



# Grounding Children's Cabinets in Racial Equity: A Resource Guide

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## About the Education Redesign Lab

Founded in 2014 by Paul Reville, former Massachusetts Secretary of Education and Professor of Practice of Educational Policy and Administration at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, the Education Redesign Lab (EdRedesign) is a university-based actionable research hub. In the pursuit of equity and social justice, we support the field in building cross-sector, community-wide systems of support and opportunity for children from birth to adulthood.

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# Introduction

As the United States grapples with the persistent and pervasive effects of systemic racism, it is more important than ever for communities to address the continuing effect of racial equity on opportunity and outcomes for children and families. This means, among other things, explicitly considering how strategies designed to support children's wellbeing can more intentionally incorporate a racial equity lens.

Children's Cabinets—cross-sector coordinating bodies brought together at the local or state level—are an increasingly popular strategy to improve opportunities, supports, and outcomes for children and youth. Cabinets generally include government stakeholders whose services impact children and youth as well as stakeholder groups outside of government representing health care, nonprofits, parents, funders, youth, and others. By meeting regularly to develop and implement a shared agenda, Children's Cabinets have a unique opportunity to meet the multifaceted needs of children and families with purpose, focus, and urgency.<sup>1</sup> In the words of Education Redesign Lab (EdRedesign) Founder and Director Paul Reville, “Mechanisms like local Children's Cabinets, convened by mayors [or other elected officials] and composed of leaders of child-serving organizations inside and outside of government, can assist communities in constructing a cradle-to-career pipeline designed to meet children's needs inside and outside of school.”<sup>2</sup>

Advancing equity is usually a driving force behind Children's Cabinets, since the most vulnerable children and youth are those most harmed by the fragmentation and underinvestment Cabinets seek to improve. Having equity as an overarching goal, though, does not automatically lead to a set of practices that addresses issues of racial equity within the place-based initiatives coordinated by Children's Cabinets or other bodies.

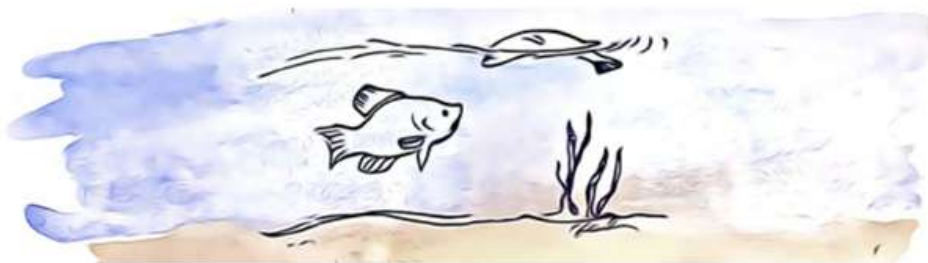
A PolicyLink critique of early collective impact work, for example, called out its failure to address equity and its reliance on top-down initiatives.<sup>3</sup> While race is correlated with poverty, disability, and English learner status, the distinct history and harm of systemic racism calls for Cabinets to develop practices to understand the role of race in shaping the lives of children in their communities and to develop strategies for meaningful change.

This document is intended as a resource guide to support Children's Cabinets in moving from intention to action by embedding racial equity into their work. We have gathered materials from organizations leading the way in advancing racial equity in a number of key areas, including: creating a shared understanding of systemic racism; community engagement; communications and messaging; and data and measurement. This guide is not meant to offer a single approach to addressing equity or to provide an exhaustive compilation of resources. Instead, it suggests some initial ways for Cabinets to begin this important, long-term work and to embed it into their cross-sector efforts.

# Building a Racial Equity Foundation

*Equity is not an abstract concept; it is something that leaders and communities live, breathe, and feel to their core. This passion, knowledge, sense of urgency, and commitment to advance racial inclusion infuses soul into the work of collective impact — **broad, cross-sector coordination**.<sup>4</sup> (emphasis added)*

One powerful way for Children’s Cabinets to think about racial equity is through the Racial Equity Institute’s “**Groundwater**” **metaphor**.” This metaphor is designed to aid leaders and practitioners at all levels in understanding the systemic nature of racism. The metaphor is this: If you see a single dead fish in a lake, it makes sense to wonder what is wrong with the fish. If you see many dead fish in the lake, you wonder what is wrong with the lake. And if you see dead fish in multiple lakes, you ask what is wrong with the groundwater. This analogy highlights the need to fix our country’s “groundwater” by recognizing that the widespread and persistent disparities by race in outcomes is a problem of the system rather than of individuals — and points to the need for Cabinets to create a “groundwater” solution.



