EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN POLICY CONTEXTS THAT STRIVE FOR EQUITY

Carolyn Riehl
University of North Carolina at Greensboro, USA

In North America and elsewhere, the students educated in public schools have long been diverse along dimensions of race/ethnicity, national origin, native language, socioeconomic status, gender, and physical ability. Even so, social and cultural diversity is accelerating, so that most teachers and schools, whether located in urban, suburban, or rural contexts, can now expect to encounter students from widely varying backgrounds (Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1990; Nieto, 1999; Riehl, 2000). Diversity in student enrollment has virtually always led to unequal levels of educational achievement and attainment for students from different backgrounds. Increasingly, however, public officials, advocates, and others are challenging the inevitability of this result and are crafting policies to hold schools and school systems accountable for equitable learning for all students.

These policies have become more specific over time, beginning with the provision of services and moving gradually toward a focus on outcomes. For example, in the 1960s, U.S. federal legislation initiated “compensatory education” services for children living in poverty, but the laws did not hold schools accountable for achievement results. In the 1980s, the New York City Board of Education adopted a policy to report high school dropout rates separately for black, white, and Hispanic students. This policy, one of the earliest initiatives to disaggregate student data, was the result of persistent pressure from ethnic advocacy groups who wanted racial disparities to be acknowledged and addressed. Once again, however, while the disaggregated reports brought inequities to light, there were no automatic consequences for schools that failed to serve all students equally well. Almost twenty years later, accountability for results was introduced, as the U. S. federal government wrote into law, in the No Child Left Behind legislation, a stipulation that federal funding for education would be contingent upon states, school districts, and schools documenting equitable learning for students in different demographic categories, including race/ethnicity, economic status, gender, and handicapping conditions.

Over the years, policy makers have pushed for equity by using a variety of
policy instruments (McDonnell & Elmore, 1987). These have included mandates for service provision, such as “least restrictive environment” policies for handicapped students in the United States, language instruction policies in Canada, and more recently the U.S. policy that every child is entitled to have a “highly qualified” teacher. Other policy instruments include standards for the actual learning that students are to achieve, as in state and national accountability programs that set forth specific curriculum standards and require students to demonstrate their learning on assessment measures aligned to the curriculum standards. Policies also address issues of capacity-building and provide resources and incentives for schools and school systems to increase their ability to produce equitable student outcomes, as in the funding that is available for professional development so teachers can learn strategies for reducing achievement gaps between groups of students.

Many observers wonder about the real intent and likely outcomes of equity-focused educational policies. Are they merely a clever way to certify, under the guise of fairness, a new class of winners and losers in the competitive educational arena? Do they provide a smokescreen of equal opportunity that absolves school systems of responsibility if inequality persists? Or do these new policies reflect a genuine, long-overdue awareness that inequitable student outcomes are detrimental to students themselves and to society at large and therefore must be eliminated?

Whatever one’s level of optimism or cynicism, one thing is generally clear: In this new era of equity-focused educational policy, more people are paying more attention to disparities in students’ opportunities to learn and in their achievement. Just as the advocates in New York City two decades ago hoped, inequities are more visible than ever before, and they can lead to real, negative consequences for schools, and school systems. Thanks to disaggregated data reporting, principals and teachers can no longer hide behind the achievements of their highest-performing students, and districts can no longer hide behind the achievements of schools with high average outcomes. Furthermore, inequities in conditions such as school resources, teacher quality, and curriculum enactment are coming to light as educators search for ways to improve outcomes. It is now more possible to pinpoint systemic problems and not simply blame poor achievement on the students themselves.

In this charged policy environment, the pursuit of equity has become a political and practical necessity as well as a moral obligation for educational leaders. Much responsibility falls on the shoulders of district-level leaders, including school board members and chief administrators. District actors must not only respond to equity-based policies imposed by higher-level educational agencies but must also craft their own policies and practices. District policies regarding student assignment to schools determine the racial/ethnic and socioeconomic composition of schools, an important influence on student achievement. Similarly, district practices for the assignment of qualified teachers and administrators to schools, the allocation of other resources, curriculum guidelines,