# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Executive Summary</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Objective</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Findings</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section I: Case Profiles</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section II: Equity Document Design</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section III: Stakeholder Engagement</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section IV: Participant Recommendations</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A midsized northwestern school district is interested in further exploring how districts develop foundational documents – including statements, policies, and mission statements – to guide equity work, including the role of community feedback during the development process.

✓ How do districts develop equity statements, policies, and other documents?

✓ How do development processes vary for each equity document type?

✓ How do districts incorporate community feedback when developing equity documents?
Hanover Research (Hanover) conducted seven in-depth interviews with equity leaders at districts and other education organizations across the country, with a focus on the northwestern United States.

Hanover began email outreach in September 2018. Interviews were conducted from September 25th through October 3rd.

Note:

Qualitative research is exploratory and designed to add insight and a depth of understanding to a particular question or topic. Qualitative findings provide commonalities and trends but are not intended to be statistically significant or to provide generalizable conclusions.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on findings from these interviews, Hanover recommends that districts:

1. Clearly determine the “why” for equity at the district, establishing a common purpose and language for equity work. Let this objective anchor the challenging design and implementation processes, as well as guide communication with stakeholders.

2. Ensure that committees leading equity document design are inclusive of all stakeholder groups, especially those from marginalized groups. A committee may first develop the district’s equity statement or mission and then continue to develop a more detailed equity policy.

3. Plan for the development of a comprehensive equity policy or similar document to occur over a year or longer. An extended period promotes stakeholder inclusion and buy-in.
KEY FINDINGS

Participants described the development of a diverse set of equity-focused documents to guide and advance their districts’ commitments to educational equity. These documents include equity-specific policies, frameworks, plans, missions, lenses, stances, inventories, and toolkits. Notably, multiple participants described the intersection of these documents with their districts’ broader strategic plans. Participants broadly described similar processes for developing comprehensive equity-focused documents of various types.

To compose equity policies, plans, frameworks, and other comprehensive equity-focused documents...

1. **District leaders firmly and publicly establish equity as a priority.** Leaders typically establish the “why” for equity at their district and appoint a dedicated equity leader.

2. **District leaders convene an inclusive group of stakeholders** to form a design committee.

3. **This committee researches other districts’ equity documents,** selecting the components of these that best serve their district’s philosophy. The committee modifies and expands upon these components according to their district’s specific equity goals, needs, and values.

4. **Leaders turn next to community engagement,** for example, by engaging staff via thoughtful and well-supported professional development, as well as anticipating and taking proactive steps to mitigate resistance from other stakeholders. District leaders should ensure that community stakeholders understand the district’s definition of and focus for equity, as well as communicate regularly and transparently around equity-focused initiatives.

Committees responsible for designing equity documents typically include a diverse cross section of teachers and staff, administrators, parents, and students, as well as other community members. However, committee composition varies greatly, according to the individual needs and priorities of the district. Empowering marginalized stakeholders through membership on the committee improves the viability of the equity document. As one participant explained, “To strengthen the voice of those who are impacted most [is to] strengthen the policy.”

Participants emphasize that a thorough design process demands a great deal of time, often 12 to 18 months. This time investment promotes a thoughtful and equitable design process and helps ensure that the final document reflects the input and needs of the full community.
KEY FINDINGS: A FOUR-STEP DESIGN PROCESS

FOUNDATIONAL WORK:
Executive district leaders firmly and publicly establish equity as a priority:
✓ Convey the “why” for equity at their district, grounded in a common purpose and language.
✓ Appoint a dedicated equity leader
(Slides 15-16)

COMMITTEE FORMATION:
Executive district leaders convene an inclusive committee of stakeholders:
✓ Principals, teachers, & staff
✓ Parents
✓ Students
✓ Community members
(Slides 17-18)

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT:
✓ Anticipate and mitigate resistance from other stakeholders.
✓ Engage staff via thoughtful and well-supported professional development.
(Slides 22-24)

COMMITTEE WORK:
The committee researches peer districts’ equity documents, selecting components that best fit their community’s equity goals, context, and needs.
(Slides 19-20)
Severeral interviewed districts described developing a series of documents – including plans, policies, and frameworks – to guide and advance their work around educational equity. For example…
CASE PROFILE: ANONYMOUS DISTRICT IN WASHINGTON

**STRATEGIC PLAN**
- Developed by the district’s new superintendent.
- Equity priorities are embedded throughout.

**EQUITY POLICY**
- Developed over 12 months by an inclusive district committee of stakeholders. Ratified by the board.

**EQUITY FRAMEWORK**
- Merges the Equity Policy and Strategic Plan, with an emphasis on consistent language and actionability for professional development.
- Comprises four domains:
  - Governance, Ordinance & Policy
  - Climate & Culture
  - Teaching & Learning
  - Family & Community Engagement

**EQUITY TOOLKIT**
- Serves as a blueprint for additional policy creation, to ensure the district’s policy development process, as well as the effects of these policies, are equitable - an “equity lens.”

