



## **Breaking Barriers in School Board Governance: Pursuing Equity and Access through the Lens of Critical Race Theory**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines how school board governance can be a transformative vehicle for achieving educational equity and access. Grounded in critical race theory (CRT) and practical leadership experience, it explores the intersection of governance structures, systemic barriers, and community representation. Drawing on foundational research from Ladson-Billings, Sampson, Horsford, and others, the paper analyzes the challenges and opportunities in fostering inclusive decision-making. It presents strategies used by equity-minded school board members to address governance gaps and concludes with a call to action for educational leaders, researchers, and policymakers to disrupt exclusivity and reimagine equity-centered governance.

**Keywords:** school board governance, educational equity, Critical Race Theory, community engagement, policy transformation

### **Introduction**

Despite increasing awareness of educational inequities, school board governance remains an underexplored lever for transformative change. School boards, typically composed of locally elected trustees, shape the conditions under which students learn, and educators work through decisions on budgets, curricula, superintendent oversight, and district priorities. Yet, their composition, decision-making processes, and institutional legacies often reinforce the very disparities they are positioned to address. Using Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a guiding framework, this paper interrogates how power and race dynamics play out in school board

governance. CRT reminds us that racism is not aberrational but deeply embedded in U.S. institutions, including education policy and leadership. Thus, questions of who governs and whose interests are served are central to understanding why inequities persist. This paper, informed by both scholarly research and practical experience on a school board, critically examines how issues of equity and access are negotiated within board governance. It argues that intentional, inclusive leadership is necessary to dismantle systemic barriers and advance justice-centered outcomes for historically marginalized students.

### **Defining Equity and Access in Governance Contexts**

Equity in education is not about treating every student the same; rather, it is about ensuring each student receives what they need to thrive. As Ladson-Billings (2006) contends, equity involves confronting the education debt owed to communities who have been systematically disadvantaged. This debt encompasses the cumulative effects of policies, practices, and assumptions that have historically marginalized Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and other students of color. In a governance context, pursuing equity means that board policies and resource distributions actively redress these historical injustices rather than perpetuating them.

Access, meanwhile, must be viewed beyond physical or technical availability, it includes access to decision-making, representation, and influence within educational systems. Access to power is a critical dimension: Inclusive governance practices aim to expand who has a voice in setting educational priorities. For example, ensuring diverse community stakeholders have access to board discussions and advisory roles is as important as providing equal access to programs or facilities. In short, equity and access in school board governance refer to who gets to participate in leading our schools, on whose terms, and to what ends. A CRT lens underscores that without attending to racial power imbalances, efforts at improving access can ring hollow. True inclusion

means those historically excluded are not only present but can influence outcomes in meaningful ways.

### **Why School Boards Matter**

School boards matter because they govern the policies and norms that shape students' daily experiences. These boards approve curricula, set discipline codes, negotiate teacher contracts, and make decisions that can either close opportunity gaps or widen them. Historically, however, the exclusion of communities of color from these governing bodies has undermined equitable decision-making. Research shows that the demographics of school boards often do not reflect the student populations they serve. Sampson (2019), for instance, underscores the underrepresentation of Latinx and Black voices on school boards and links it to limited advocacy for equity-based reforms. In her analysis, she identifies a representation gap wherein those most affected by education policy decisions often have the least formal influence over them. This exclusion is not incidental; it is part of a broader pattern of systemic neglect and gatekeeping within public education governance.

Moreover, the very legitimacy of school boards is at stake in diverse communities. As Alsbury (2008) argues, the relevance of school boards today depends on their ability to evolve beyond traditional bureaucratic models and respond to the needs of increasingly diverse communities. Boards that continue to operate as insular, technocratic committees risk making decisions detached from the realities of students and families. By contrast, boards that engage authentically with their communities can become powerful engines of equity. Indeed, research has found that when school boards take an active role in equity, through setting clear goals and holding administrators accountable, student outcomes can improve. Thus, why school boards matter for equity is twofold: They hold significant formal power, and they are potential sites of

representative democracy in education. Ensuring they function effectively for all students is key to broader educational justice.

### **Governance Gaps and Representation**

Despite their importance, governance gaps persist in both urban and suburban districts. Often, these gaps are sustained through electoral mechanisms, districting practices, or informal norms that privilege dominant racial, political, and economic interests. Marschall (2005) and Wilson (2014) document how electoral systems like at-large voting and low-turnout elections can marginalize minority communities' influence. For example, an at-large election (where all voters in a district choose all board members, as opposed to neighborhood-specific seats) can dilute the voting strength of communities of color, making it harder for candidates from those communities to win office. Empirical studies confirm these disparities: Fraga and Elis (2009) and Meier, Juenke, Wrinkle, and Polinard (2005) found that electoral structures such as at-large elections often diminish the political voice of minoritized groups, exacerbating representational inequities. In fact, at-large school board election systems have been shown to significantly hurt board representation for both Latinx and Black communities, leading to less advocacy for the needs of those student populations.

