INVESTING FOR EQUITY IN INSTRUCTIONAL IMPROVEMENT

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The idea of investing resources (people, money, time) in learning improvement presumes that resources are targeted to particular purposes—and not others—within the district and its schools (see Chapter 6 in this volume). In so doing, the investor is likely to be asked: Why not use the resources for X or Y or Z? Why favor that school, unit, or program and not this one? How fair is this allocation? How will this specific group of students (or teachers) benefit? Will all students (or teachers) benefit equally? Why or why not? The answers to these questions invoke the delicate politics of making investments in the context of scarce resources and competing interests. The questions also confront a basic premise of learning-focused leadership, and indeed the broad policy movement that seeks to “leave no child behind”: that leadership and reform aim at providing all young people with education that is both powerful and equitable (Clune, 1994; Copland & Knapp, 2006; Ladd, 2008; Organisation for Economic Co-operation & Development [OECD], 2007; Scheurich & Skrla, 2003).

While the tug of war over scarce resources can be seen as a process of negotiating among competing interests, it is also a central occasion for district and school leaders to consider notions of equity and fairness. Based in some compelling vision of what is equitable and fair, the leadership challenge is to invest resources in ways that respond to the unique needs of students, teachers, and schools while maximizing these goals and developing economically and politically sustainable strategies for doing so.

Either explicitly or implicitly, these matters were a central concern in the districts and schools we investigated in the third strand of the Study of Leadership for Learning Improvement (Knapp et al., 2010; Plecki et al., 2009), and their experiences
in investing resources bring to light the core issues at stake and some possible ways they can be addressed. Their attempt to grapple with equity concerns while investing resources to support learning improvement highlights the complexity of this facet of leadership work in two ways. First, it highlights the conceptual challenges of dealing with this fundamental but difficult idea. Put most simply, as various scholarly literatures have long recognized (Baker & Green, 2008; Berne & Stiefel, 1999; Grubb, 2009; Ladd, 2008), the conceptual problem resides in the fact that what is equal is not always “equitable.” Despite the natural leadership tendency to make sure all parties have equal resources—thereby “leveling the playing field”—educators and their constituencies know intuitively that not all students need the same supports for learning, and that some students who face significant economic, linguistic, or other disadvantages are likely to require much greater support, to ensure an “equal” opportunity to succeed, no less to ensure success itself (Downes & Stiefel, 2008; Harris, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Leaders struggle to address historical and persistent inequities that are all too common within schools and classrooms across the nation, despite numerous federal, state, and local efforts to reduce them (Baker & Corcoran, 2012; Ladd, 2012).

Second, the attempt to invest resources equitably and effectively within districts and schools highlights the fact that achieving equity goals is not only a technical or structural problem, it is also a political challenge in which diverse views of what constitutes “fairness” must be adjudicated (Oakes, 2005). In broad strokes, the more that equitable solutions diverge from equal allocations, these political dynamics are likely to become all the more acute—because certain interests get an increasingly disproportionate share of a given resource (staffing, funding, time, expertise, materials), while others get less. Retrenchment conditions are also likely to surface political dynamics in more acute form, as leaders are forced to do the same (or more) with less, and the stakeholders view the resource distribution equation in stark, zero-sum terms.

Contextual factors may also contribute to the political dynamics and leadership challenges in developing more equitable responses to address the learning needs of all students. These factors include the nature of the relationships among school administrators, school boards, and labor unions and the specific policies that result from collective bargaining agreements. These labor arrangements can impact the types of staffing resource allocation strategies available for consideration in both productive and unproductive ways (Strunk & Grissom, 2010).

Thus, an explicit focus on equity brings a new dimension to the investment equation, as suggested in Figure 7.1. We explore this dimension in this chapter as follows. After a brief discussion of the central leadership challenges and concepts at play, we distinguish different types of resource decisions that invite the differential investment of staffing and other resources in activities aimed at particular schools, classrooms, programs, or students, and show how these actions attempted to realize the goals of learning-focused leadership that prioritizes equity. We
explore each of these with district and school examples across our sites. Then, drawing from one particularly instructive case, we explore how leaders can manage the political dimensions of leading for equity. We conclude the chapter with a few observations about the leadership actions leaders may consider as they move through stages of an equity agenda.

The Leadership Challenge

Public school leaders are increasingly being asked to do more with less, and to provide an opportunity for more of their students to experience school as an “equalizing” social and economic vehicle. Accountability initiatives like No Child Left Behind have shifted the focus of attention toward measurable outcomes in schools and across districts, and the corresponding wealth of published data about student performance has brought issues of difference and disparity to the forefront of school leaders’ attention (Lee & Wong, 2004; Oakes, 2008). The four districts we studied (Atlanta Public Schools, New York City/Empowerment Schools Organization, Portland, OR, Public Schools, and Lane County District 4J in Eugene, OR) resemble a range of large and mid-sized districts across the country; they were wrestling with the complex and dynamic challenge of trying to raise the academic performance of all students, close the achievement gap, and distribute educational access and opportunity more equitably to every student. These objectives can at times compete for both attention and resources, and leave school
leaders struggling to find adequate or useful decision making models and resource allocation strategies. Adding to this challenge is the growing realization by many school leaders that creating new funding formulas is not enough.

Specifically, leaders face some common problems of practice with respect to resource allocation, four of which are central to the task of equitably allocating resources based on differential needs (Plecki et al., 2006):

1. **Targeting achievement gaps.** Here, the cumulative disadvantages affecting some groups of students relative to others almost inevitably imply directing more and different resources to less advantaged students, to help them catch up with more advantaged peers. The key leadership act is to “put the money where the rhetoric is,” by making achievement gaps a basic reference point for resource-related decisions, based on clear evidence (which accountability systems can help provide) on the nature of achievement gaps and progress on addressing those gaps.

