, they often tended to get “the same 30 people” from the community participating in the work. The challenge is reaching people who, for a whole host of reasons, don’t easily engage in DEI work.

Ideas that were generated to help promote DEI work into the future throughout Maine included professional development sponsored by Maine DOE for all employee groups, including groups like bus drivers, and support for curriculum development that could be shared statewide. Leaders for District A noted that the Maine DOE’s Wabanaki Studies curriculum could be a model for

other DEI-related curricula. In addition, Denver noted the opportunity to explore more equitable methods of assessment and grading.

Superintendent Brooklyn noted Maine's opportunity to be a strong national leader around equity. As a small state with tight connections and wholesome values, state level public leadership is influential and "the more assistance we can get in people to endorse the work that we're going to do would be helpful."

District B Case Summary

District B had been doing some diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) work prior to the murder of George Floyd, but that incident and subsequent public outcry, including from local community members, added urgency and made the work feel compulsory. This event led Superintendent Springfield and the school board to establish a committee specifically dedicated to DEI.

The district's work has included reviewing existing policies such as the Core Values, Transgender and Gender Expansive Policy, Student Rights and Responsibilities, System-Wide Code of Student Conduct, Bullying, Nondiscrimination/Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action.

In addition, District B has adopted new policies that make an explicit commitment to enacting "inclusive practices." As part of their DEI work, District B has partnered with a local DEI organization to provide staff training, and hold virtual sessions with the student body and staff. It has also engaged consultants to conduct an equity audit for the district.

Superintendent Springfield sees DEI work as being "inevitable" for the region. The district had always had some racial and ethnic diversity represented in the student body and, with even one racially and ethnically diverse student, s/he couldn't imagine just ignoring DEI as a core value. Also, as Springfield puts it, "I think every place is diverse if they want to look at it closely enough," and s/he views it as "educational malpractice" for schools not to address DEI.

District B takes a humble and honest approach to their DEI work, noting that the district does not have it all figured out, so to speak. As Springfield described the district's approach, s/he commented, "The one thing that I will promise you is that we're all in on admitting it [racism] and wrestling it to the best of our ability. We won't ignore it, [we] won't tell you it didn't happen to you. We won't try to justify it. We won't not have the conversation with the perpetrators and try to figure out where to go from there."

One illustration of the district's honest approach to DEI is in the superintendent's recognition of failures made along the way and of the energy required to sustain DEI work especially in the midst of a pandemic. Springfield noted that the district did not follow through on one particular BIPOC student-led initiative last year. In reflecting on that moment s/he noted that "there are these moments of failure that I think are related to a dynamic. I don't know if you lose heart, if you lose courage, or if you just lose." S/he continues, "I just feel like there are moments when you look away, when you let go of the tail of the monster."

Springfield comments that there is a "cost" to looking away from the work. S/he notes that, "one of the most powerful things that kids can do is to trust you." As such, Springfield sees it as the responsibility of public schools to trust the voices of students and to engage in DEI work. S/he states, "I think it goes to one of the specific jobs of public education and that is to have a conversation, not just in an academic, antiseptic way, but to have a living conversation about living in a small 'L' liberal, diverse community." S/he further argues that "If we are being honest, it feels a little bit like having a monster by the tail. I would say it's our role to refuse to let go of that tail because I don't think that our Black and LGBTQ and Chinese-American students can possibly have equal experiences in our school district if we don't."

Springfield identified success as refusing to *not* do the work. One way in which District B is holding themselves accountable for "doing the work" is by working with the school committee to endorse a DEI statement and vote on DEI topics. Springfield sees this as a critical component to addressing systemic bias. S/he notes that asking public representatives "to take a few votes, to pull them in so as to have it mean something" is key to instituting real change. S/he sees this as necessary because "structurally the way that bias works is that it moves through levels of an organization and it's the things you don't say, as well as the things that get stated and the actions that don't get taken as well as the actions that get taken" that reveal whether one is truly committed to the work. S/he sees voting on issues as a way of "not letting any of us off the hook."

The DEI objectives that Springfield would like to see achieved include creating a "community dialogue," to develop a "better way for students to report concerns," "to do some policy work," and "to educate and have a conversation with the school committee more."