**EQUITY INVENTORY**
- A recent addition, this document outlines equity priorities for each buildings’ equity team.

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“Our [equity] policy and our strategic plan (…) work very well together.”

“You don’t want to (…) change the language too much (…) in education. It confuses people. So by combining the [equity] policy (…) and the strategic plan into the framework, they’ve seen this language over and over again.”

“We’re starting with the very basic one first, which is governance, ordinance, and policy. Examining those barriers that get in the way of kids learning or kids participating in certain events.”
CASE PROFILE: ANONYMOUS DISTRICT IN WASHINGTON

MISSION: Race & Equity Committee

POLICY: Race & Equity

MISSION: Race & Equity Advisory Team

MISSION: Central Office Equity Team

ACTIONS PLAN: Race & Equity

Guided the 45-person Committee’s development of the Race & Equity Policy.
- “[It answered:] what is our intention around making a race inequity policy?”

Developed over 18 months by the Race & Equity Committee.
- Three Buckets:
  - Professional Development
  - Equity in Systems & Operations
  - Workforce Equity

Parallel to the Advisory Team’s Mission, but targeting district leadership.
- “[Is] about building capacity for awareness and knowledge among our (...) higher leadership.”

Outlines the Advisory Team’s goals for implementing the Race & Equity Policy.
- “[It answered:] how do we shift [our] mission to (...) implement the policy now that it’s been adopted? What is the work (...) [and] purpose now?”

Developed by the Advisory Team.
The plan for translating the theory of the policy into action.
- “[It] envision[s] [what] those main three buckets could look like in action.”
Case Profile: Anonymous District in Oregon

Outlines superintendent’s priorities. Contains equity-specific goals:
✓ Equity professional development
✓ Equity response protocol
✓ Student voice
✓ Gender equity
✓ Culturally responsive hiring practices

A board- and community-created document, developed over 18 months.
➢ “[It] is a flagship, ‘Why?’ for our district. This is why we behave this way, (...) why we make decisions this way, (...) why we talk about equity this way.”

Set of guiding questions for district leaders, principals, and teacher leaders.
➢ “To help screen for [hidden] systems of oppression, uncover bias, (...) [and to] articulate their rationale.”

Accompanies the strategic plan and appears in the equity policy.
➢ “Foundational belief statement. (...) it [outlines] why one of our founding beliefs is in our commitment to equity.”

Eight bullet points that encompass all equity documents.
➢ “One stance that [says], "This is us. This is our hallmark. These are our core founding principles inside of equity that we carry with us to the work that we do."
EQUITY DOCUMENT DESIGN
One person is sitting in a room trying to craft a policy by themselves - [this is] not (...) an equitable practice. (...) It's really important to have lots (...) of different examples of (...) policies (...) but not to copy a policy. It really has to be customized for your own community. (...) That takes time (...) [and] intentional[ity] [regarding] the people [who] inform your policy (...) [so] that your policy is something that the community can own.

— Director of Equity and Family Engagement, WA District
The viability of equity document development requires strong and unwavering “top-down” executive support from board members and the superintendent.

[Our new superintendent] came in with an equity focus. (...) Her entire strategic plan, is based on equity work. (...) she was great as far as getting out there and communicating with many stakeholders about [her equity goals]. (...) And the school board has bought in. - Anonymous

It has to be from the top down. Your superintendent really has to be on board with it happening. - Leader, WA District

Participants outline several key equity-focused responsibilities of executive leaders:

1. Drive far-reaching systemic change.

You have to align all of the other policies to the equity policy. It needs to be the policy. It cannot be one of many policies. (...) You're going to need strong conviction to really shift this practice. You're going to need a different skill set (...) because this is hard work. There is nothing romantic about [it]. - Leader, Anonymous District in Washington (WA District)
2. Appoint and empower a dedicated equity leader.

“If we are serious [about equity], I can’t do those other things. The superintendent (...) agreed to have me just focus on equity and diversity this year.”

– Anonymous

After a year-long inquiry, (...) a recommendation from a nearby educational service district (...) [was to hire] a person to lead the equity work in this district.

– Leader, WA District

3. Establish the “why” for equity at the district, grounded in a common purpose and language.

“It starts with the ‘why.’ Why [does] the district wants to develop an equity policy in the first place, right? If you don’t have a clear, compelling why (...) , it’s just wasting people’s time.”