2. **Organizing schools to enable the alignment of resources with equity-focused learning improvement.** Formula-driven approaches to allocating human resources to schools, coupled with the typically egalitarian culture of schools, often push them to be organized to be “equal” (e.g., same number of students in each class, same teaching assignments), and as such, typically not well aligned with an equity agenda. The leadership challenge is to structure time, staff roles, staff and student assignment, particular programs, funding formulas, and other organizational conditions that enable resources to be used in a more flexible and purposeful way, so as to maximize equity goals.

3. **Developing and distributing “human capital” equitably, among schools, programs, and classrooms.** The lines of least resistance are often for capable staff to be distributed inequitably among schools and programs (e.g., put the best teachers in the most advanced classes). Fully accomplished teachers are also typically in short supply. To counter these tendencies, leaders can provide supports, incentives, and opportunities for professional learning that build motivation and expertise, thereby fostering higher performance among all teachers, while also encouraging or directing the greatest talent to serve the greatest need.

4. **Managing the politics of equitable, learning-focused leadership.** All steps taken to allocate resources equitably, which almost always means unequally, will generate political pressures, due to competing demands from actors both inside and outside the education system. Leaders are often on the receiving end of these pressures, but also in a good position to mediate them.

All four challenges articulated above were present in our district cases, and responses to any one of them either interacted with, or were dependent upon, strategies to address the other three. In this chapter, we explore all four, while paying particular attention to understanding the fourth challenge regarding the successful management of political tensions associated with equity-focused leadership.
Clarifying Conceptions of Fairness and Equity

To pursue these challenges, leaders immediately confront the complex and politically charged determination of what is "fair." Ask any group of educators (as we did our informants) about equity as a concern or principle of their leadership action, and a range of responses is likely: from equity as the equal distribution of workload across teaching staff, to the reduction of achievement gaps, to equalizing access to selective programs, to the attention paid to special needs students as compared with others, to the pursuit of social justice in communities of poverty. The educators are likely to talk about—or around—issues of equity in their work in a variety of ways, but often with difficulty, or in ways that indicate they struggle to reconcile competing ideas (Marshall & Ward, 2004). At the root of their struggle are some notions of fairness and equality (e.g., equality of opportunity), coupled with heightened concern for the circumstances of less advantaged individuals or groups.

Beneath what people say or think are three notions that have been articulated by the school finance literature across the past several decades: equality, equity, and adequacy (Corcoran & Evans, 2008; Hanushek & Lindseth, 2009; National Research Council, 1999; Springer, Houck, & Guthrie, 2008). Of particular concern are the multiple and evolving meanings for the term equity, for they highlight the source of many struggles in this realm of leadership work (Bulkeley, 2013).

In operational terms, the answer in many districts to this question of what constitutes a fair funding system has often been a distribution of dollars (e.g., funds for instructional materials) and human resources (e.g., principals, librarians, instructional assistants) to schools based simply on the number of students enrolled. On the face of it, this arrangement is clearly equal, and in certain situations would be considered equitable, as in cases where distributions are blatantly unequal. For example, in response to the "savage inequalities" that have often been described in urban schooling (e.g., Kozol, 1991), more equal treatment of all parties is an easily agreed upon goal. Yet even this goal is not easily met: the material, intellectual, and social resources of schooling remain stubbornly unequal, even when attempts are made to equalize the availability of books, technology, adequate facilities, literacy coaches, and other such resources (Baker & Corcoran, 2012; OECD, 2007; Rothstein, 2004). Confronted by these basic inequalities, the first impulse of reformers is to try to equalize available resources. The underlying assumption is this: When parties (districts, schools, teachers, classrooms, etc.) are themselves considered equivalent, then treating them equally is generally viewed as the "equitable" thing to do—this principle is described as "horizontal equity" in the language of school finance scholars (Berne & Stiefel, 1999).

However, a substantial body of research has established that not all students' needs are equal, and those with economic, social, or language challenges bring to school an increased need for support that might not be met solely by the additional support that categorical funds such as federal Title 1 dollars provide...
(Harris, 2008; Jimenez-Castellanos & Topper, 2012; Jordan, 2010). Therefore, a funding formula that doesn’t recognize these need-based differences not only fails to adequately support its students, but in fact, may be exacerbating the achievement gap within the district (Baker & Corcoran, 2012; Reardon & Robinson, 2008). Unfortunately, this realization often leaves district leaders with the complex and perplexing question: If an equal distribution to students and to schools (in proportion to enrollment) doesn’t work as an effective and equitable funding formula, how do we determine (and justify) giving some more, and others less?

Central to this question is a complicated debate about the differences and distinctions between equality and equity. The equal treatment of equals, or horizontal equity, may not pertain, especially where students are not equally situated and bring varying abilities and needs to their school. In this circumstance, the unequal nature of the playing field creates the need for the differential treatment of unequals, or what is known as vertical equity (Berne & Stiefel, 1999).

The first level of “equity testing” within a district is often to determine whether or not horizontal equity has been established through the existing funding formulas; that is, are equals being treated equally? But equal resources don’t necessarily result in a lessening of the achievement gap or the equal distribution of access and opportunities across districts or schools. This prompts leaders to examine the second level of equity testing: “an assessment of the ‘appropriate unequal treatment of unequals’ or the desired relationship of resources to needs” (Rodriguez, 2004, p. 8).