Beyond elections, governance gaps are evident when board compositions fail to reflect the communities they serve. When decision-makers do not share or at least understand the cultural backgrounds of their students, policymaking tends to reproduce dominant narratives rather than challenge them. This can manifest in policies that, for instance, overlook the needs of English learners or enforce disciplinary measures that disproportionately affect Black students. Wilson (2014) describes how even in ostensibly well-resourced districts, if the board is homogenous and disconnected from marginalized communities, equity initiatives often lack

urgency or depth. By contrast, greater representation of people of color on school boards correlates with policies more attuned to equity. Research evidence supports this: Ross, Rouse, and Bratton (2010) found that in Texas, higher Latino representation on school boards led to increased hiring of Latino administrators and teachers, which in turn had a strong indirect positive impact on Latino students' academic performance. Similarly, previous studies have noted that Black representation on school boards is associated with more attention to issues like disproportional discipline and resource allocation in predominantly Black schools. These findings reinforce the idea that who sits at the governance table matters greatly for student outcomes. Representation is not a token concern; it has substantive consequences for equity.

In essence, governance deficiencies, encompassing representation, responsiveness, or both, render contemporary school board practices often inadequate to the democratic standard. Critical race theorists contend that this is not coincidental but a manifestation of power's self-perpetuating nature. Overcoming these gaps necessitates deliberate interventions to reform the electoral processes, the solicitation of input, and the decision-making frameworks employed by boards.

### **Reflections from the Dais**

Drawing on my own experience as a Trustee in the Orange Unified School District, I have observed firsthand how board procedures and culture can either silence or amplify marginalized voices. Boardrooms frequently operate as exclusive environments, protected by formal protocols and historical power dynamics, which can be intimidating for community members unfamiliar with the specialized language and terminology associated with these settings. For example, the format of public comment (often a brief, timed statement with no dialogue) can discourage genuine exchange, effectively muting the concerns of those who are not

politically savvy or connected to insiders. I have seen meetings where parents from historically underserved communities lined up to speak about inequities, such as the lack of bilingual support or the disproportionate suspension of Black students, only to be met with polite thank-yous and little follow-up action from the board. In these moments, the board dais felt more like a gatekeeping barrier than an invitation to a partnership.

In contrast, I have observed how leadership and intentional cultural shifts can facilitate governance opportunities. When our board experimented with community forums and town halls (as opposed to the usual formal settings of official meetings), we observed a broader spectrum of parents and students becoming engaged. They shared stories and solutions that were typically absent from regular meetings. This experience taught me that the structure of participation is equally important as the formal decisions we make. A pivotal moment in my trusteeship occurred when I insisted on adding an agenda item to review discipline data based on race and disability status, thereby initiating a public conversation on disproportionality that had been concealed. Initially, some colleagues resisted, arguing that such discussions were divisive. However, by grounding the conversation in data and student perspectives (including testimony from affected families), we gradually fostered awareness and empathy among board members. Over time, this resulted in policy modifications (such as revising the student code of conduct and investing in restorative justice initiatives) that yielded more equitable outcomes.

These reflections underscore that board leadership matters, but so do the mechanics of participation and the values that shape governance culture. Simply having progressive ideals is not enough; one must navigate and, when necessary, disrupt the procedural norms that maintain the status quo. In practice, I found that cultivating informal alliances with community advocates was crucial. Community members often provided the moral compass and urgency that prompted

the board to act beyond its comfort zone. In one instance, a coalition of parents and teachers organized around the need for an ethnic studies program. By the time it came to a vote, their persistent advocacy had reframed the issue from a niche proposal to a broadly supported equity initiative. My role as a board member was not to lead that charge alone but to lend positional power to those community voices, to validate their concerns in official terms and ensure the system responded. This kind of coalition-building and shared leadership from the dais is what begins to break down the historical barriers in educational governance.