– Leader, WA District

[You must] re-calibrate the collective understanding of ‘racial equity,’ so that way they can speak the same dialect. (...) It will minimize (...) confusion. (...) [Being] anchored in that shared purpose is going to be critical.

– Leader, WA District

Be really clear about what your purpose is (...) whatever language you use for your policy, be really clear about it from the beginning because it’s really hard to go back and backtrack from that.

– Leader, WA District
COMMITTEE FORMATION: WHO SITS ON THE DESIGN COMMITTEE?

EQUITY LEADERS
Facilitate meetings. (Other district leaders and board members have final approval)

“[The] Equity Diversity Committee (...) was composed of parents, students, administrators, teachers...just across the board. And the mayor [and] one of our police chiefs. (...) The equity policy (...) came out of that committee.”
– Anonymous

“Community meetings involved a diverse cross-section of our community and our (...) staff – classified, certified administrative – in helping create a document.”
– Leader, OR District

CAMPUS-LEVEL REPRESENTATIVES
Principals and key teachers and staff

“Networking and [those who] reached out. We didn't really do any kind of formalized call. (...) [Eventually] we added in student voice[s] and (...) parents and a couple of classified staff and some certificated staff.”
– Anonymous

STUDENTS AND PARENTS
Especially from marginalized groups.

EQUITY LEADERS

“All levels, from teachers to counselors to principals to central office staff, and there are community partners and there are families, especially [those] who are most impacted by racial inequities.”
– Leader, WA District

OTHER STAKEHOLDERS
Including elected officials, police chiefs, and community partners.

“…”
Composition of this committee varies greatly, according to the individual needs and priorities of the district.

For example, some districts opt for a minimal role for district leaders:

We don’t have any kind of central administrators (…) because we wanted [to prioritize] community members’ [voices].

– Leader, WA District

Several participants note that a group can become too large to function efficiently, necessitating a smaller committee to execute the vision of the larger group.

We weren’t all 27 co-creators for the single document.

– Leader, OR District

We decided to make that group a lot smaller (…) because it’s a lot of people (…) We prioritized community members and had a few staff people as part of that group.

– Leader, WA District

Empowering stakeholders in this way improves the viability of equity-focused policies:

If (…) you [don’t] have the right voices [creating] this policy (…) then the policy’s just going to collect dust on a shelf. To strengthen the voice of those who are impacted most, (…) [is to] strengthen the policy.

– Leader, WA District

I wasn’t part of it (…) beyond facilitating the process. (…) It wasn’t something that came from me by itself. So the ownership didn’t belong just with me.

– Leader, WA District
Committees typically scan other districts’ equity documents and select language and/or objectives that best fit the particular context, values, and goals of their community.

“[Our committee] developed our policy, (...) around (...) [our] district [needs], (...) [and] based on what we learned from Minnesota [and] Portland’s [policies]. (...) It was merging our policy from examples that we had seen. ”

- Anonymous

“[We] brought in different districts around the country that had created their own race and equity policies. (...) It really helped inform the work that we were doing.”

— Leader, WA District

Even though they speak to similar issues in terms of addressing our inequities within our systems. (...) Every district['s] (...) policy looks different. (...) because it's [determined] by the community.

— Leader, WA District

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— Leader, WA District

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“Even though they speak to similar issues in terms of addressing our inequities within our systems. (...) Every district['s] (...) policy looks different. (...) because it’s [determined] by the community.”

— Leader, WA District

“[Our committee] developed our policy, (...) around (...) [our] district [needs], (...) [and] based on what we learned from Minnesota [and] Portland’s [policies]. (...) It was merging our policy from examples that we had seen. ”

- Anonymous
Participants emphasize that a thorough design process demands a great deal of time (e.g., 12 to 18 months).

This investment ensures the document is designed thoughtfully, smoothly, and with equitable participation from a variety of community members.

“I really liked how the process went. (...) It was slow, intentionally slow. [So] when we got to: (...) "Do we all agree about this?", It wasn't a whole lot of [further] conversation. Everyone [got] to contribute so it felt very equitable.”
– Leader, WA District

“We worked (...) over a period of a year and a half (...) to create that policy.”
– Leader, OR District

“The process typically takes about 12 months. (...) [You shouldn’t] try and be efficient and do it in two, three, four months. It doesn't work that way. It is a collective process that will take time.”
– Leader, WA District

“Honestly, a framework does take about a year.”
– Anonymous
STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: FOSTERING BUY-IN

Interviewed equity leaders anticipated some degree of resistance, confusion, and/or hesitance from community members regarding the new equity policies. However, the degree of actual occurrence varied from district to district. Notably, resistance to new policies typically involved racial dynamics.