A challenge Springfield identified in DEI work is the manner in which the conversation is framed. S/he points out that districts often choose between taking either a broad, general approach to DEI or focusing on a particular marginalized population. Springfield worries that the broad approach often yields vague outcomes. Springfield believes in the need to start someplace more targeted, perhaps focused on a particular marginalized group. In the US, Springfield notes, it's particularly important to understand anti-Black racism, and this focus on race in DEI work can add tension to an already uncomfortable, and for Whites, unfamiliar topic.

After leading the district’s DEI committee for the first year, Springfield had planned to “walk away from [leading] the work.” S/he shared “I tried ... saying, ‘you know, it’s time for someone else to chair the committee’ . . .” After further consideration, however, Springfield felt that the role of school leaders in carrying out DEI work was critical to its success, pointing out that if it is not viewed as important by those in positions of power then “structurally it’s not going to happen.”

Springfield notes “there are a lot of districts that hire ... staff members [from minoritized backgrounds] to run this work.” While s/he sees the appropriateness of this approach, s/he raises concerns that without adequate support from the district, these positions can fail.

Springfield sees the role of “local control” as an area of concern for DEI work in Maine. S/he points out that the state has a “state-level curriculum framework” that requires schools to teach specific material and s/he believes that DEI knowledge, skills, and understanding could be more explicitly a part of this curriculum. Further, Springfield raises concerns about local control allowing some communities to ‘opt out’ of including DEI in their student’s education.

District C Case Summary

District C’s equity initiative was motivated by civil rights complaints brought forth by students in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. In response to these concerns, the district formed an equity committee co-chaired by two administrators to focus specifically on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). To support its work, the district felt the need to engage external experts and hired a consultant who served as a DEI coach.

Superintendent Waters sees their approach to DEI as going from “more specific to more broad.” The district’s initial focus was on racial equity, but it has since broadened to incorporate inclusion and diversity, for example, around youth with gender expansive identities.

District C’s accomplishments include the creation of an equity statement for the district. The district’s equity committee, which is composed of more than 30 people from across the district, began the work with their DEI coach by identifying “What’s your why?” and “Who are you?” Once the district’s equity statement was created, the focus shifted to taking the work out to the staff in the form of professional development workshops focused on equity training. Every building received equity training that was facilitated by a member of the district’s Equity Committee. After that training, they went through all the feedback and reported: “[The feedback] ranged from ‘this was amazing’, ‘thankfully we're doing something,’ ‘that's really

relevant' to, 'are you kidding me?' 'this has nothing to do with me, who I am, this community,' and we went, 'well we have work to do.'"

In describing the format of their work, Asst. Superintendent Meadows shared that the equity committee meets "twice a month with the ... coach, [to] plan the training and then take it out into the schools with our staff." S/he noted that as they have progressed through the work their focus has shifted. "The focus has really moved from, let's give everyone a basic foundation so people understand what the terms are and have sort of an experience around identity, microaggressions, those sorts of things. And now we're saying this is how you work with kids, this is how you bring it into the classroom, and do this work with students." One way District C has extended their equity work to the students is by hosting student summits focused on equity.

District C identified their consistent partnership with an equity coach and the dedication of the equity committee as being critical components of their success. The school board is another group that was brought into the equity work, though from a different perspective than the equity committee. Initial attempts to revise existing policies through an "equity lens" didn't "go over well with the board." This led to the acknowledgment that equity training needed to be extended to include the board as well.

Regarding board and community members who are critical of the district's equity work, Waters noted that "people are so far apart and some of that is knowledge base." In response to the knowledge division, the district is dedicating more professional development to "training on how to talk to angry people about [accusations that] you're teaching CRT [or Critical Race Theory]." Part of District C's approach to explaining their equity work is breaking the message down and reminding critics that it is the responsibility of the public school system to serve ALL children.

In regard to state level support for equity work, District C shared that the Maine Department of Education's joint equity statement was a helpful tool in backing up their work.

Looking ahead, both the superintendent and assistant superintendent shared concerns regarding how equity work would be funded in the future. Currently, District C has been able to use ESSER funds to advance their equity work, but district leaders recognize the limited shelf life of these funds and Superintendent Waters worries that the work will stop once the funding disappears. S/he notes that "we won't be done with our work in three years, and if we drop this we're heading straight back to where we were. So we need help being able to fund it moving forward." Possible solutions for this prospective funding gap include providing state grants or competitive awards for districts engaging in equity work.

District D Case Summary

Following local and national events of racial bias over the last two to three years, District D formed an equity and inclusion team, authored a diversity statement, and began reexamining existing policies through an equity lens. To support their district's work, District D has also partnered with an external consultant.

