

Unraveling Policy Coherence: Intranational Perspectives on State and District Roles in Equity-Centered School Leadership

Research Overview

This study investigates the *coherence/incoherence* between state and district education policies and their implications for developing equity-centered principal pipelines. Employing a critical policy analysis framework, we analyzed 150 policy documents across seven state-district pairings. Findings indicate that while districts pursue localized strategies, these efforts are constrained by fragmented state frameworks.

Purpose of Study

We identify key challenges and opportunities in aligning district and state policies to foster a principal workforce that reflects the diversity and needs of students. We use Critical Policy Analysis (CPA) to examine how educational policies can be intentionally designed to support state and district policymakers in developing mechanisms that advance equity centered principal development. The research questions are:

1. How do state-level and district-level educational policies shape the capacity of school districts to build and sustain a diverse principal workforce?
2. What are the critical policy gaps at the district and state levels that need to be addressed to create a more equitable and effective principal workforce?

Research Methods

This study was conducted across seven urban public school districts participating in a multi-year, grant-funded initiative aimed at advancing equity in education. The districts spanned multiple regions in the United States—Mid-Atlantic, Midwest, South, and West—and represent a range of political and demographic contexts in which equity is enacted. In this study, we examine the degree of alignment—or misalignment—between state and district levels, to shed light on how political and policy factors influence the ability of districts to cultivate appropriate leadership. Following Callahan's CPA Metrics Matrix framework (Callahan et al., 2022), our goal is to understand the landscape of equity and inclusivity in state education policies. We examined relevant policies between 2020 and 2025 and focused on key areas that shape equity-centered leadership at the state level. We considered diversity, equity, and inclusion policy indicators, broader political and governance factors, including governors' political party affiliations, party affiliations of state legislature, state voting patterns, and state demographics.

We reviewed each state’s education plans to assess how states integrate equity and leadership development within their federally mandated education policies.

In addition to analyzing state-level policies, we examined district-level policies that impact the recruitment, retention, and professional development of principals within the districts. To examine how district-level policies support or hinder equity-centered principal leadership, we developed an Equity-Centered Pipeline Implementation (ECPI) matrix that categorizes district efforts across five key areas: District Vision, District Equity Policies, District Principal Policies, University Collaboration, and Community Engagement. Each district was evaluated on a five-point scale:

- (1) Inequitable
- (2) Departing Inequity
- (3) Approaching Equity
- (4) Equitable
- (5) Transformative Equity

The matrix allowed us to assess the degree to which equity considerations are embedded within district policies and practices.

Results and Discussion

We use the ECPI matrix to guide our findings, highlighting the state equity context, district equity plan indicators, and the alignment between state and district equity policies. In the majority of state-district cases (five of seven), we identified significant *policy incoherence*, particularly regarding the alignment of principal development policies with broader equity goals. There is a widespread absence of policies explicitly aimed at increasing principal diversity—an overlooked but essential lever for advancing educational equity. Furthermore, most states received low ratings in both “State Equity Context Overall” and “Funding and Sustainability” highlighting a lack of meaningful investment in the development of equity-centered principals and the principal workforce overall. In contrast, all districts, except one, scored higher than their respective states on equity indicators, suggesting that local systems are leading efforts to advance educational equity despite state-level constraints.

Across cases, district-level scores on equity-related categories were at or above *approaching equity* (3.0), with two districts reaching *equitable* (4.0) ratings. In contrast, states show lower average scores—often ranging from *inequitable* (1.0), *departing inequity* (2.0), to

approaching equity (3). State equity indicators overall mean average score was 2.4 points whereas district equity indicators scored overall higher at 3.6 points. This suggests that most districts are actively pushing for more equity-driven practices, even in contexts where state policies lag behind. While some may argue that principal development is solely a district responsibility, the state plays a foundational role in shaping the principal pipeline. States control certification standards, program accreditation, and funding—all of which directly impact who becomes a principal and how they are prepared.

This study highlights a critical finding: districts are increasingly becoming sites of both resistance and innovation, developing equity-centered leadership systems in the absence of coherent state policy. To achieve equity at scale, coordinated governance and vertical policy alignment are essential to achieve future-oriented equity practices in the education spaces. Without systemic state-level accountability, equity-centered leadership will remain an under-supported endeavor, disproportionately dependent on local context and vulnerable to broader political shifts.

References

Callahan, R., Gautsch, L., Hopkins, M., & Unda, M. D. (2022). Equity and state immigrant inclusivity: English learner education in ESSA. *Educational Policy*, 36(5), 1011-1053.

Fuhrman, S. (Ed.). (1993). *Designing coherent education policy*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.