

Trading Baby Steps for Big Equity Leaps



Incremental equity initiatives often just paper over the status quo. How can schools be bolder and more strategic?

Paul Gorski, Marceline DuBose, and Katy Swalwell

In our combined 60-some years pushing schools toward transformative equity visions, we've navigated innumerable roadblocks. But only rarely is the primary roadblock a scarcity of equity initiatives. Wherever we go, school leaders can list multiple equity efforts: a book study, a student club, antibias training.

The trouble more often lies in how incremental those efforts are. It's relying solely on interpersonal interventions, like an antibullying program, to solve institutional problems, like racism or

heterosexism, and other mitigative equity approaches where we need deep, transformative ones.

We recently met the leadership team at a high school we'll call Gracelynn High, a school verging on implosion from this inertia. (The school name and all other names mentioned are pseudonyms.) Students of color and LGBTQ+ students were organizing against the administration, blasting the school on social media for failing to adequately address racism, heterosexism, and transphobia, trying to force meaningful action. Students of color bemoaned inequitable discipline practices. Transgender students felt invisible in the



EONEREN / ISTOCK

curriculum and admonished leaders for refusing to require teachers to use their correct names and pronouns.

The leadership team was baffled. “We have many equity initiatives,” the discipline coordinator contended. One instructional coach praised Gracelynn’s Black History Week. An assistant principal boasted that she and a few teachers affixed “Safe Space” stickers to their doors.

In focus groups we facilitated with Gracelynn students, they acknowledged that the school was doing something to address equity issues. But that something fell short of responding in substantial ways to their concerns.

They demanded big institutional changes; the school had responded with a hodgepodge of minor initiatives.

“A ‘safe’ classroom or two is nice, but what about all the other spaces?” one student asked.

When we asked Sharon, the principal, how the leadership team might scale up their approach, she wavered. “We have to meet people where they are, or they’ll stop engaging,” she said. “It’s about baby steps.” Sharon had a philosophical commitment to equity but was hesitant to act decisively and “upset the apple cart.”

In our experience, this is common thinking among school leaders, including those of us committed to equity. *We need to pull people along slowly, the thinking goes, or we’ll sink the whole effort.*

If we’re honest, though, we should ask ourselves which people we mean when we talk about “meeting people where they are.” What would

our equity approach be if we met people who bear the weight of institutional racism or ableism where they are? What if we heeded their demand for something more meaningful than baby steps?

From Baby Steps to Leaps

Baby steps implies moving incrementally, cautiously, anticipating little immediate progress. We don’t hurry babies who are learning to walk. When it comes to addressing longstanding, institutional injustices causing trauma and disparities right now, however, the value of baby steps unravels.

One challenge of attending to institutional inequities is that they’re often subtle to those of us not being plowed under by them. We might tuck them behind traditions or “the way we’ve always done things.”



Modifying a curriculum to be somewhat less racist or adjusting policies to be not quite so transphobic is no equity triumph. Equity means eradicating harm now; it means actively cultivating justice. That’s what the Gracelynn students demanded and deserved: not the crumbs of half-hearted inclusiveness, but the whole equity cake.

This means taking equity *leaps* rather than baby steps. *Leaps* are transformative, requiring deliberate, bold thinking and action. We shift our intention from less racism to antiracism. We reshape the entire school, not just a couple of spaces, to ensure justice.

Given the well-documented traumatic effects of sexism, racism, and other forms of inequity (Carter, Kirkinis, & Johnson, 2020; Pemberton & Loeb, 2020), why are “baby steps” still so

common in conversations about equity in schools?

The concerned realists in us worry that it's intentional. Our just-fluffy-enough student-diversity program might garner positive attention. We can choose a version of equity that minimizes controversy—and that drastically minimizes impact.

At the same time, the hopeful constructivists in us understand the pressures leaders face. Sharon was new to Gracelynn. She inherited a few outspoken staff who passionately resisted equity efforts. She had lost some central office support when she initially pushed harder.