A theme in District D's equity story, as told by the Assistant Superintendent, is identifying their diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) work as an "ethical responsibility," as well as connecting their work to existing civil rights laws, language, and policies.

District D's equity work also includes a focus on social-emotional learning (SEL) – e.g., mental health supports, instruction in SEL, and wraparound services. Assistant Superintendent Reynolds explains that the SEL work "led into conversations obviously around equity and inequities. It was also at the same time that national conversations were starting in light of Breonna Taylor [March 2020], George Floyd [May 2020], and Ahmaud Arbery [February 2020], and the list goes on. The national conversation for school districts [meant we] were really thinking deeply about practices, so I would say it sort of started in one committee's work and morphed into this equity-focused work."

At the same time that the district's SEL and equity work was evolving, the district was also engaged in a comprehensive strategic planning process. Reynolds notes the good timing of these events, as it allowed the equity work to have a larger and more significant impact. In particular, the strategic planning committee created six core beliefs, with the first core belief dedicated to equity and inclusion. The district further identifies specific strategic goals and action steps for each core belief.

Reynolds sees the strategic goals and action steps as "driving the next phase of the work" which includes collecting "evidence of progress toward goals." Strategic goals include creating groups of educators across the district with a "deep understanding" of DEI to lead the work, to "remove barriers so all students can access extracurriculars," to examine "curriculum and board policies within an equity and inclusion lens," "to create a community of professional and student learners where everybody feels safe, valued and achieves at high levels," and to "recruit, hire, and retain diverse staff."

Part of District D's equity work has been to broaden people's understanding of DEI. Reynolds notes "when we talk about equity, we are talking about the children; children with disabilities, children of color, children who come from poor families, from wealthy families. This is about every single learner has access and is absolutely supported and thriving in our learning environment."

Reynolds argues it is important to ground the ‘why’ of your equity work in policy and law. In addition to providing strong foundations and guidance, this can assuage possible opposition, and especially opposition that may be motivated by politically organized groups or personal beliefs.

District D credits their success in DEI work to forging strong external partnerships with a variety of partners (not only their coach), a “fierce commitment to it” and “carving out time” to do the work.

Challenges to the work have included the tense political environment that seeps its way into board meetings, the “laser focus on certain words that are misunderstood,” and the lack of civil discourse.

In regard to ways in which equity work in schools can be supported at the state level, Reynolds identified the need for the legislature to understand the nature of equity work and the role that policy and laws play in executing the work. For example, “when we think about curriculum and standards that are required, and what that will look like at different levels within a school system. Those are really important for people to understand.”

District E Case Summary

Superintendent Jordan noted that equity/fairness has been a general driving principle in District E’s approach to public education. As an illustration, s/he discussed staffing reallocations required among different towns and schools in the district in order to achieve more equal and equitable experiences for students regardless of their town residency. However, District E’s most recent equity initiative is closely tied to a public student complaint about racial bias experienced at one of the district’s schools. The student complaint, in combination with the community response to George Floyd’s murder sparked an emotional response in the community regarding what the district was doing to address equity.

A theme in District E’s story is the challenge of communicating in a community with various perspectives, beliefs and values. While some community members criticized the district for not moving more quickly and dramatically in its equity work, others complained that the district was going too far and that it is “indoctrinating” children with liberal ideas. In this context, Jordan noted that it is incredibly difficult to communicate with the public, especially on sensitive topics like equity and racism. As an example, Jordan recalled the criticism s/he received because s/he did not attend a local event organized in protest for the murder of George Floyd and other brutalities against Black communities. It was during the height of the pandemic and s/he did not see how s/he could attend a crowded community event while also instructing students and families to stay home in order to keep the virus from spreading. Jordan was also criticized for

taking too long to send out a statement in response to Floyd's murder. Because of the emotionally-charged nature of the event, Jordan carefully crafted the statement and prudently asked several colleagues to review it before making it public, which took about a week.

Superintendent Jordan has a long record of administrative leadership and was not expecting to please everyone, but the experiences are emblematic of the challenges that Superintendents face in addressing equity work in their communities. Jordan points out that "as superintendent, as you're trying to lead this work, I don't think you get anywhere when you- and I think this is happening so often in our country- when you alienate a whole group, right? And so trying to walk the line of the message you want to send in a way that doesn't marginalize any group is really difficult."