However, even if a need for vertical equity can be established, defining and operationalizing “student need” can be a difficult task, as one scholar has noted:

Vertical equity is a concept that continues to be among the most difficult to clarify. . . . Although principles that underlie it are commonly understood, due to so much attention in the sociological and economic literature on the impact of schooling on student achievement, what is less available are standard definitions and measures of educational need (Rodriguez, 2004, p. 17).

Again, as the quote illustrates, the fundamental leadership challenge rests both in the recognition that unequal resource needs exist among students within a district, and in accurately and consistently identifying and measuring these needs.

Further complicating this challenge is understanding the important distinction between equity among students and equity among taxpayers within the district. As many state school finance systems are dependent on property tax revenues and/or the passing of supplemental bonds or levies, considering the fairness to the taxpayer within the community is often an important part of the equity equation within a district (Rodriguez, 2004). At the heart of the matter here is a concept that is fundamental to vertical equity—the appropriate treatment of unequals (Berne & Stiefel, 1999; King, Swanson, & Sweetland, 2005; Ladd, 2008;
Underwood, 1994). Reasonable people may differ on what constitutes an “appropriate” response to the differences among students within the system that may warrant differential support, and what allocating resources “in direct relation” to the educational needs or presumed disadvantages of these students may imply (Chambers, Levin, & Shambaugh, 2010).

A further dimension of the funding formula for district leaders to confront is the concept of adequacy or sufficiency, and its relationship to equity. Establishing an equitable distribution of inputs to students and schools across a district is only half of the challenge; there is also the question of educational outputs—in particular, student learning outcomes—to consider. Districts may determine that an average test score or level of proficiency is an outcome standard to be met by all students, and thus an equality of outcomes may require an equality of inputs, providing further justification for the concept of vertical equity (Ladd, 2008). And the greater attention in recent years to results, coupled with the persistent patterns of low performance for some segments of the student population (even when inputs disproportionately favor the least advantaged), have led educators and scholars to focus more on equality of outcomes, and specifically on allocating the level of resources that are presumed adequate to the task—that is, sufficient to support equitable outcomes for all students (Clune, 1994; Downes & Shay, 2006; National Research Council, 1999; Odden, 2003). Rather than focus on relative inputs, this conception focuses on “an absolute threshold. . . . An education system meets an adequacy standard if all schools have sufficient resources to achieve a specified outcome standard, given the particular set of students they serve” (Ladd, 2008, p. 404). Once again, judgments of what is adequate to this purpose may differ, and rest on different philosophical premises (e.g., is our job to provide equitable opportunities to succeed, or to ensure success?).

Though they have been most fully developed to understand the allocation of funding in education, the principles of horizontal and vertical equity and adequacy apply just as well to other resources with which educational leaders are concerned, among them, time, staff FTE, expertise, space, and materials, to mention several that are likely to figure prominently in the leaders’ decision making, and may not reflect money per se (City, 2010).

These conceptions of equity and adequacy help to clarify why and how the task confronting the districts and school leaders we studied was complex. As the persistence of achievement gaps in their settings suggests, it was not enough for these leaders to provide equivalent inputs for schools. Rather, resource investment strategies that differentially target specific groups of students as well as the schools that served high concentrations of these students were called for (Henry, Fortner, & Thompson, 2010). While the strategies appeared to show promise, these technical solutions were not without political challenges, which we will explore as the chapter unfolds. But first, we clarify the range of different solutions these leaders devised.
A Range of Technical Solutions: Differential Investment Toward Increasing Equity

Various staffing investment decisions can address equity concerns by differentiating the resources that go to different units (classrooms, schools, teacher groups or teams, programs) in proportion to perceived need. The districts we studied used the investment of resources as a central tool in seeking to enhance equity. Some of these investment decisions concentrated on increasing the supply of staff who could address particular learning improvement needs, others focused more on reconfiguring roles for staff, while still others were more centrally concerned with improving staff capacity and performance. We discuss and illustrate these approaches with examples drawn from two of the districts that, at first glance, represent nearly opposite conditions. On the one hand, the Lane County 4J District in Eugene, OR, encountered long-standing equity issues that had escaped notice and serious attention for years. On the other hand, the New York City Department

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<tr>
<th>Type of Differential Investment Decision</th>
<th>Focus of Equity Concern</th>
<th>Level of Decision Making</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Allocating funds or staffing FTE (full-time equivalents) differentially in proportion to need</td>
<td>Schools experiencing the greatest need or that are hardest to staff</td>
<td>District</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Investing most heavily in building capacity of staff, based on need and challenges</td>
<td>Concerns within or across schools about weaknesses in staff knowledge, skill, and commitment</td>
<td>District, school</td>
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<td>3. Improving the match between students and staff through changes in classroom or school assignment</td>
<td>Mismatch between staff capacities and particular student learning needs</td>
<td>District, school</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Augmenting the allocation of instructional time for underserved or underperforming students</td>
<td>Insufficient instructional time (that can be addressed through alterations of the master schedule, repurposing of particular time blocks, teaching assignments within time blocks, or additions to the normal school day)</td>
<td>School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Pooling and concentrating existing resources to maximize assistance to struggling students</td>
<td>Insufficient concentration of resources (e.g., dollars, FTE, or even students, treated as a resource), brought to bear on students exhibiting the greatest need</td>
<td>District, school</td>
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of Education presented district and school leaders with every imaginable equity issue in stark terms. Yet despite the differences in these settings, many if not most of the underlying approaches to investing staffing resources differentially to improve learning more equitably were similar. In these cases, five types of differential investment strategies are readily apparent, summarized in Table 7.1, occurring at district and school levels (and sometimes at both levels simultaneously):

**Solution 1: Staffing or Funding Schools Differentially**

Perhaps the most obvious form of investing resources differentially to promote equity occurs when district leaders change the amount of staffing resources that they allocate to each school in an attempt to offer more dollars or staff to schools that face greater challenges in educating their student populations. This straightforward approach to realizing vertical equity typically offers schools some combination of (1) specific staff positions or (2) an additional funding amount, much of which may (or must) be used to pay for staffing resources. To accomplish this purpose, districts either redesign their base allocation formula so that it integrates some notion of vertical equity—e.g., by weighting the funding formula so that more intensive learning needs are reflected in the budget—or maintain a base allocation formula that equally distributes resources to schools, while supplementing that base with additional resources designed to bring about more equity (Chambers, Levin, & Shambaugh, 2010).