Sharon wasn't philosophically opposed to deeper equity action, but she struggled to understand inequity's scope. Like many leaders, she worried about pushback from privilege-wielding parents and the media. Plus, staff already felt overextended. And she figured that deeper equity efforts would require resources Gracelynn didn't have. "The apple cart is teetering," she said, "and whichever way I move, I risk knocking it over."

We worked with Sharon to proceed more substantively and strategically. We suggested she strengthen her support system by first working with staff who embraced equity. We helped her identify somebody in the central office who supported her efforts and who could help cultivate a deeper vision among the district-level powerbrokers. We coached her to frame equity as a lens—as an underlying commitment to just action that informs every aspect of school, rather than as a new program or initiative. Teachers are already drowning in programs and initiatives.

When she expressed how hard it felt moving from baby steps to equity leaps, we empathized, but we never lowered our expectations. Leading for equity is hard. But it's not as hard as being a student who is being neglected in a school where nobody is leading for equity.



Sharon heeded our advice, fortified her confidence and support, and began taking bigger leaps. For example, she charged district curriculum specialists with overhauling the curriculum, foregrounding equity as one of its pillars. They adapted the curriculum standards created by Learning for Justice (part of the Southern Poverty Law Center), instituted schoolwide professional learning to help staff implement them, and elicited input from students.

The anti-equity contingent in the school community remained ruthless, hollering at school board meetings and shaming Sharon for doing what was right. But students began reporting for the first time that their school experience was changing. That was evidence of something positive afoot.

Four Equity Leaps

The four equity leaps described below represent shifts in thinking and action we often observe in schools making significant equity progress.

Before we explore the leaps, it's important to acknowledge that, while the peril of strong equity leadership—the blowback it often elicits—affects us all, the impacts aren't distributed equally. Some of us contend with boards or policymakers bent on abolishing anything related to equity. Further, educators of color, LGBTQ+ educators, and educators with other identities disproportionately affected by inequity can face fiercer opposition for their actions than educators whose identities protect them from inequity (Kohli, 2018).

We're not advocating that all equity-minded leaders should leap their way out of jobs. The question for educational leaders is, *Within my context, given my spheres of influence, how far out of these baby steps can I stretch?* The commitment, then, is to stretch at least that far.



1. The Equity Imperative Leap

When Sharon strengthened her support system by starting with staff who were chomping at the equity bit, she gained momentum and prepared these colleagues to help push through the resistance.

But had she stopped there, offering optional book clubs or workshops to the same few staff without establishing equity as a schoolwide imperative, we would still call this a baby step. As leaders, we must emphasize that equity is integral, not optional. We model this commitment by making it part of every conversation. Let's discuss how this new policy will impact our most economically marginalized families. How can we reimagine school culture to prioritize the joys and engagement of the families whom we've failed to prioritize?

We must match this demand with the resources and support people need to do it. Having a clear, intentional professional learning plan is essential. We recommend professional learning that focuses not just on equity strategies or personal reflection, but also on educators' abilities to recognize and eliminate economic injustice, heterosexism, and other forms of inequity.



2. The Transparency Leap

Even when schools overflow with equity initiatives, the students most affected by inequity often tell us they don't see or feel anything changing. Among their most common demands, they want to know how people or systems harming them are being held accountable. They want to see an immediate response to the harm.

But they also want deeper change. They want to be able to attend school without dodging oppression.

Timothy, a Gracelynn junior, shared, "All through elementary and middle school, I reported racism to anyone I thought I could trust. If I followed up, the AP would say, 'We're working on it.' But the racism never went away, so it felt like they weren't

"A 'safe' classroom or two is nice, but what about all the other spaces?"



doing anything." Timothy's trust in school leaders withered so much he stopped reporting the discrimination he experienced and came to believe he just needed to learn how to survive it. It's hard to imagine a bigger equity leadership failure than that.