➢ Some districts did not experience push-back...

“We didn’t. And that’s been interesting because the district I work in is predominantly white. – Anonymous

➢ While others did...

“The biggest area of misunderstanding (...) that we have is people (...) often times conflate equality with equity. That’s a very common thing. – Leader, OR District

“One of the primary challenges is ultimately pushback: (...) people don’t see the importance of ensuring [equity]. – Anonymous

“There was pushback [as to] why we’re focusing on just race. – Leader, WA District
Leaders expressed concern regarding resistance of this type. However, they note several strategies for remedying or, better yet, avoiding resistance altogether.

**Leadership and Policy Clarity**

- “[Buy-in] is why [our policy] is really clear about resource allocations too, because [equity] does mean that people need different things.”
  – Leader, OR District
- “The (...) superintendent, (...) was very clear on her [equity] goals (...) [for] the district. And she (...) communicat[ed] with many stakeholders about that.”
  – Anonymous

**Focus on Student Achievement and Well-being**

- “We haven't had anyone say, ‘No. I believe there should be disproportionate outcomes.’”
  – Leader, OR District
- “[It’s] important to talk about why that and why here and (...) if in our data, if race really was the number one predictor around student success.”
  – Leader, WA District
Interviewed leaders emphasize that a crucial step in actualizing the goals of an equity policy is engaging staff – teachers, principals, and others – through thoughtful and well-supported professional development (PD).

“Your biggest gap of all is your value gap. ‘These [are our] values, then these are the steps, trainings, learning or un-learning that needs to take place for you to walk and live [out] your values.’
– Leader, WA District

“Expectation without support is a recipe for failure. So (...) We come alongside our staff and say, ‘We’re going to support you in this [PD] training in that the district pays for [it] and we make time for it on your calendar. And it’s an expectation.’
– Leader, OR District

“Build the capacity for awareness and knowledge among (...) higher leadership.
– Leader, WA District

One participant, a leader in equity-related professional development, recommends that trainings be ...

**Ongoing & Differentiated.**
It’s not just this one-time training, but just there’s a lot of different layers for all of the educators’ (...) different contexts, [and] stages of development.
– Leader, WA District

**Embedded.**
Our team does a lot of professional learning sessions and coaching with all of our educators and our main key educators in Washington state.
– Leader, WA District
PARTICIPANT RECOMMENDATIONS
When asked what their advice is related to the development and implementation of equity-focused documents and policies, interviewed leaders recommended that the district:

- Implement equity policies and initiatives with boldness and determination;
- Use data to monitor equity needs and progress towards goals; and
- Communicate regularly with the community and learn from other districts.
PARTICIPANT RECOMMENDATIONS: DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

“BE BOLD”

- Leaders note that equity documents are just words, unless they are met with a deliberate approach to implementation, including accountability and commitment to change.

"Crafting an equity policy is just the easy part. The implementation is the harder part. That's where the rubber meets the road. That's where most districts (...) feel the pain, the conflict, the heat (...) because you're asking people to change.

- Leader, WA District"

"We can talk about equity all day, [but] we're not necessarily doing anything about it. (...) Make these (...) living, breathing documents and policies that (...) actually hold people accountable to (...) moving the work.

- Anonymous"

"Be bold. Truly state who you are and what you believe in. (...) State [the goals] and then design your path. (...) You [will likely] go against the traditional values of dominant culture that keep things copacetic. (...) We're giving advocacy and agency to students who need voice.

- Leader, OR District"
PARTICIPANT RECOMMENDATIONS: DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

USE DATA TO DRIVE YOUR PROGRESS

• These leaders encourage other equity leaders to rely heavily on data in order to monitor their district’s equity needs and progress towards their equity goals.

“It has to be data-informed and looking at all the different kind of inequities that are within our system.

— Leader, WA District

“If you don’t have true data targets to [track progress] (...) moving forward, then you’re not really (...) mov[ing] the system in a way that’s more equitable.

— Anonymous
PARTICIPANT RECOMMENDATIONS: DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

OTHER RECOMMENDATIONS

• One participant in particular has several key pieces of advice...

“Networ[k] with surrounding districts and other equity folks around ways to compare information and support each other and collaborate.”
– Leader, WA District

“Updates to the community around the [design] progress (...) awareness [leading up to] approv[al]. (...) Transparency, or more communication, outreach.”
– Leader, WA District

“Do you also have white accomplices around [leaders of color] to help support the message? So it doesn’t become lost in another race conversation (...) especially (...) [when] you’re trying to implement.”
– Leader, WA District
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*This participant is now engaged in equity-related work at a university but formerly worked in a school district and drew upon this experience during the interview.