Among our study sites, the New York City Department of Education went the furthest in redesigning its base school resource allocation formula in an attempt to increase equity. According to the district’s official communications in 2007, the reason for developing this new way to allocate money to schools, which they termed Fair Student Funding (FSF), was that

> Every child deserves the same opportunity for a great education. And that means every school deserves fair funding. For years, our school budgeting has fallen short of that promise. It’s time to change that. Under Fair Student Funding we will begin to fund schools based on the needs of the children at each school. Because that’s what matters most. *(Fair Student Funding: Making It Work for Your School and Your Student, May 2007)*

Under these reforms, a weighted student funding formula determined the amount that each school should be funded based on student enrollment demographics, so as to create more equitable conditions. Under the new formula, some schools gained, while others received proportionally fewer resources. The weighting could be done with a more targeted purpose, as in Eugene, which offered all schools a special literacy fund over and above the basic allocation, based on a formula that took into account the proportion of students in poverty, the number
of English language learners, and the number of special education students. The difference in what a school received could be substantial: In the 2004–05 school year, literacy funding augmented school budgets by amounts ranging from $5,600 to $28,900 per elementary school. For middle schools that same year, the amounts ranged from $30,600 to $47,300 per school; and at the high school level, from $62,700 to $108,000.

Alternatively, the additional resources could come as a grant or lump sum, as in New York City, where schools with high poverty numbers got a special allocation of “Contract for Excellence” money (originating from the state), earmarked for class-size reduction and several other purposes presumed to enhance the instructional program in these schools (Schwartz, Rubenstein, & Stiefel, 2009). In Eugene, equity grants were made to schools with the highest minority and poverty counts, starting in 2002. Eligible schools submitted proposals to the district for how they would spend the grant money, and the amount allocated to each school depended on the proposed uses (sometimes adding staff, in other instances aimed at improving staff capacity). Therefore, the amount each school received through this program would vary.

Alternatively, the district could invest in particular staff positions directly, in proportion to assumed need. The role of the allocated Student Achievement Coordinator position in Eugene was defined by the district to be assessing the progress of students and supporting school staff in analyzing and using those data to improve instruction. This additional half-time staff person was made available to a small number of schools with declining enrollments and low performance that had been negatively impacted by a school choice policy, and where the remaining student populations reflected higher-than-typical concentrations of students from low-income backgrounds.

**Solution 2: Investing in Building Staff Capacity to Increase Equity**

Beyond making resources available to schools that typically increased the supply of staff, districts could direct resources differentially toward increasing staff capacity, typically through one or another form of professional development investment. Most obviously, these investments could concentrate on particular groups of teachers or even individuals whose skills seemed most in need of support or who were working with underserved groups of students. But in a more subtle way, professional development funds could also be targeted to all staff to help them differentiate their teaching work more effectively, thereby allocating the resource of their instructional attention and energy more equitably among their students.

In Eugene, targeted literacy funds and “academy grant” funding offered an obvious resource for this kind of capacity-building work, and many schools opted to take advantage of it for this purpose. In this respect, the district’s investment simply provided school decision makers with a flexible resource that could be
directed to purposes that were explicitly intended to enhance equity, but could be used in a number of ways. More often than not, in situations where school leaders have substantial amounts of discretionary funding available for professional development, as in New York City/Empowerment Schools, the funds were used to support a variety of professional learning needs, all of which were loosely related to improving school performance, but often without an explicit equity justification.

But given a clear equity agenda on the part of the school leader, with or without similar expectations from the district, discretionary, capacity-building funds could serve a focused equity-oriented purpose, as in an elementary school in Eugene where the principal invested time and resources to have his staff visit and observe two elementary schools in a nearby district. While the district allowed schools such as this one the freedom to use their academy funds for a variety of professional development and school redesign purposes, the district had suggested that schools use the money to visit other schools. This school’s principal responded accordingly, largely to raise his staff’s expectations for how the minority, low-income, and English language learner students of their school could achieve academically. The principal described his staff’s reaction to visiting schools with similar demographics in which a high percentage of students were achieving state standards:

... We did school visits as a staff four years ago when we were trying to find places that looked like us that were successful, and we were the best staff, the most resources of any—hands down—anywhere we went. [But this time] it was like ... these people are getting 90 percent of their kids reading at benchmark and they look exactly like us and they’re operating with like a third less resources.

The principal pointed to these visitations as key turning points in changing the expectations of his staff for how they as a school could get their particular student population to achieve. In a related way, the investment by a New York City elementary school principal in a year-long professional development series focused on differentiated instruction was meant to help his staff visualize more concretely how to align instruction more responsively to their students’ strengths and needs. Though aimed at all staff in the building, this investment in capacity building concentrated on differentiation of teaching time and attention, such that the most needy students would get a more powerful learning experience.

