



THREE WAYS RESEARCH-PRACTICE PARTNERSHIPS CAN SUPPORT EQUITY-BASED REFORMS



The coronavirus pandemic has been devastating to education, suspending in-person instruction, worsening pre-existing staffing shortages and creating new ones, and centering schools as ground zero for fiery partisan debates over mask-wearing and other COVID-related concerns.

Yet where there is turmoil there is also often opportunity for change.

A [new essay](#) published in the peer-refereed journal *Educational Researcher* illustrates how that change can place social justice and equity front and center. The essay is authored by NEPC Fellow Ann Ishimaru of the University of Washington and her colleagues Filiberto Barajas-López and Min Sun (also of the University of Washington), along with Keisha Scarlett and Eric Anderson (of Seattle Public Schools).

[Research-practice partnerships](#), the authors suggest, can help create that change. In these partnerships, educators and researchers collaborate to explore new teaching and learning strategies and design ways to implement and research those strategies.

Ishimaru and her colleagues draw upon academic research as well as their experiences with an established research-practice partnership—with Seattle Public Schools, the Seattle Education Association (a teachers' union), and the University of Washington—to offer three suggestions for creating that change:

- 1. Systemic change requires systemic reforms.** Reform in Seattle and elsewhere has often attempted to combat racism by focusing training to help shift individual teachers' personal attitudes and beliefs about race. But while such efforts have an important role to play, they come up short because they do not sufficiently focus on systemic inequities. Similarly, the Seattle school district had 29 "parallel" equity initiatives, which the partnership helped to streamline into nine interconnected efforts that transcended specific people, departments, and aspects of education. The authors write:

In Seattle, we have worked to expand the operating theory of change for systemic racial equity by attending simultaneously to vertical change (connecting individual educator-student interactions to classrooms, schools, the district central office, and the broader community) as well as more horizontal coordination between systemic equity initiatives.

- 2. Develop equity-focused data systems.** "Rather than solely seeking standardized achievement outcomes, a system of equity-focused measures might reflect a conceptualization of equity that attends to opportunities, process, and both proximal and distal outcomes of holistic learning, well-being, and postsecondary life," the authors write. Seattle's efforts have included the continuous collection and response to a wide range of data, including piloting a new measure of culturally responsive instruction, disaggregating student survey responses by race to examine school environments, and examining teacher workforce diversification strategies.
- 3. Equity-based research-practice partnerships need to include students, their families, and their communities.** This may mean expanding upon traditional data collection methods. For example, when families of color responded in lower rates than White families to Seattle's surveys about remote learning and school reopening during the pandemic, the district partnered with community organizations, conducted focus groups in Somali, and collected information at meetings led by a Black parent and community leader.

Ishimaru and her colleagues emphasize that they are not holding up Seattle's work as an exemplar but, rather, a work in progress and a promising approach to bringing about systemic, equity-focused change. They write:

We challenge [research-practice partnerships] to move beyond aims of alignment with siloed work, deficit-based measures, and exclusively professional expertise—towards proactive and expansive processes and possibilities that take up racial justice agendas, data, and community expertise as explicit standards for the emerging field.

NEPC Resources on Equity and Social Justice

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