Artwork by Jojo Karlin (jojokarlin.com)

Source: The Groundwater Approach: Building a Structural Understanding of Racism (2018)



Applying the Groundwater metaphor to the education system can enable leaders and practitioners to uncover the systemic inequities impacting children and families. For example, reframing the achievement gap as an outcome of inequitable opportunities to learn moves the conversation away from a singular focus on school-based accountability **toward a broader societal responsibility for larger, systemic inequities such as funding and resources.** In addition, it keeps the equity goal, rather than a deficit-based framing of the problem, in the foreground of this work.<sup>5</sup>

### **Understanding the Community's History and Current Structures**

Successful cross-sector collaboration is built on a foundation of trust. Those who have been subjected to racist policies and practices may be understandably wary of trusting those in positions of authority to act in the best interest of people of color. Angela Glover Blackwell explained in a [speech to the Collective Impact Forum](#):

*When you're thinking of a common agenda, you've got to put it in context. This notion of where you live determining almost everything has to do with a long history of discrimination. People don't just happen to live in communities that lack all of the basics. People were forced to live there. ... It was by law. It was by policy, and we are still feeling the impact of it.*

As entities defined by local geography, Children's Cabinets have a particular responsibility to understand and acknowledge their community's history as it relates to race and racism as well as the contemporary structures that perpetuate racial inequity.

## Asking Core Questions

To elevate a focus on racial equity in Cabinet decisions, the Local Children's Cabinet Network's Children's Cabinet Toolkit suggests using a set of core questions. The specific questions will likely vary from community to community but might include:

- Does this [goal/initiative/effort/action] advance racial equity and close equity gaps?
- Does this [goal/initiative/effort/action] address a need identified by the community?
- Will this [goal/initiative/effort/action] disproportionately impact or burden a particular group?
- Can those impacts be mitigated?
- Is this a universal or targeted approach? Discuss the differences and implications of each approach.

Cabinets can document actions and responses to the questions above, regularly review them every few months, and address patterns that emerge (i.e., the Cabinet has only undertaken universal approaches rather than targeted interventions or actions have regularly and disproportionately placed extra burden on children in poverty).

The Children’s Cabinet Toolkit also suggests Cabinets use a “targeted universalism” strategy to reach their goals. This approach involves including everyone in a program or screening, but offering different levels of intervention or access depending on needs. For example, if a goal is to improve health outcomes, strategies could be: 1) Developmental delay screenings for all infants (a universal approach) and 2) Align programs to connect children in low-income housing to primary care providers (a targeted approach).

As an example, the Montgomery County (Maryland) Public Schools (MCPS) employs a targeted, universal approach. The district’s Equity and Achievement Framework provides a detailed assessment of school success. They publicly monitor all students’ performance and provide a path to ensure success for all students. The framework highlights the specific dimensions that MCPS believes work together toward equitable student outcomes. MCPS focuses on equity of resources (money, time, and staff) and considers how well the resources are being used across and within schools. The focus is on subgroups of students who have historically inequitable access, opportunity, or success.

## Community Engagement

Working with community members is essential to finding solutions to persistent education, health, and economic disparities. Children’s Cabinets should embed community engagement and incorporate community voices into their day-to-day work. Children’s Cabinets can engage families, students, and community groups in multiple ways to advance racial equity. The Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships, while developed for schools rather than Cabinets, offers guidance on how to do this.



First, it is important that Cabinets understand the goals and needs of families, children, and communities. This involves deep listening to broad cross-sections of the community, and lifting up typically unheard voices from marginalized communities, especially from people of color. It also means ensuring community meetings are accessible, in terms of location, timing, language, and childcare. This work cannot be sustained unless it rests on a foundation of trust, however, which means that Cabinet members should undergo a process to understand and rectify the harm caused by historical and current policies and practices. Some of the strategies below are intended to support this aim.

Cabinets can also meaningfully engage families, students, and community members by ensuring that they jointly contribute to developing strategies and programming. Cabinets cannot be authentic in their response to community needs unless the beneficiaries of their services have a voice in shaping their work. Understanding Community-Led Approaches to Community Change by the Tamarack Institute highlights a spectrum of approaches from “community informed” on the low end to “community led.” The Tamarack Institute also has several other resources to support authentic community engagement.