Solution 3: Altering Student, Teacher, or School Assignment Policy

Beyond the gross distribution of staff FTE or dollars and the systematic differences in staff capacity that disadvantage some schools or students over others,
significant inequities often exist in the ways staff and students are assigned to each other and to schools (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2006; Yamasaki & Goes, 2009). Especially at the school level, but also through district-level action, leaders face the puzzle of matching students to the settings and people who can help them learn most effectively. Attempts at doing this matching more equitably sometimes involve altering the assignment of students or teachers to schools, or within schools, searching for a more equitable assignment of students among programs, classrooms, instructional experiences, and teachers.

Assigning students more equitably to schools. Student assignment policies can enhance equity in several ways. First, school assignment can increase certain students' access to programs they may need and in which they were formerly unable to participate. Second, the reassignment may change overall enrollment distributions, thereby ensuring that enrollment shifts do not erode certain schools' capacity to mount high-quality programs. In the extreme cases, reassignment can mitigate against or forestall precipitous enrollment declines, which can have a devastating effect on a school's staff capacity, not to mention morale, particularly in cases where the decline is due to larger economic and demographic shifts occurring throughout the community.

To return to the Eugene case, the flow of students out of neighborhood schools and into alternative schools under the district's choice plan had generated some serious inequities that prompted several reassignment policies. The first policy, to forestall the tendency for middle-class students to leave neighborhood schools, created an "alternating pick" lottery system to increase the probability that low-income applicants would have access to these schools. The second policy capped enrollments in secondary schools, slowing a trend for certain more affluent schools to increase enrollment and thereby accelerate the extent to which the student populations in other schools were increasingly segregated by social class. Third, the district ended the co-location of alternative schools and neighborhood schools, as this practice seemed to encourage the migration of students from the neighborhood school to the alternative provided under the same roof. Together, these reassignment policies were meant to prevent the growing separation and concentration of student needs by social class, with its natural tendencies to exacerbate inequities. These moves were not without controversy, a matter we take up later in the chapter.

Assigning teachers more equitably to schools. Either by guiding the movement of teachers among schools, or simply recruiting and hiring in a targeted way, districts and schools together could seek to assemble a staff that better matched student needs, a matter most dramatically seen in schools that served a large English language learner (ELL) population, generally Spanish-speaking. In one New York City Empowerment School, the principal made a concerted effort over a period of years to recruit and retain Spanish-speaking staff, especially
those who had grown up in or resided in the school’s community. The principal’s efforts in this regard were in large measure successful, in part, a reflection of the discretion granted to schools in hiring and configuring staff. One of the Eugene elementary schools, serving a similar population, engaged in a parallel effort, this time through active collaboration with the district central office and the teachers’ union, to increase the number of Spanish-speaking staff in the school. This school was also one of the district’s targeted schools. When developing the district policies regarding designation as a targeted school, district leaders recognized that the shift in status and focus in the targeted schools would potentially be problematic for some teachers who had worked in those schools for years. Consequently, the district negotiated an arrangement with the teachers’ union to allow teachers in targeted schools an earlier window to apply for other positions in the district. They also negotiated an arrangement that allowed the school to post their open English as a Second Language positions earlier than other schools in the district. These efforts changed the composition of the staff in these two schools in such a way that students, who often found school a foreign and unresponsive environment, encountered a more engaging set of learning environments.

Assigning students more equitably to teachers, programs, and tracks within schools. No matter what resources came to the school—in the form of increased dollars, staff with particular capabilities, or an appropriate mix of students—a finer-grained challenge resided within the school. Here, leaders confronted a range of inequities, some overt, some less visible, that meant that certain groups of students were systematically exposed to teachers without the capabilities needed to meet their needs, or some students clearly needed more and different kinds of help with their learning. To address within-school inequities, school leaders could take many steps—especially with the way particular teachers were asked to take on classroom assignments that played to their strengths or, conversely, were shifted to assignments that minimized the effects of their weaknesses—as in one New York City school in which struggling teachers who showed no sign of responding to feedback and instructional assistance were immediately removed from the regular classroom and given small pull-out assignments, while their classrooms were taken over by more competent specialists.

The pursuit of equity through within-school student assignment was nowhere more dramatically seen than in the grouping of students, and here differing notions of equity came into play. In one large elementary school in the New York City/Empowerment Schools Organization, students were clustered by their apparent profile of multiple intelligences into separate “academies” within the school, each designed to approach learning in ways that optimally matched particular learning profiles. Another principal, holding steadfastly to a principle of social equity, persisted in assigning students to classes heterogeneously, on the basis that this would prevent pernicious forms of social class segregation that he
saw as corrosive to the learning of all students, and especially those from low-income backgrounds. In contrast, the principal of another school in the same district advocated regularly adjusting homogeneous grouping of students for literacy instruction, on the premise that this would most effectively lead to greater equity of academic outcomes.

However assignments were made, and whoever was officially assigned, the net effect was to alter the way staffing resources were deployed and used—and often with little or no change in the outlay of dollars or FTE. Where the reassignment enabled needy students to get better or more concentrated help with their learning, the reinvestment of staffing resources was differentially based on equity principles, whether or not they were so stated. A number of subtle possibilities arise here that are easily overlooked by educators seeking a structural, and often more expensive, solution to inequities in the schooling experiences or outcomes of those they serve.

