For months, the Orange County, N.C., school board wrestled with pressure to ban students from wearing the Confederate flag symbol on school grounds. Then came the deadly white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Va., in 2017.

Within days, the board banned Confederate flag clothing and formed a task force that would labor for two years to write a new racial equity policy.

"The Orange County schools acknowledge persistent racial intolerance, inequities, and academic disparities in our district," the task force wrote, before laying out its prescription for "disrupt[ing] all forms of discrimination in our school community."

After an emotional public hearing, the board adopted the policy unanimously.

"I'm proud to say, 'Hey, I'm turning around,'" said board member Stephen Halkiotis, whose public remarks about his change of heart were captured in a local TV news story. "I'm letting it go, because it's the right thing to do because all seven [board members] have to march together on this."

Now the real work begins.

The district, located in the same county as the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, is just the latest in a wave of school systems that are grappling with the impact of deep-seated educational inequities.

The most visible feature of that wave has been the creation of positions and hiring of new senior staff members, often called chief equity officers, to lead that public reckoning. People like Dena Keeling, a former school counselor who is the new chief equity officer in the Orange County district.

"If you're a district who's not really serious about this work, then I'm not the person," Keeling said she told district leaders as she interviewed for that job.

Her hiring is proof that the district's leaders are serious about addressing deep-rooted concerns, she said. But, she acknowledged, "they haven't been tested yet."

A Challenging, Isolating Job

Equity in education, broadly speaking, means that schools provide all students the supports they need to reach their fullest potential.

Officials often focus on racial, economic, and gender gaps in academic performance, and how school policies perpetuate those disparities.

For example, studies show that children from low-income families are less likely to be identified for gifted education compared to wealthier peers, even when they demonstrate the same achievement. Other
research shows that schools with the most disadvantaged students tend to have the least experienced and effective teachers.

Drawing attention to longstanding racial inequities in school district practices is challenging, exciting, and essential work, according to chief equity officers interviewed in six districts and one charter network.

It can also be isolating, difficult, and a magnet for hostility, both inside and outside the school system. It's profoundly unsettling for school staff and some members of the community to hear that their own beliefs and practices are contributing to the intractable gap in achievement between white and affluent students and students who are black, Hispanic, or from low-income backgrounds.

"One of the ways we see institutional racism is the casual acceptance of the gap," said Dani Ledezma, the senior adviser for racial equity and justice for the Portland school district in Oregon. "We have to build a culture that doesn't accept that."

But pitfalls abound, both for equity officers and for superintendents who openly pursue an agenda to dismantle inequities.

In September, Dennis Carpenter, who had a controversial tenure since he was named superintendent in the Lee's Summit, Mo., district in 2017, resigned after clashing with the all-white school board. It had turned down his requests to hire a firm for districtwide equity training, then reversed itself. Carpenter, who is African American, was also subjected to racial threats during his time leading the majority white district in the Kansas City suburbs.

In January, Sharif Liwaru, hired in 2014 as director of equity and diversity for the Omaha, Neb., district, was fired. He said it was because he forwarded an invitation to principals to attend a community meeting on African-American suspension rates; the district said it could not comment on personnel matters.

And some African-American community members in Columbia, Mo., are calling for the resignation of that district's chief equity officer in the wake of a 14-year-old black student's wrongful arrest after a school fight. They say Carla London, hired to the position in 2017, hasn't done enough to advocate for minority students.

"You really can't do a chief equity officer job if you're scared to lose your job," said John Marshall, who since 2012 has overseen equity efforts for the Jefferson County public schools in Louisville, Ky. "When it comes to talking about racial inequity, you are, in fact, calling out the system."

But the position also requires the political skill to do just that, while still being able to function within the bureaucracy.
"We're often a department that the district created to fight itself," says Tiffany B. Young, equity and diversity director for Nevada's Washoe County school district. "We're not the staff that sits in a room that says, 'oh yeah, that's fine.' "

—Tiffany Brown Anderson/Redux Pictures

"Equity work is hard, and you cannot do equity work without having creative conversations about race," said Tiffany Young, the equity and diversity director for Washoe County schools in Nevada.

And that means in every department, she said. The district is now providing cultural competency training to its bus drivers after hearing about a driver with "biases toward a particular population," she said.

"We're often a department that the district created to fight itself. We're not the staff that sits in a room that says, 'oh yeah, that's fine,' " said Young, who's had the job since 2014.

"It can be a process of disrupting," she said, "but it shouldn't be disruptive."

Young is leading a student committee through a re-evaluation of the district's dress codes. American Indian students had been banned from wearing eagle feathers, seen by many tribes as symbols of strength and wisdom, on their graduation caps—part of a districtwide policy prohibiting decorations on the caps. As a compromise, students are now allowed to wear the feathers in their hair.

"We had some good conversations in the district about silencing cultural beliefs and values," she said.

A Position With Power?

Counting the number of chief equity officers nationwide is difficult. Many districts have staff members who oversee some aspect of a district's equity work, such as promoting workforce diversity.

An important difference in the newer positions is that chief equity officers are a part of a superintendent's cabinet. They have a mandate to work across—or break down—central office silos and shape districtwide policies.