Children's Cabinets can find ways to empower nondominant community voices, invest in building their capacity to lead, and offer them a vote in determining the Cabinet's direction. For example, they may choose to use formal board structures such as a Community Council and/or Youth Advisory Board, which provide a governance mechanism for community groups and young people to vote on Cabinet priorities. Cabinets may also decide to focus on building relationships with local community anchors through individual meetings. By centering community members' perspectives and voices, particularly in marginalized communities that are accustomed to being neglected, Cabinets can help generate the political demand for their work and sustain their long-term viability. The Baltimore Children's Cabinet, for example, has used multiple methods of community engagement to create its current workplan. Its 2021 Action Plan highlights its extensive use of town halls and over 1,300 survey responses to develop the Cabinet's 15 priority action areas.

Another vital component of advancing racial equity through community engagement involves individual work to unearth and address assumptions and biases about families and children of color. Turnaround for Children offers a set of strategies for engaging in this process. Lived experiences are the most powerful levers for learning, but only if leaders unpack what they've learned about themselves through their deeper collaborations with families.

## Community Engagement Resources and Tools

- Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships (Version 2): This research-based framework outlines the goals and conditions necessary for developing effective family engagement strategies, policies, and programs that are linked to student achievement and school improvement.
- Understanding Community-Led Approaches to Community Change: This resource from the Canadian Tamarack Institute highlights a continuum of community engagement practices and is intended to support communities in moving from limited, tokenistic approaches to more authentic and fully engaged ones.
- Community Council for your Children's Cabinet: Designed specifically for EdRedesign's By All Means Children's Cabinets, the Community Council proposal involves a series of solidarity-driven co-design principles that aim to ensure deep listening and power sharing.

## Communications and Messaging

How we talk about racial inequity is important. **“If communications aren’t framed carefully, conversations could inadvertently reinforce unproductive misconceptions, or missed opportunities to broaden the coalition working for change.”**<sup>6</sup> This includes ensuring there is a shared understanding of terminology and the use of asset-based language both within the Cabinet and across the community.

FrameWorks Institute, a think tank that supports mission-based organizations in effectively communicating about a range of social issues, recommends that advocates use the following four research-based strategies to discuss issues related to racial equity in education:<sup>7</sup>

- Lead with an aspirational appeal to shared values, not a stark negative evaluation of the status quo. Effective themes for creating support for policies that address racial disparities in education include Human Potential and Fairness Across Places.
- Explain “how it happens” before talking about “who it happens to more often.” Describing the causes, contexts, and processes before providing data on racial disparities is necessary for showing the systemic factors affecting the inequities and avoiding reinforcing stereotypes and blaming the individual.
- Frame the responsibility for the problem, and the benefits of solving it, as a shared concern. FrameWorks suggests asking the following question when crafting communications: “Does this wording position education equity as an issue that matters to everyone—or is there room for people to take away that it’s only a problem for the students or communities who are directly affected?”
- Replace edu-speak and policy jargon with explanatory techniques that help people grasp how in(equity) works. Explanatory metaphors help a broad range of audiences, including those not in the education field, to understand educational equity. One research-based metaphor for explaining inequitable access to learning is comparing learning environments to charging stations.

## Communications and Messaging Resources and Tools

- Talking about Racial Equity in Education: This FrameWorks guide identifies four research-based strategies for building understanding about structural inequities and fostering support for positive change. Each strategy is accompanied by an illustrative example.
- Elements of the Core Story Example: Developed by FrameWorks, this tool offers an outline of the “core story to tell,” or the key frame elements for communications that seek to promote early childhood policies.
- The Groundwater Metaphor is designed to help practitioners at all levels internalize the reality that we live in a racially structured society, and that is what causes racial inequity. The metaphor is based on three observations: (1) Racial Inequity looks the same across systems, (2) Socioeconomic difference does not explain the racial inequity, and (3) Inequities are caused by systems, regardless of people’s culture or behavior.