**Solution 4: Altering the Allocation of Instructional Time**

Two kinds of time reallocation within the schools we studied were designed to give struggling learners a better chance at success, by enabling some learners to get more minutes of instructional time or more concentrated instructional attention (or both) than they otherwise would have, or more than other students experienced. The first approach simply added to the total hours of instruction for certain groups of students over and above what they would typically experience. Either outside the school day, as in after-school programs and Saturday school, or within the formal school days through additional intervention periods, these students spent additional time working on literacy or mathematics (and occasionally other subjects), sometimes with their regular classroom teachers and sometimes with other instructional staff. One district institutionalized this effort by selectively extending kindergarten from a half day to a full day in a small number of the schools serving the most impacted students. Other districts or schools increased the minutes of the school day, made resources available for Saturday classes, or used other devices that added time to the weekly or yearly instructional total.

A second kind of time reallocation came about by deploying staff in more concentrated arrangements that enabled teachers to spend intensive small-group or one-on-one time with particular students who needed it the most. For example:

- In one elementary school, supplementary funds intended to reduce class size were used to create team teaching arrangements in kindergarten through second-grade classrooms, on the supposition that early literacy was a fundamental foundation for subsequent school success.
- Intervention classrooms in another school replaced the 25-student classroom with one that focused on the same material with a classroom group of 6,
comprised of students who were experiencing difficulties, as indicated by their periodic assessment results.

These arrangements represent a way in which the deployment of additional staff in unusual roles (team teacher, intervention teacher), alongside or sometimes in place of a regular classroom teacher, effectively increased the total time and attention that particular students received. This provided for a focused and differential allocation of resources to assist specific students who needed additional support.

**Solution 5: Pooling Resources to Create a Critical Mass of Support for Particular Needs**

One final means of investing differentially in instructional support for particular groups of students occurred through school leaders’ efforts to pool resources, so that, in the aggregate, they enabled an improved form of instructional service to be targeted to a particular learning need. We saw this most dramatically in ways that districts or school leaders clustered English language learners (ELLs) so that the special funds available to serve their needs could facilitate the hiring of staff with specialized skills. Without the clustering, these students would have been dispersed among a number of schools or classrooms that would not be able to create the specialized program. Two schools in New York City reflect this strategy:

- One school, created as a magnet for recent immigrants from Spanish-speaking countries, constructed a dual-language program that promoted fluency in both their native language and English.
- Another large school in the midst of a school-wide restructuring into four thematically defined academy programs set up one of the academies with a focus on “world studies.” The great majority of the school’s ELL students were clustered in this program, as were most of the bilingual teachers.

Schools in other districts reflected other variations on this theme, and in several instances, leaders were able to articulate a productive way of thinking about what they were doing with resources. Most notably, rather than approaching ELL students as a problem, they saw the students themselves as a social resource, whose cultural backgrounds could enrich the learning experience for other students, given the right kinds of conditions and support (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2013).

Such pooling arrangements are not without potential drawbacks. Clustering of students who might otherwise be underserved by the school can create a kind of segregation that can have an isolating effect, with negative social and academic ramifications (Oakes, 2008). But our informants seemed to believe that such concerns were outweighed by the benefits that students would receive from a staff that had the skills and commitment to best meet their particular educational needs.
Managing the Political Dimensions of Equity-Focused Investments

In devising strategies for enhancing equity in learning improvement efforts, such as those just reviewed, district and school leaders are being asked to make judgments based on comparisons of the circumstances and needs of specific schools or groups of students, and ultimately develop resource plans that represent the district's or school's goals and objectives. Aside from their capacity to redirect resources to particular perceived needs, these decisions can, and often do, signal the way that specific schools and groups of students are valued within a district. These messages, unintentional or not, have profound political implications for leadership within the district and the community.

In attempting to manage the political dimensions of both introducing and sustaining investment practices that target equity within a district, three central strategies or practices appeared to show promise from the cases we explored for this study. Those strategies suggest three overlapping phases of equity-focused political work that play out across a long-term time frame.

- **Planning for equity.** In this phase, which can last years, leaders engage in groundwork that identifies the equity challenges facing a district or school and publicly build a community mission that prioritizes enhancing the equity of the educational system.

- **Shepherding the ongoing equity conversation while taking action.** During this phase, leaders engage stakeholders in continuing conversation leading up to, and implementing, specific decisions to invest resources disproportionately, and in so doing, try to craft coherence and foster deeper commitment among the various parties.

- **Anticipating, and persevering in the face of pushback.** During this phase, subsequent to one or more resource-related decisions, leaders anticipate and manage pushback from interests both inside and outside the education system who perceive their relative advantages to be severely reduced or eliminated and actively resist the proposed changes.

We elaborate on these stages by examining a particularly instructive case (Lane County District 4J in Eugene, OR)—the district in our sample with the longest chronology of efforts to invest in equitable learning improvement. The case helps to underscore the political dimensions of this investment story and how they can be addressed. While the dynamics revealed here are particular to district-level action, the same or similar dynamics play out in resource decisions within schools. In addition, though the specific conditions of this case story are not necessarily replicated in other school districts, the basic principles are likely to apply in many instances, as we indicate by references to equity-related resource allocation cases from our other sites.
An Instructive Case: Investing for Equity in Eugene

The Eugene school district serves approximately 17,500 students and is the fourth-largest school district in Oregon. Like many medium-sized, historically exurban or suburban districts in the country, the characteristics of the student population in this district's schools are changing, and estimates are that by 2015, close to a third of the district's students will be persons of color and approximately 40 percent will be students from low-income families. At the time of our study, affordable housing was becoming increasingly difficult to find within district boundaries, and as a result enrollments were increasing in surrounding communities and declining in Eugene. The school district was organized into four geographic regions, with each region serving as a feeder system of elementary and middle schools and one comprehensive high school. The district also had an extensive history of offering a number of small alternative schools, often housed adjacent to or in the same building as the traditional neighborhood school. Accompanying the history of alternative schools was a long-standing district school choice policy that allowed families to apply to and, if accepted, attend any school within the district.