Obviously, legal considerations prevent disclosures about specific personnel or students. But from an equity perspective, if students who are being oppressed don't see and feel change, that means there's no change. The measure of our equity commitment is not what we do behind the scenes, but what changes experientially for people experiencing inequity.

As educational leaders, we have two responsibilities. First, we should

communicate clearly how we're responding to oppressive incidents and eliminating the institutional conditions that enable those incidents. Vague talking points—*We value diversity; this was an isolated incident*—are transparently evasive. Instead, we can publicly name and codify how we will eliminate inequity. Many equity plans extol the virtues of diversity. Few explain how a school will eliminate the inequity operating within it. Craft that plan as preparation for a transparency leap.

Second, we should hold ourselves accountable for the intentions embodied in the plan. Schools have too many equity statements and visions unmatched by action and accountability. Align every statement of values, every goal or aspiration, with specific actions and outcomes. For example, if your equity statement says you are committed to ensuring all students feel "safe and welcome," it also should include the specific actions the school is taking to make that happen. What steps are you taking to eliminate the inequities that make schools predictably unsafe and unwelcoming to some students, staff, and families?



3. The Institutional Leap

When we ask school leaders how inequity lives in their schools, they commonly cite student interactions. *Students call each other homophobic names*, they might say. When we ask for institutional examples—how inequity operates in policy, hiring procedures, or other aspects of institutional practice—school leaders often stumble.

This might be why equity-focused

The question for educational leaders is, *Within my context, given my spheres of influence, how far out of these baby steps can I stretch?* The commitment, then, is to stretch at least that far.



professional learning often focuses on implicit bias, microaggressions, and personal prejudice. It can feel more manageable to address individual attitudes or interpersonal conflicts than to disrupt institutionalized inequity.

We should attend to individual attitudes and actions, of course. The accumulative effect of personal biases helps sustain inequities, such as racial discipline disparities or gender gaps in advanced STEM course-taking. However, when we decontextualize personal bias, or even individual privilege, from institutional conditions, we restrict our equity reach (Leonardo, 2004). After all, failures of institutional culture and practices enable and normalize oppressive individual thinking and action.

One challenge of attending to institutional inequities is that they're often subtle to those of us not being plowed under by them. We might tuck them behind traditions or "the way we've always done things." One way leaders can initiate this leap is by discarding tired institutional excuses for baby steps, like the desire to tiptoe around traditions we know are harmful or avoid offending people who defend those traditions.

Then we can identify and eliminate policies that are inequitable on their face: hair or dress code policies targeting specific identity groups, for instance. Also, we can transform policies that, according to the preponderance of research,

are likely applied inequitably, like discipline policies (Anyon et al., 2018). Schools are also full of policies that punish economically marginalized families for their poverty, such as charging fees for extracurriculars or withholding access to graduation ceremonies for students with unpaid fees. Leaders can learn to recognize these inequities and rebuild policy in ways that actively emphasize equity.

This is the key to the institutional leap: Eliminating or adjusting an inequitable policy is only the beginning. If we change a sexist or Islamophobic policy without transforming the thinking that created it, then that thinking will continue informing other institutional decisions. The leap happens when we attend to root causes. *How did we decide this was good policy? What was the thinking that landed us here?* Transform the policy doing harm, but also the ideologies and institutional processes that allowed that policy to exist. This is where that professional learning on identifying and eliminating inequity especially comes in handy.



4. The Rewarding Equity Leap

The most committed, outspoken equity advocates must trust that leaders have their backs. It can be powerful to share support privately, but it's also important to proclaim it publicly and unequivocally. We can also prioritize hiring people with equity mindsets and skillsets—and people with experience strengthening institutional equity efforts in their previous jobs. When somebody applies for a job, ask questions that will help you assess their ideologies around equity.