Jordan describes the reaction from the community, especially specific members of the school board, as being "nothing I have ever seen" in terms of their demands for the district administration to swiftly and thoroughly address racism in the schools. According to Jordan, the country and Maine had witnessed racist incidents in the past, but the George Floyd incident and the community's response to it, changed the expectations that the community - or at least some in the community - had of district leaders.

S/he describes the experience as being on a "runaway train" in terms of scrambling to satisfy people's demands while still managing the roll-out of urgent COVID measures in the district. Within weeks of the protest that ignited the equity issues at District E, Jordan had reached out to outside consultants to perform an equity audit that would include forums, focus groups, and data analysis. District E worked with legal counsel to review their policies. They scheduled a forum as a follow-up to the protest that was led by an outside facilitator. They planned a student forum at the high school to provide the students an opportunity to share their thoughts. They also created a district-wide diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) committee. A goal was added to the existing strategic plan that directly focused on DEI.

While the district has clearly taken numerous steps, Jordan stressed that it is "a journey, not a sprint," and racism is not something that can be eradicated in a day, nor can justice be settled overnight.

District E has chosen to take a broad approach to their equity work rather than focusing on a particular marginalized group. Emerson, the district's assistant superintendent, remarked that "it's about equity of all kinds" and that "one of our goals is to look at the bigger picture of inclusion as opposed to singling out a particular race or two in the work."

In addition to race, socio-economic class and gender identity are among the equity issues for District E. In addition, Jordan notes the disenfranchisement that some constituents are

expressing: “We get more pushback from some constituents around that work where they feel like now my child with conservative viewpoints, they’re not feeling safe and they don’t have a sense of belonging.” S/he points out that we “want schools where everyone has a sense of belonging and that’s so easy to say, but it’s much more difficult to realize.”

In regard to the curriculum, District E has adopted a review tool to look at their course materials for representation and bias.

A notable sticking point along the path in the district’s equity work has been creating a space where students can discuss or share their thoughts on equity in the district. In the course of the equity audit, a student forum only resulted in 10 student participants. Since that experience, the district has been working with an outside consultant on student-led discussion groups, which the district feels has been more effective. The outcome of those discussions indicates that “discrimination against gay [people] or homophobic type tendencies” weighs on students’ minds. But the lack of student voice in the original forum led some to ask: “Who is more passionate about this issue, the students or the parents?” This year, Jordan and district leaders have been working to strengthen student voice in general, including through the establishment of Civil Rights Teams in all schools.

Professional development for staff has been another area of focus, particularly “heightened awareness about inherent biases.” The administrative team and schools have engaged in book studies to address this.

Another focus of their equity work is increasing diversity among the staff. The district is changing its platform in order to reach a broader audience. They have completed training to raise awareness of bias in hiring. A question Jordan raised about creating a diverse staff is ‘what constitutes as diverse?’ S/he asks, “Are you really just looking at staff of color, or are you looking at more [than that], like non-binary or gay people?” This is a question that the district has not resolved.

In addressing their leadership approach, Jordan explained that “when I am doing any kind of goal, to me, I really trust the administrative team to kind of guide that work.” For that reason, the district’s equity work began with a book study and conversations at the administrative level. Jordan and Emerson have both taken leadership roles on the DEI committee, with the Assistant Superintendent taking the lead on the policy work and Jordan taking the lead on the communication piece because it has been contentious.

Jordan sees having a “strong leadership team” as being critical to the work. S/he shared an account of how previously they had a member on their team who did not fully buy into the work, and how “when everybody’s not on board with furthering the work how detrimental that can be.”

Assistant Superintendent Emerson sees taking a “slow and steady” approach to the work, and “continuing the conversation” [for example, on diversifying staff in Maine) as being important to the work.

Jordan identified the two areas that s/he believes “furthers any work in a district”; authoring a specific goal around it, and having professional development. S/he sees the work that the district has done around creating a strategic equity goal and then “following that up with professional development” as advancing the work and making progress.

In regard to obstacles, one of Jordan’s concerns is that there are a lot of assumptions from the public surrounding what is or is not being done. The problem is that so many of the assumptions are inaccurate, and so a lot of time and energy is spent addressing misinformation. Jordan also notes that a lot of pressure is placed on the schools - as opposed to other community organizations or sectors - to “solve” the equity problem, and while schools and educators are certainly part of the solution, they can not be responsible for addressing it entirely on their own – “the only way to create real systemic change is for all of us to do our own part.”