The district had enjoyed significant stability in leadership and in its teaching corps. The superintendent who served during the time of our study had occupied that position for 10 years, and a number of the then current central office and school leaders had worked in the district for more than 20 years.

For a number of years, reducing the achievement gap had been the principal reform priority for the district—as indicated by a clear and resounding message from the school board, superintendent, district leadership, and principals. Due in large part to the superintendent's vision, determination, and leadership, cultural competence and issues of fairness and equity had been consistent themes within the district and central to its reform theory. There was little disagreement across the district that some schools had been disproportionately impacted by the changing demographics of the community, and that student performance had been tightly linked to poverty and racial/ethnic differences. The district's commitment to equitable outcomes for all students formed the basis for its reform strategy of improving access to strong programs in all neighborhoods and increasing staffing resources and support for those schools and programs most in need.

These themes and commitments are consistent threads running through the decade-long chronology of investing for equity, summarized in Table 7.2 below. Across this period district leaders took many steps to define, articulate, implement, and sustain their commitment to closing the achievement gap and improving learning for all students.

The case of Eugene underscores the fact that, in the early stages of the process, district leaders took deliberate steps to identify publicly the scope and nature of equity challenges facing the district. Specifically, they first invested resources in exploring what equity was (and was not) within the district. Defining the term
<table>
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<th>Time Frame</th>
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<td>1999–2001</td>
<td><em>Schools of the Future</em> planning process and follow-up</td>
<td>Surfacing inequities inherent in neighborhood schools versus alternative schools of choice</td>
<td>Public recognition of equity concerns Need for resolution of disparities in school resource/attendance situation</td>
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<td>How equal-per-pupil allocation process yielded inequitable resource distribution, especially in context of enrollment decline</td>
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<td>Consideration of potential school consolidation and closures, and their potential differential impacts</td>
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<td>2001</td>
<td>Board discussion on establishing equity-related principles</td>
<td>Search for consensus among different stakeholders concerning school choice and its ramifications</td>
<td>Consensus statements on school choice that recognized equity principles</td>
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<td>2002</td>
<td>Board retreats and follow-up actions</td>
<td>Continued discussion of the relation between school funding and school choice</td>
<td>Board forms a commitment to close achievement gap and enhance equity as central district goals Equity grants to the neediest Schools</td>
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<td>2003–2004</td>
<td><em>Access and Options Committee</em> planning process, and aftermath</td>
<td>Exploration of alternatives for realizing equity principles within a framework of school choice</td>
<td>Committee recommendations concerning school configuration alternatives and ways to enhance access and equity Differentiated literacy funding to all schools, based on weighted formula</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time Frame</td>
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<td>2004–2005</td>
<td>District outreach process (through surveys, focus groups, community forums, meetings with school staffs, principals, and union)</td>
<td>Assessing stakeholder views and commitments, in relation to <em>Access and Options</em> recommendations</td>
<td>Superintendent’s recommendations to board—e.g., changing lottery system for alternative schools, redrawing attendance boundaries, designating neighborhood academy schools. Extra funding to academy schools.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2006–2008</td>
<td><em>Shaping 4J’s Future</em> planning process (focus groups, survey-driven deliberative process)</td>
<td>Imagining services and facilities for the next 5 years and more to support district’s instructional program, to increase achievement of all students and reduce the achievement gap</td>
<td>Reaffirmation of equity, excellence, and choice as district values. Limiting inter-school transfers (to limit drain from poorer schools). Movement toward differentiated staffing.</td>
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*equity* was a critical leadership action that enabled participants to come to a shared, collective understanding of the differences between allocation policies designed to equalize resources across the district and those that promote an equity agenda. Doing so laid a critical foundation upon which district and school leaders could develop a broader program and curricular restructuring agenda focused on equity. From there on, successive cycles of planning and action, involving numerous committees (Schools of the Future, Access and Options) and district-sponsored initiatives (e.g., the Shaping 4J’s Future initiative) built on the foundation.

Critical to this process was the inclusion and support of union representatives, school board members, parents, and members of the local business community. District leadership invested in a process that included these parties and built a broad-based network within the district and throughout the community. At each stage, district leaders invested heavily in the planning that surrounded both the process of trying to understand the differences between equality and equity, as well as in the deliberate move to include a broad cross-section of the community in the process of moving forward toward a shared policy goal for the district.

Another key element to the ability of this district to sustain an equity-focused investment agenda appears to be the deliberate transparency of the process,
Committees designed to explore issues of equity or inequity were broad-based and inclusive, and reports from these committees were openly discussed in school board meetings and in meetings the district leaders held with members of the public. In our conversations with union leaders, principals, faculty, and parents, it was clear that they knew what the district was up to with these committees and initiatives, and what the goal of all this work was—to increase access, opportunity, and achievement for all students within the district. The clear, consistent, and open message from district leaders appears to have helped build support among both district personnel and the community.

The process in which Eugene engaged resulted in the identification of particular schools that were targeted for additional resources and support. Virtually all of the main strategies described earlier in this chapter showed up at one time or another through the decade: differential investment in targeted schools, investing in staff capacity to increase equity (e.g., in efforts to both define and increase “cultural competence”), alterations to assignment policy (e.g., by capping the numbers of students who could attend certain oversubscribed, largely affluent schools), altering the allocation of instructional time within school programs, and pooling resources to amass supports for better serving critical needs.