### **Strategies for Inclusive Leadership**

To become more equity-focused, school boards must adopt intentional strategies prioritizing inclusion and justice in governance. Inspired by scholars like Muhammad Khalifa, Linda C. Tillman, and others, and practical insights, several critical strategies emerge:

***Conduct Equity Audits of Policies and Resource Allocation:*** Boards should regularly examine who benefits from and who is harmed by current policies. This involves collecting and disaggregating data (e.g., achievement, discipline, program enrollment by race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, etc.) and scrutinizing budget priorities. Research suggests that equity audits are most effective when they go beyond superficial compliance checklists; they must critically interrogate district practices, budgets, and staff composition to uncover systemic biases. Khalifa, Gooden, and Davis (2016) and Skrla, McKenzie, and Scheurich (2009) argue that such audits should be used to disrupt and dismantle oppressive practices in schooling, rather than serve as perfunctory reviews. In other words, an equity audit is not a one-time report, but a continual process of asking who is being well served, and who is not? and then acting on those findings.

***Facilitate Authentic Community Engagement and Listening:*** School boards must create avenues for community input beyond the formal board meeting. This could include listening sessions in neighborhood schools, student town halls, and advisory committees that include parents and students from marginalized communities. Ishimaru (2020) emphasizes that authentic, equity-focused governance prioritizes relational trust and co-leadership with families, particularly those historically excluded from power. Building such trust means meeting communities where they are, respecting community knowledge, and demonstrating follow-through on concerns raised. For example, a board might hold multilingual forums to engage non-English-speaking parents in their preferred language and then integrate their feedback into decision-making. When families and community members see their input valued, it not only yields better decisions but also builds the collective capacity to pursue equity.

***Recruit and Support Diverse Board Candidates:*** One proactive strategy to close representation gaps is to cultivate a pipeline of diverse school board members. This may entail community groups and existing board leaders encouraging parents, educators, and local leaders of color to run for office and providing them with mentorship or resources. It could also involve revisiting election systems, shifting from at-large to district-based elections, for example, to lower structural barriers for candidates from underrepresented communities. Research supports the importance of such efforts: greater racial/ethnic diversity on boards correlates with more equitable outcomes for students. Ross et al. (2010) found that Latino student achievement improved in districts where Latino representation on the board increased, reinforcing the need for demographic alignment in governance. However, recruitment is only half the battle; once elected, board members of color often face unique challenges (such as tokenism or racial bias

from constituents or colleagues). Thus, supporting them through onboarding, continuous training, and peer networks is essential to enable their success and longevity.

***Embed Culturally Responsive Practices in Board Training and Leadership:*** Just as we call for culturally responsive teaching in classrooms, school boards should practice culturally responsive governance. This means engaging in ongoing professional development around issues of race, bias, and cultural competence for both board members and district leadership. For instance, boards can incorporate equity goals into the superintendent evaluation process, signaling that cultural responsiveness and closing opportunity gaps are top priorities. Additionally, drawing on the work of Khalifa (2018) and others, boards can encourage practices like honoring community cultural wealth (e.g., inviting students and families to share their experiences at meetings, celebrating multilingualism, etc.) as part of the district's ethos. Linda Tillman (2002) notes that one barrier for African American leaders in education is the often isolating and unwelcoming environment they enter; by contrast, a school board that normalizes conversations about race and equity in its own work sends a message that equity is everyone's responsibility, not an add-on or a single person's job.

Each of these strategies demands courage and persistence. They also require a shift in mindset from a traditional, top-down governance model to one that is collaborative and critically self-reflective. Inclusive leadership on school boards is less about heroic individual leaders and more about collective leadership capacity, board members working in tandem with students, families, and educators as partners in change. This reimagining of governance aligns with what CRT calls voice and counter-storytelling: bringing forth the perspectives of those historically silenced to challenge dominant narratives and practices. When school boards adopt these

strategies, they move closer to fulfilling their democratic promise and moral obligation to all children.

### **Implications for Policy and Community Advocacy under ESSA**

The push for equity in school board governance has important implications in the current policy landscape, particularly under Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). ESSA, enacted in 2015, devolved significant decision-making power back to states and districts while explicitly emphasizing the need for stakeholder engagement in school improvement efforts. Horsford and Sampson (2017) argue that educational equity under ESSA cannot be realized without deeply rooted community advocacy and shared governance structures. In their study, they found that ESSA provides a unique policy window for district leaders and school boards to advance an equity agenda if and only if they work closely with local community advocates. In other words, the law's requirement for community input in planning (e.g., for Title I am spending or accountability measures) is an opportunity to put the public back in public education. But seizing that opportunity means boards must embrace power-sharing with the communities they serve.