Regarding building a more equitable future for Maine’s students, Jordan notes the importance of defining the work and thinks this could be done at the state-level. S/he remarked, “until you define it, then we’re all just talking so vaguely that nothing’s going to be realized.” S/he used Congress as a case in point, of “how do you get people to sit at the table in a respectful way to discuss the issue at hand, and to reach agreement on next steps?” S/he identified access to wi-fi as one of the few equity issues most people can agree on.

Jordan also noted that the equity audits and 3rd party analyses of district work and policies do require funding. One idea might be for the state to endorse an equity audit tool for districts to use, or for the MDOE to audit district work around equity, similar to the way that they already audit the nutrition department, for example. S/he points out, “why not have somebody, who’s highly skilled, that is doing [equity audits] across districts because I think that can be helpful when they come in and say ‘hey, you’ve got a little bit of a problem here, that we don’t see in other districts so you need to take care of that.’ I think that could be very helpful in that way of creating more equity across the state.”

District F Case Summary

Superintendent Parker and Curriculum Director Drew shared District F’s equity story. Highlights from this interview include an emphasis on striking the right “balance” through “measured” and “meaningful” action.

District F's equity work was not in direct response to an incident in their schools, rather their work began four years ago when they began cultural competency training for their leadership team, which eventually worked its way out to staff, teachers, students, and the community. The first stages of their equity work focused on the LGBTQ community and gender equity. Parker notes, "We'd already been doing a fair amount of work in terms of the LGBTQ community and gender equity, but wanted to put a little more focus on understanding racial equity and our intercultural competence."

Superintendent Parker sees the creation of the district's equity committee as the "enduring project" from their work. The equity committee, which evolved out of a previous steering committee, was created following the death of George Floyd and is made up of community members, staff members, and students from the high school and middle school. It consists of four subcommittees, each with their own area of focus. Some of their accomplishments include the creation of a Civil Rights Team at the elementary school (in addition to the existing Civil Rights Teams at the middle and high schools), another team at the middle school which is focused on "increasing intercultural competence," and an affinity group for Black students at the high school.

The district has also developed two new policies focused on transgender students and equity, which were drafted in one of the subcommittees.

In regard to teaching and learning, Drew described a number of initiatives occurring in the schools to support equity. They have developed a cohort of K-12 educators who have undergone extensive training in intercultural competence and established a "basic understanding of [equity] language" in order to "build capacity within the buildings." They continue to send teachers to professional learning focused on Wabanaki history and experience and they use a tool to assess materials for cultural responsiveness. These efforts are focused on more than just adding diversified texts to the curriculum, rather Drew describes the work as reexamining one's instruction and asking "how do I teach differently?"

Additional equity work includes the formation of an anti-racist White educators group in the high school that teachers can opt into. This group focuses on critical self- and institutional reflection and building awareness of unconscious bias. Drew describes District F's equity work as rooted in "core values." S/he notes "Equity is one of the core values. District F is a district that the core values really mean something for students, for teachers, for community members. It is something that is put into practice in the buildings. They use that through teaching, discussion, advisory. It's lived."

Parker identified two "significant curriculum moves" that s/he sees as promoting equity – providing public PreK and expanding world languages to other grade levels. S/he notes "I think

those are two steps that people outside the schools may not look at as being equity work, but I see them as significant steps in preparing our students to communicate with and have greater empathy for and greater access to curricular experiences.”

Parker has observed an interesting phenomenon in their schools stemming from a relatively recent influx of asylum-seeking students. S/he noted that prior to the students’ arrival they had observed “more anti-social behavior” in their students. S/he feels that the addition of the asylum-seeking students has created an opportunity for the students and staff to practice empathy. S/he shares, “This has been a struggling year, . . .we’re seeing more anti-social behavior in students than we’ve seen in the past. We feel as though there’s been a shift since our asylum-seekers have come, and I’m wondering if it’s greater empathy. We’re providing our students and staff with an opportunity to practice empathy, to observe and learn about what it’s like for somebody who isn’t White and didn’t grow up [with the same privileges a lot of our students have].”

In regard to leading the district’s equity-focused work, Parker identifies as more of a “facilitator” than a leader. S/he shares, “Even when I was leading it didn’t feel like I was leading it. I was facilitating it and really just providing a platform for others.” Parker notes that s/he has as much to learn about equity as anybody else and is not an “expert” on the subject. S/he describes the district’s equity work as being a “collaborative effort.” While Parker initially led the work, s/he has since passed the torch to Drew, and the transition has been smooth.

