

From Policy to Practice: Central Office Strategies for Advancing Equity Under External Pressures

Research Overview

We examine how central office administrators in eight urban public school districts in the United States respond to growing political pressures surrounding equity initiatives. Findings highlight: the escalation of political interference that undermines equity agendas; policy incoherence across governance levels; and the emergence of adaptive strategies, including strategic reframing.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine how central office administrators navigate the political tensions and policy incoherence stemming from state and federal pressures when implementing district-level equity initiatives. As such our research questions:

- 1) How do state and federal political climates influence district-level decision-making and implementation of equity-focused policies?
- 2) How do central office administrators navigate local, state, and federal political pressures when making and enacting district-level equity policy decisions?

This study is guided by the Critical Policy Analysis (CPA) framework that centers the role of power in both the construction and enactment of policy amid existing social hierarchies (Diem et al., 2019). The overarching themes within CPA are: “1) attention to complex systems and environments in which policy is situated; 2) the theory as a virtual part of the methodology; 3) most often is done with qualitative research approaches” (pp. 4-5).

Methods and Analysis

This qualitative study draws on 112 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with central office leaders across eight public school districts. These interviews were conducted as part of a multi-year, grant-funded research initiative focused on equity-centered leadership. These districts span multiple regions—Mid-Atlantic, Midwest, South, and West—and represent a range of political and demographic contexts in which equity is enacted. Participants included superintendents, principal supervisors, equity officers, and other district-level administrators. The research team applied an open coding process (Saldaña, 2021), developing and refining codes through multiple rounds of discussion and collaborative review.

Preliminary Findings

Finding 1: Navigating Escalating Political Pressures on Equity Work

Across districts, central office leaders described an intensifying landscape of political interference—particularly through state-level anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) legislation, targeted funding threats, and ideological attacks on public education—that has forced districts into a near-constant state of defense. Leaders referenced how bills introduced in their states are “a reflection of national tensions” and framed their roles as protectors of educators and students amid this political hostility.” As one leader explained, “They’re threatening our school funding... they’re coming after our vulnerable youth.” Such pressures not only disrupt equity-focused initiatives but also create fear and uncertainty within district leadership, as well as influence their decision making.

Finding 2: Policy Incoherence Across Governmental Levels

Leaders frequently highlighted how contradictory mandates and fragmented governance structures create deep tensions and uncertainty around policy implementation. In some cases, policy goals from state legislatures or federal agencies directly conflicted with local district priorities or community needs. Leaders in other regions described a constant need to

“recalibrate” as political leadership and district-level administration changed, eroding consistency and long-term planning. A former superintendent from one district captured the dilemma: “There’s a constant political tension here between what’s going to play well publicly and what’s actually in the best interests of the students and communities most marginalized.”

Finding 3: Strategic Reframing and Adaptive Leadership Amid Constraint

Despite the challenges, many administrators described how they strategically adapt to shifting political landscapes to sustain equity work. Leaders often reframed loss as transformation, shifting their approach to maintain momentum under new constraints. In one district, for example, the elimination of the Office of Equity in 2019 was initially met with dismay, but later viewed as an opportunity: “We think we’re losing everything, but watch the Phoenix that will arise.” That loss, as the leader explained, eventually catalyzed the creation of a city-wide Office of Racial Equity, positioning equity as a broader interagency initiative. Across sites, leaders emphasized the need for political agility, transparency, and courage. One district leader explained, “You have to be willing to risk your own political capital... if you’re not willing to do that, then the work stops at slogans.”

Significance

This study offers critical insights into the ways central office leaders sustain equity-focused policies and practices in the face of intensifying political interference, particularly related to their local context and anti-DEI legislation across the USA. By centering the voices of school district leaders, this research brings forward the lived realities of educational leadership at a time when public education is a primary site of political contestation. Existing scholarship often highlights the role of school-based leaders in advancing equity, yet less attention has been paid to the decision-making processes and adaptive strategies of central office administrators who operate at the intersection of state mandates, federal guidance, and local community demands. Through the lens of CPA, this study contributes to policy and literature by illuminating how power and resistance function within multilevel governance systems.

References

- Diem, S., Young, M. D. & Sampson, C. (2019). Where critical policy meets the politics of education: *An introduction*. *Educational Policy*, 33(1), 3-15.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904818807317>
- Diem, S., Young, M. D., Welton, A. D., Mansfield, K. C., & Lee, P. L. (2014). The intellectual landscape of critical policy analysis. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 27(9), 1068–1090. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2014.916007>
- Saldaña, J. (2021). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Sage Publications.