We recommend starting with *why* questions. *Why* do racial discipline disparities in schools exist? *Why* are students experiencing poverty more likely to leave school without graduating than their wealthier peers? Flag answers that suggest a deficit view—that attribute disparities to something that needs to be "fixed" within marginalized families or communities. Listen

for responses that attribute disparities to inequities, biases, and institutional barriers, because those suggest an equity-based (and accurate) view. Then ask what the applicant would do in their potential role to help eliminate these disparities.

It's not just about hiring, though. We can compensate existing employees for equity efforts that transcend their primary roles, perhaps by reducing other parts of their workloads or by offering the sorts of stipends often provided to coaches and other educators who take on additional responsibilities. Educators of color, LGBTQ+ educators, and other educators who disproportionately face discriminatory barriers themselves often expend uncompensated labor offsetting their schools' failures to protect students who share their identities. They become advocates and de facto counselors. This requires intellectual and emotional labor (see Williams, Bryant, & Carvell, 2019) that we should acknowledge and compensate.

The flipside of rewarding equity is resisting pressures from people angling to retain disproportionate access and opportunity (Gorski, 2019). Prepare a response you can use when somebody pressures you to stop talking about heterosexism or makes an argument about how you're the racist for naming and trying to eliminate racism: *We believe we fail all students if we allow bias or inequity to fester. We're in the business of helping students thrive. So, we're stepping up equity efforts. You're welcome to share your concerns any time, but we remain invested in doing everything we can to make this an equitable learning environment.*



Reflect & Discuss

Does your school or district have multiple small-scale equity initiatives? Are they making a difference?

In your view, what prevents schools from taking bolder, more integrative "leaps" toward equity?

Where is your school or district most falling short on the four equity leaps outlined? How could you address that?

Our Challenge

When we settle for baby steps, it might appear that we're edging forward when we're actually conceding, trading the possibility of equity for a privilege-sustaining illusion. Our challenge is to opt, instead, for something more substantive.

We know it's a precarious time to be a leader who enacts serious equity commitments. We feel profound admiration for leaders plowing through roadblocks despite the disdain of people who have made equity the Boogeyman.

Rather than a reason to retreat, the disdain is evidence for why we desperately need to stretch our strides, deepen our equity convictions, and leap, strategically but surely, toward justice. 🗣️

References

Anyon, Y., Lechuga, C., Ortega, D., Downing, B., Greer, E., & Simmons, J.

(2018). An exploration of the relationships between student racial background and the school sub-contexts of office discipline referrals: A critical race study analysis. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 21(30), 390–406.

Carter, R. T., Kirkinis, K., & Johnson, V. E. (2020). Relationships between trauma symptoms and race-based traumatic stress. *Traumatology*, 26(1), 11–18.

Gorski, P. (2019). Avoiding racial equity detours. *Educational Leadership*, 76(7), 56–61.

Kohli, R. (2018). Behind school doors: The impact of hostile racial climates on urban teachers of color. *Urban Education*, 53(3), 307–333.

Leonardo, Z. (2004). The color of supremacy: Beyond the discourse of "white privilege." *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 36, 137–152.

Pemberton, J. V., & Loeb, T. B. (2020). Impact of sexual and interpersonal violence and trauma on women: Trauma-informed practice and feminist theory. *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy*, 32, 115–131.

Williams, A. A., Bryant, Z., & Carvell, C. (2019). Uncompensated emotional labor, racial battle fatigue, and (in) civility in digital spaces. *Sociological Compass*, 13(4), 1–12.

Paul Gorski (gorski@equityliteracy.org) is the founder of the Equity Literacy Institute and author of *Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty: Strategies for Erasing the Opportunity Gap* (Teachers College Press, 2013). **Marceline DuBose** (marceline.dubose@dueeast.org) is the founder of Due East Educational Equity Collaborative and a lead equity specialist for Equity Literacy Institute. **Katy Swalwell** (katy@equityliteracy.org) is a former classroom teacher and professor who now facilitates professional development for educators with the Equity Literacy Institute and Past Present Future Consulting & Media.

Copyright of Educational Leadership is the property of Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.