District F has worked in conjunction with several outside partners in their equity work, identifying quality experts who could contribute to the district’s growing understanding and developing practice.

As the curriculum director, Drew creates space for conversations and serves as the ‘bird’s eye view’ for the district by connecting the dots between the work being done in the various buildings. S/he shares “The work I see myself doing is really helping to make sure that there’s space for the conversations. That when people are bringing needs forward, that we’re really truly following up. But also that we’re identifying those needs, that we’re actually trying to figure out actively where are the issues that we’ve got that we need to address, or we can improve.”

Drew further notes how they are fortunate that they have many invested individuals contributing to their equity work, but how that can also at times create “blindness” that take them down one path without considering alternative options. As such s/he notes that “I think where I can help with that is I’ve got more the district view, so I can give that perspective that may not be biased to a particular age group, a particular space, to a particular subject or topic.”

Another crucial component of Drew's role is the "connection piece." S/he shares, "There needed to be a person to make sure that all of the pieces are kind of connecting." S/he continues, "So what I'm working on is 'okay, so we've got some really great work going on at X school, but Y school doesn't know about it. Or the community is doing some awesome stuff, but the kids don't know about it, and vice versa. So what we have found is that we've got these pockets of things that are happening that are phenomenal, but how do we make sure that people know so that we can transfer and that there is true understanding or that we're not duplicating."

Drew echoes Parker's approach of being a "participant" in the equity work as opposed to being an "expert." S/he notes, "I'm not an expert. I'm somebody who has been continually learning. I think it's important for us to model that and then to recognize when we need to bring in other people who have different expertise." S/he describes teachers and students who have sought additional training on a topic that they then bring back to share with others. S/he sees their approach to equity work as a "shared leadership" style that incorporates the entire school community, i.e., students, teachers, staff, administrators, and community members.

In identifying what has contributed to their success, Parker sees engagement as being critical. S/he notes, "Opening it up for community and student and staff engagement has been meaningful. When we were first doing the work it was leadership level which it needed to be for a year or so, and then we went to the staff. But really the work shifted and started becoming more impactful when we brought in community and students along with staff, and everybody's just working together."

In regard to identifying the challenges, Parker sees "hitting the right balance for the community" as being crucial. S/he notes "One of the challenges we're facing in this country is that the most radical voices on either side of the fence are driving the conversation. And there's much more common ground to be found." S/he sees clear communication as playing an essential role in establishing a 'common ground.' S/he shares, "I think that the challenge is clearly communicating what we're doing and why we're doing it and helping people find that common ground, because it's there."

Drew identified "time" and "communication" as being the greatest hurdles to overcome in their equity work. S/he shares, "Time to be able to do the work, to do it well, and embedding the work within the school day." S/he notes that "A lot of what happens happens voluntarily, in many cases outside of the school day, in addition to things that we would plan. But a lot of the groups that we have running, and I think a lot of the conversation has been [outside of the school day] and that can limit who might be available to be involved."

Drew also sees meaningful communication between the "various groups, parties and schools" as a "growth area." S/he identified some simple ways to improve communication such as

developing a website or ‘Google site’ for sharing information. Less simple ideas include dedicating instruction time to addressing equity that is built into the teacher’s paid time, as opposed to being done as “extra” work. Drew emphasized that whatever approach they take it is something that needs to “work for everybody.” S/he shared “One of the things we’re trying to be conscious of it’s not just the structure that we say is going to work, it’s really what is going to work well for all parties involved.”

Piggy-backing on the idea of ‘what works well for everybody,’ Parker points out that it is not just a matter of addressing the people who are “pushing back against” equity work, it can also be a matter of reeling in those that are “way out in front” on equity. In particular, s/he notes the need to be mindful of one’s messaging and to avoid creating a “mic drop moment” in which one ends up pushing people away from equity work rather than pulling them into it. S/he shares “If our goal is truly to unify, then we need to change our messaging.”

Regarding areas for support, Parker sees having the “force of the law” as being critical to promoting equity work. S/he notes that “It’s easy for me to say to somebody transgender students are using the bathroom of choice because that’s what the law provides.” S/he continues ‘I don’t know where we would be if the law wasn’t behind us on that.’ As such, s/he sees it as the legislator’s job to “have courageous conversations around appropriate protections for the people for whom this work is being done...”