"Equity is the new coconut water," joked Christopher P. Chatmon, the deputy chief of equity in the Oakland, Calif., district. Like the trendy health-food drink, it's popular for school systems to say they're embracing equity work.
But "it can't just be a department," he said. "It has to be a theory of action that's calibrated with the whole ecosystem."

Eric Moore, the chief of accountability, research, and equity for Minneapolis schools, is an unusually powerful chief equity official; in addition to supervising the district's equity work, he also oversees evaluation and assessment, social-emotional learning, and multitiered systems of support.

"Institutional racism manifests itself in districts articulating the desire to address equity, but there aren't resources attached to the work, nor is there staff," said Moore, who has been in the chief position for nearly four years. "Districts have equity officers with a small number of staff, and they're expected to implement these enormous changes."

Moore's office is unusually powerful, with control of federal Title I spending for disadvantaged students, Title II money for teacher and leader professional development, and Title IV funds, which promote safe and healthy schools and education technology, among other programs.

That budgetary control allows him to have conversations on an equal footing with other senior staff, he said.

But there are potential downsides to designating one person or office to lead equity efforts.

"When you create a person or an office for your equity priorities, it can reinforce those policies, or it can get in the way," said Meredith I. Honig, a professor of education policy at the University of Washington and the director of the District Leadership Design Lab, which helps central offices transform in order to better support schools.

Creating a position means there's concentrated attention, Honig said. "That can set a powerful message, and also leverage important work throughout the central office."
The risk, she said, is other central office staff can believe equity concerns are someone else's job, and not their own.

"But I think the design of some of these positions takes that downside into account," she said, by making it clear that the equity officer is in place to support everyone's work, not just handle it alone.

One of the most challenging aspects of the position, chief equity officers say, is defining just what the work should be.

Keeling, who's only held her job since July, said one of her first priorities is guiding the equity task force through the painstaking work of transforming its big-picture goals into achievable interim steps.

She also is asking the community to give her some time.

"Give us the space to do the work. It's not going to happen tomorrow. These are mindsets that I have to break down," she said.

A focus on student equity is not limited to traditional districts. In June, Benny Vásquez was hired as the first equity director for KIPP schools, a nationwide charter network of more than 100,000 students, 95 percent of whom are black or Hispanic.

Individual KIPP schools and regional networks have focused on equity for some time, Vásquez said. His hiring is "an opportunity to give a systemic approach to the work, and an opportunity for us to get clear about what our vision is." KIPP is using surveys of parents and students to guide that vision, he said.

Ledezma, in Portland, is working on the creation of a racial equity and social justice advisory team, made up of representatives from district schools and departments. That team will take the district’s existing equity policy and build in more measures of accountability, said Ledezma.

Measuring Impact
Another challenge for equity officers: defining and quantifying success, especially when talking about differences in achievement between students of different races and ethnicities that have been entrenched for years, if not decades.

"It's messy," Young acknowledged, but the Washoe County official said she has, over time, been able to build ties with the district's "awesome" data and accountability department.

"It took me five or six years to get there," Young said, but the district now reports data through an "equity lens." For example, when school staff look at enrollment in high-level academic programs or suspensions, they do so with an eye to whether certain groups are under- or overrepresented.

Keeling sees part of her position as getting people to look beyond numbers as a sole measure of success.

"Voice and story and experience and qualitative [measures] are equally as important," she said. "I want the kids to be able to say, 'My experience has changed for the better.' And I don't want it to be just for the kids and the parents of color."

Coming from a research and accountability background, Moore said equity officers have to be able to present both positive stories and positive numbers to convince the community—and district leadership—that work to root out inequities is really happening.

"There's a tendency to not want to use quantitative research because it has been a way to silence groups," Moore said. In other words, a group's feelings about a school or situation can get overlooked or downplayed because it's difficult to measure.

"I get [the concern], but I'm trying to approach research and evaluation in a different way," he said, where both quantitative measures and experiences matter.

"You have to have both, because you have to monitor the work. Some people want to see stories based on numbers. Some people want to see that the story has changed, that the narrative has changed."

Researchers have started to put some hard numbers around the effectiveness of policies aimed at educational equity.

In Oakland, a program of regularly scheduled classes that are exclusively for black, male students, taught by black, male teachers who focus on "social-emotional training, African-American history, culturally relevant pedagogy, and academic supports," was found to boost the on-time graduation rate among black males by 3 percentage points.

Rates for black girls also rose, though not as much.

As chief equity officers grapple with these weighty tasks of measuring success and developing a framework to do this work, they're also trying to formalize opportunities to network with and support one another.

Right now, there is no organization of chief equity officers, though they do connect through other school leadership organizations or by visiting districts making strong equity efforts.

"I would love for the philanthropic community to get a cohort of us together," said Chatmon.

Marshall said he, too, would love to connect with his peers beyond his Kentucky district.

"Some of the things that a chief equity officer needs is the affirmation that you're doing the right work," he said. "They are tackling racial inequity and gender inequity and going up against a system that was not designed to even think about this."

There's also a recognition among these leaders that their work may never really end.

"This work is a journey, a journey to a destination that we'll probably never reach," Vásquez said.
"There's always going to be some obstacles. But when I walk through the door and I see our beautiful babies happy and smiling and joyful and learning ... when I see those things happening, I think, wow, we're getting there."

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