## Data and Measurement

Data should play a central role in helping Children’s Cabinets address racial equity. Data that is disaggregated by race — as well as by other important characteristics — can identify areas of disparate opportunity and impact and point Cabinets toward priorities. The Results-Based Accountability Implementation Guide highlights the importance of using “an evidence-based and disciplined approach for moving from talk to action. Results-based accountability (RBA) is a smart approach to change and decision-making. Using RBA, **leaders define results and disaggregate data to craft equity-focused strategies that eliminate disparities and eradicate their root causes; engage partners to achieve the results; and use data for learning, continuous improvement, and shared accountability.**”<sup>8</sup> (emphasis added)

Data can also highlight community and individual assets, such as positive trends and areas of strength. Child Trends’ framework for incorporating racial equity into research highlights the importance of grounding research in an understanding of a community’s disaggregated data, and this principle applies to Cabinet work as well. Cabinets should begin their work with an equity-focused analysis of data that identifies areas of racial disparity in outcomes and opportunities, and also seeks out areas of growth and strength on which the Cabinet can build. School districts and state departments of education already collect and report on a substantial amount of data, and city or county agencies have additional data that can inform this process. The Child Trends report also emphasizes the need to recognize that race and economic status intersect and to examine trends in the data — and to consider likely reasons for these trends.



In doing this, Cabinets can develop an understanding, agreement, and prioritization of what dimensions of inequality **must be measured, recommendations on how they should be measured, strategies for collecting and analyzing data, and focus on addressing recognized gaps.**

## **Data and Measurement Resources and Tools**

- Racial Equity Institute Getting to Equity Advocacy Results (GEAR): This tool provides useful benchmarks, frameworks, and tools for measuring progress in equity efforts for policy change. The GEAR framework provides advocates with tools to strengthen the effectiveness of their advocacy, identify opportunities to drive change, and demonstrate results — across a range of issues.
- A Guide to Incorporating a Racial and Ethnic Equity Perspective throughout the Research Process: This Child Trends resource provides concrete ways in which researchers can incorporate a racial and ethnic equity perspective at every stage of the research process, including landscape assessment, study design and data collection, data analysis, and dissemination. It also identifies five guiding principles to assist researchers in applying this lens.
- Opportunity Atlas: Jointly developed by the Census Bureau, Brown University, and Harvard University, this tool enables users to examine social mobility data in order to address the question, “Which neighborhoods in America offer children the best chance to rise out of poverty?”

- The Handbook on Measuring Equity in Education: This resource provides practical guidance on the calculation and interpretation of indicators designed to target the most disadvantaged groups. **It is intended for anyone involved in the measurement and monitoring of equity in education**, especially those concerned with national policymaking. It addresses the current knowledge gaps and provides a conceptual framework to measure equity in learning, drawing on examples of equity measurement across 75 national education systems.
- NYCLA Equity Self-Assessment Tool: This tool provides a framework for school and district leaders to evaluate the state of equity in their school system and to identify and prioritize areas for improvement. The assessment focuses both on school and system leadership (collectively) and the district/school system as a whole. Users assess their progress along a continuum of behaviors and practices ranging from the least to the most desirable.
- Reforming NY's Juvenile Justice System: This case study analyzes the NY Juvenile Justice System. Performance metrics that previously rested in different agencies and newly designed data sets were woven together into real-time decision-making tools for key stakeholders. Local communities were integrated into the state planning process, and eight Regional Youth Justice Teams worked across the state to build broader alignment and ultimately create better results for New York youth.

# The Path Forward

Children's Cabinets are uniquely positioned to bring together a broad set of organizations within a community to effect change for children and youth. In this capacity, they have a particular responsibility, and opportunity, to ensure racial equity is at the center of this work. To do this, Cabinets will need to adopt specific strategies to ensure they move beyond intentions to action. Through authentic community engagement coupled with strong collaborative action, equity-focused data analysis and metrics, and powerful communication and messaging, Children's Cabinets can serve as vehicles to address systemic racism as they work to improve opportunities and outcomes for children and youth.



# Endnotes

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- <sup>2</sup> Paul Reville, “Coronavirus Gives Us an Opportunity to Rethink K-12 Education,” The Boston Globe, April 9, 2020, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2020/04/09/opinion/coronavirus-gives-us-an-opportunity-rethink-k-12-education/>.
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- <sup>6</sup> FrameWorks, “Talking about Racial Equity in Education,” Washington D.C., 2020, <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/FRAJ7033-Racial-Equity-in-Education-Guide-for-Advocates-190712.pdf>.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>8</sup> Michael MacAfee, “Bringing Soul to the Work of Collective Impact,” SSIR, 2015, [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/bringing\\_soul\\_to\\_the\\_work\\_of\\_collective\\_impact#](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/bringing_soul_to_the_work_of_collective_impact#).