Drew identified clear state language around standards as being an important piece to further supporting equity work. S/he shared “We need to be clear in what we’re expecting teachers to teach, we need to give them enough space and room for creativity, but at the same time we can’t set them up to be in conversations that lead to challenges.”

Parker recognized that “Financial resources are always helpful and probably more so to other communities.... So I would certainly advocate for that, even though it may not benefit us but it may benefit [another district] or [another county] who has greater need for that.”

S/he also notes that “it’s sometimes challenging for the state to provide fiscal resources without dictating what those will be spent on.” This can be problematic as Parker noted that s/he can often access “better resources than what the Department of Education can provide.” As such, s/he sees having the state “provide a list of resources and put their energy into securing financial resources that we can then determine this is what we’re going to use [in our district]” as being the most helpful.

District G Case Summary

District G identified equity as a focus issue after racist behavior among students brought it to the forefront. Partially in response to this and partially in response to the school board's interest, an equity committee was established prior to the George Floyd murder. When Superintendent Madison was interviewed about the district's equity work, s/he noted that it had been "a messy road" that involved responding to several racial incidents in the district, hosting public forums to address community concerns, and ongoing communication to the community about the work of the equity committee and the approach the district was taking.

Superintendent Madison believes it is critical to tie diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives to educational goals. As such, District G views DEI as a fundamental component to teaching global citizenship and the skills needed to be successful in a global economy.

Due to the changing labor market, the need for global skills has become an imperative. From Madison's perspective, "All kids benefit from work on equity. You can't just have a small community in Maine that is predominantly white and expect all students to be able to graduate from that high school and go out into all these colleges, wherever they are, and go into an economy that is very global now, often outside of Maine, and expect to be successful."

Initially, District G's equity work focused primarily on race. This was due to the race-related incidents that had occurred in the middle and high schools. The outside consultant advised them to create a plan related to race that could later be adapted to address other areas of equity. However, in the aftermath of the George Floyd murder, and following a district communication on this topic, some members of the community raised questions regarding Black Lives Matter and Critical Race Theory, and some of these inquiries became threatening and aggressive.

At this stage of the district's work, almost three years in, Madison sees the importance of incorporating other areas of equity into the conversation. S/he shares "we have a lot of parents in the community [who] are saying, 'Can we have a focus on students with disabilities and not just race?' Or, 'Let's look at sexuality in our district.' We have a large interest there. We have gender identity and religious affiliation. I mean there were all kinds of areas coming out."

In describing the larger context of engaging in equity work in Maine, Madison notes that "I don't think we prepare students." S/he acknowledges the lack of diversity in Maine, which tends to lead to a lack of awareness of diversity-related issues, and how that has created "growing pains" for the state in the sense of needing to educate oneself about the problems that exist outside of Maine. Furthermore, given that Maine will eventually become more diverse, regardless of how

slowly that occurs, Madison sees the need to raise awareness of DEI. S/he points out that “I think Maine doesn’t know how to deal with it.”

Madison’s observation about Maine not knowing how to deal with diversity, and racial diversity in particular, is illustrated through the challenges that District G faced from a very small segment of the population, including one individual in particular who was president of the state chapter of a national affiliate that targets districts engaged in equity work. This targeting of the district’s DEI work came in the form of board members being stalked and publicly harassed, numerous Freedom of Information Act requests, board meetings being disrupted, attempts to remove board members, and calls to remove the superintendent.

In fact, in response to this targeting, several state legislators proposed LD 1939 An Act To Protect School Administration Officials from Harassment and Abuse. The act was supported by the Maine School Management Association, the Maine Principals Association, the Maine Education Association, and the Maine Curriculum Leaders Association, but ultimately did not pass through the Committee on Criminal Justice and Public Safety. Madison was discouraged by what s/he saw as the Committee’s inability to grasp the extent of the abuse of school officials around equity and other issues and believed that the lack of support has had and will have profound consequences for the state’s education workforce. In the words of Superintendent Madison, “The Committee did not heed the warnings of those who spoke in support of LD 1939 that the current law does not protect educators from abuse by members of the public. The consequences are now being felt as superintendents and principals are resigning, teachers are leaving the profession for other careers, and the education of students is becoming a political showdown rather than the stable institution in our communities [that] it should be. All because a small group of people with loud voices is controlling a false narrative that furthers their political objectives.” According to Madison, the State Legislature “bears responsibility for their own failure to act.”