One practical implication is that school boards should develop formal mechanisms to incorporate community voice into compliance with ESSA mandates. For example, when crafting district improvement plans or determining how to address underperforming schools, boards can convene equity councils made up of parents, students, and community members from historically under-served groups. These councils can help identify root causes of inequity and co-create solutions, ensuring that interventions are culturally relevant and community supported. Horsford and Sampson (2017) highlight cases where community advocates even became school board members, using their dual roles to dismantle inequities in their districts. This blurring of lines

between community and board is in fact the goal, an integrative governance model where informed citizens and officials work side by side.

Another implication under ESSA is the importance of transparency and accountability to the public. With greater flexibility given to districts, there is also greater responsibility on boards to report progress on equity in a way that the community can understand and influence. Boards might publish equity scorecards or hold annual equity hearings to discuss progress on closing gaps, thereby institutionalizing the advocacy role of the community. The ESSA era has shown that technical compliance alone will not yield equitable outcomes; it requires a political commitment to leverage the law in service of justice. School boards, being the closest education policymakers to the public, are the natural conduit for this work. They must ensure that equity goals in state plans do not remain lofty rhetoric but translate into budget and policy decisions at the district level. Ultimately, the implication is clear: policy must meet practice through participatory governance. Educational leaders and board members should view engaged communities not as a threat or a mere box to check, but as indispensable partners in achieving the equity aspirations of ESSA and beyond.

As Warren (2011) documents, community-based organizations have historically played a pivotal role in advancing education reform through grassroots advocacy. This aligns with ESSA's emphasis on stakeholder engagement, illustrating that authentic community organizing is not ancillary but central to effective governance and equity. While this paper centers K–12 school boards, the strategies discussed have broader implications. Equity-centered governance principles, such as authentic engagement, counter-storytelling, and shared power, are adaptable to higher education boards, nonprofit organizations, and other public institutions. By applying these approaches beyond K–12, leaders can foster equity-oriented cultures that extend

democratic participation and justice-centered decision-making across multiple educational systems.

### **Call to Action**

Educational leaders, researchers, and community advocates must resist traditional governance models and collaborate to transform school board leadership. The future of equitable education demands confronting school board histories of exclusion and reimagining practices through justice, cultural responsiveness, and shared power. This involves focusing on decision-making processes, purposes, and who is at the table. Equity initiatives must not be co-opted by market-driven reform rhetoric that invokes civil rights language while sidestepping racial justice. Reform often prioritizes neoliberal performance metrics over students of color's needs. A truly equity-centered call to action insists that racial justice remain central to educational change.

This paper concludes with a call to action on multiple fronts:

For School Board Members and Educational Leaders: Make equity and inclusion the foundation of governance. Train in anti-racism and cultural competence, examine biases, and champion policies that redistribute resources to underserved students and schools. Use your platform to elevate marginalized voices, invite students from underrepresented groups to speak, hold forums in underserved neighborhoods, and ensure language is accessible to all. Remember that maintaining the status quo is to maintain inequality. Leadership for equity often means challenging tradition and embracing change.

For researchers and scholars, continue investigating the linkages between governance and equity outcomes to guide practice. Research what effective equity-minded school boards do differently, build trust, prioritize issues, and navigate political pushback. Disseminate findings beyond academia into accessible tools or briefs for communities and board members. In keeping

with CRT principles, collaborate with communities in participatory action research, treating local stakeholders as co-creators of knowledge on governance reform.

For community advocates and policymakers, demand transparency and accountability from school boards on equity issues. Push for equity metrics in district evaluations, lobby for changes in board elections to enhance representation, or run for office to bring new perspectives. Policymakers at the state level can support these efforts by providing guidance and incentives for boards to engage in equity audits and inclusive practices. Community organizations should continue building coalitions to hold boards accountable for closing equity gaps. Shining light on board decisions and processes ensures that equity is not just a mission statement but a daily practice.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, achieving equity and access in school board governance presents a formidable challenge yet holds immense significance. It necessitates a fundamental transformation in our perception of the role of school boards, shifting them from mere managers of the status quo to steadfast stewards of social justice within the educational realm. By dismantling barriers to participation, amplifying the voices of marginalized communities, and ensuring accountability to democratic principles and inclusive values, we can metamorphose school boards into truly representative and responsive entities. This endeavor demands immediate attention. Each policy left unexamined for potential biases, each student's voice left unheard, represents a missed opportunity. Our students, particularly those who have long been underserved, cannot afford any further neglect. The imperative is clear: it is time to disrupt exclusivity in educational governance and resolutely pursue equity and access for all.

As Theoharis (2007) posits, equity-oriented leadership entails resistance to entrenched systems that perpetuate inequality. School board members must be prepared to confront the discomfort and opposition associated with centering racial justice within governance frameworks.

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