Despite the challenges from a very small segment of the community, Madison felt it was important that both s/he and the board respond to the public’s comments regardless of the rancor and mean spiritedness displayed in some correspondence. Madison firmly believes that it is important for people to “feel they were heard” and that “I wasn’t just ignoring them.”

In describing their work with stakeholders, Madison identified some expected and not-so expected partners. Madison sees the students as being “the most important stakeholder.” S/he also identified a group of parents who “formed their own book club on equity proactively and started meeting every single week” as helpful for “building a base of support which was really critical.” A network of district teams from around Maine, working with a consultant, served as further support.

In addition, Madison identified an unexpected stakeholder in the local churches. S/he shared, “that actually was a surprising ally for us in equity work and maybe it shouldn’t have been surprising, but I didn’t think of them at first and they’ve been really supportive of the work and doing their own thing in the churches.” Madison sees a powerful lesson in this, namely that the schools are not, and should not be alone in addressing equity. As s/he puts it “I was thinking, ‘Oh, it’s all on us,’ but it’s not, it is the community. It should always be about the community, [it] should never be about us, just the schools. That’s where it really gets strength, so I think that was really important.”

Other lessons learned include, “Communicate, communicate, communicate.” Madison identifies some past rough patches as resulting from a lack of communication on the part of the district. S/he notes that they have increased their efforts to “put out communication about everything when we’re doing it.”

When asked about how state policy makers might support districts in these efforts, Madison emphasized that additional protections are needed for educators, as described in the LD 1939, especially in a climate of where race is highly politicized. In terms of added support, Madison believes the best approach for supporting DEI is through education goals. S/he notes, “The legislature can help with equity, and I think in some ways with the Learning Results, in tying it to equity, it’s tied to global citizenship in the workforce, economy and all that. But I think they can go further with it and define equity for the state and help tie that together.” State curriculum leaders can also assist schools in their equity work by tying it “to the Maine Learning Results.”

District H Case Summary

District H sees their diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) work as being “proactive” and done at a “grass-roots” level. They take a “building approach” to addressing DEI rather than a “district approach.”

Director of Curriculum Turner, who coordinates the DEI work for the district, noted that the work began about three years ago with an initiative to create “more racially diverse literature.” At that time they were also engaged in two professional learning groups led by external consultants with expertise in DEI topics. In many ways, the district had “started doing some things before we named it [DEI].”

The efforts to diversify reading materials took more of a “groundswell” approach as opposed to being directed by school or district administrators. District H also describes their approach to DEI as being “data driven.” Every building has a universal team and an advanced team that

analyzes student specific data in order to design actionable plans. Resources used to collect data on DEI include a student culture and climate survey. District H sees strong connections between their DEI work and SEL. As such, District H has provided DEI professional development for staff on implicit bias and how this can unknowingly influence their interactions with students.

District H uses an array of academically rich curriculum resources for content areas that also include grade-appropriate representation of DEI topics.

Assistant Superintendent Payton notes that diversity for District H is less racial or ethnic and more socio-economic and about “equity of opportunity.” District H sees gender equity as an issue related to academic achievement. There are concerns regarding disparities between girls and boys in relation to class rank, course completion, failure rates, suspensions, and expulsions with boys being more negatively impacted by these than girls.

Areas for growth include finding ways to extend the instructionally-embedded diversity themes that are evident in the PreK-5 curriculum into the more departmentalized levels of 6-12, as well as addressing diversity through hiring, i.e., developing a diverse staff that will be working with diverse students.

Looking forward, Assistant Superintendent Payton would like to see “a more strategic focus of support from the state level.” S/he argues that the current political environment has made it very challenging for schools to do DEI work and noted there is an element of fear in stepping out too far. S/he further argues that, “if there were specific requirements, it allows everyone to have an equal footing of support, an expectation, because it is hard to be an outlier in a charged political environment.”

Concerns regarding the lack of general standards or language for DEI were raised noting that “without state language, we’re all really doing this on our own. That’s definitely a weakness.”

An emphasis was placed on the need for having a broad outlook on DEI. Recognizing that diversity looks different in different parts of Maine, it is important “to figure out that balance that supports the uniqueness of each locality . . . If we really want to address the uniqueness of our entire state, we have to really think about how we address this in a global fashion that everyone can get behind.”

The superintendent in District H stays informed of the district’s DEI work, but is not intimately involved in leading it.