An important aspect of the circumstances surrounding the initial granting of these targeted funds within this district was the fact that the district didn’t “rob Peter to pay Paul.” At certain times early in this investment cycle, the district had supplemental resources that it diverted to the specific (pilot) initiative of increasing literacy in underperforming schools, and so schools that were not receiving these additional funds were not losing any resources—they just weren’t getting the “extra” funds these targeted schools were getting. Another important, and politically strategic factor, was the time limit put on this pilot. Selected schools were promised these targeted funds for only three years, and so non-targeted schools (and parents) viewed this additional support as temporary. As a result, there was very little initial “pushback” from principals of the non-targeted schools; how could they be against giving “extra” money to schools with a greater percentage of harder-to-serve students? The reception from parents within the non-targeted schools was much the same: as long as our school isn’t getting less, why not give some of the district’s “extra” resources to those schools or students who are falling behind academically?

What became increasingly complicated in this case was the emergence of a growing cadre of parents (from the non-targeted schools) who began to shift their position and withdraw their support, in reaction to the notion of differential funding for schools, and to question the “fairness” of a funding formula that was designed to be “unequal.” For example, one of the district’s popular alternative schools was attended primarily by students from affluent families. The district’s open enrollment policy provided access to the alternative school for families across the district, but families needed to provide transportation to this
school of choice. In an effort to provide opportunities for low-income families to attend this school, district leaders put forth a proposal to provide transportation for economically disadvantaged students who could not get there otherwise. Nearly immediately, parents with children already attending that school asked the district if transportation would now be provided for all students in the school. What incidents like this began to suggest is that parents in the “non-targeted” schools were comfortable with the targeted schools getting additional resources, if they were only used within those “targeted” schools, leaving “my kid’s school” unaffected.

Planning for Equity

Revisiting the Eugene case chronology makes abundantly clear that investing in equity requires long, strategic, persistent, and patient planning, for many reasons, among them to air, recognize, appreciate, and adjudicate differing values, perceptions, and interests that come into play as leaders pursue an equity agenda. If equity principles are to guide the investment of staffing or other resources, a legitimized forum for these concerns to surface is helpful, along with multiple occasions for these issues to be given voice, and a process that develops both technical plans and broad-based, stakeholder support.

A look at equity-oriented planning by leaders in Eugene suggests a basic principle: to keep planning anchored to equity, leaders may find it useful to engage in a long-term, multistage planning process that continually revisits and builds a politically viable basis for equity-oriented investments. The decade-long process of planning and enacting an equity agenda underscores the point. This process reveals successive stages through which equity concerns became identified, explored, and embedded in a larger vision of the development of the district, often in the face of overt or potential resistance. At least three substantial planning periods took place—first, the Schools of the Future process in 1999–2001, followed by a more specific cycle of planning activity in 2003–2004 through the work of the Access and Options Committee, and following that, in 2006–2008, another comprehensive planning cycle in the Shaping 4J’s Future initiative. Each planning cycle built on the last, and cumulatively across them all, a more specific and actionable program of equitable investments took shape and was enacted. No one of these planning processes by itself would have succeeded in addressing all or even most of the dimensions of the multifaceted planning problem.

Shepherd the Ongoing Equity Conversation While Taking Action

A second phase of investing for equity, paralleling and substantially overlapping the first, concerns the way participants become clear about what “equity” means and develop commitment to this idea, with full recognition of the trade-offs it
may imply. In doing so, not all participants are equally committed, nor do they necessarily assess the trade-offs similarly, but across all, there is sufficient opportunity for awareness of differences and new thinking about equity to grow. Any time a school leader decides to diverge from the notion of equal being fair, a case must be made for why it is more fair to give one person or group more resources than others. At a district level, this conversation and debate is magnified, and conscious steps by leaders to “shepherd” this conversation over time appear to be helpful and probably necessary. Even with an extensive process of planning and an initial base of political support for equity-related actions, a continuing, proactively guided conversation offers a much-needed way for participants to work through the inevitable distractions and disagreements. At the core of this conversation, concepts of equity and fairness need to be explicitly aired and shared, and leaders may well take a “teaching” stance in helping diverse constituents come to appreciate and accept the subtle differences between equal and equitable.

Our data point to four leadership actions that show promise for managing the political dynamics of this “shepherding” process over time:

- Being proactive rather than reactive
- Basing decision making and public discussion in data
- Investing in coalition building
- Translating equity principles into tangible investments

**Being proactive rather than reactive.** One of the clearest messages coming from the Eugene case is the significant advantage to getting out in front of this process. As noted in Table 7.2 above, the superintendent called for a process to assess the current state of the district shortly after assuming his position. The resulting *Schools of the Future* report highlighted a number of areas in which the district was deficient, with issues surrounding dimensions of equity at the forefront. The report and its conclusions acted as a springboard for further efforts to both better understand and meet these challenges. Clearly, being proactive and taking the lead on exploring, identifying, and articulating the district’s equity challenges allowed district leaders to direct the initial conversation (both within the district and the community) surrounding issues of equity, as well as demonstrate the district’s ability to critically assess its performance as a public sector institution.

**Basing decision making and public discussion in data.** One of the most significant and lingering benefits from the No Child Left Behind policies of the recent past may be the amount of school-level achievement data produced. These data have fueled conversations of many kinds among many stakeholder groups, and the conversations are often about equity. School leaders and other audiences can see very clearly that the gap exists, where it exists, and for whom. The increased transparency creates a yardstick for the public to measure and critique
educators' work. It also provides a critical catalyst for creating new and innovative investment strategies that target underserved students.

In Eugene, as elsewhere, this wealth of specific performance data, which figured prominently in the planning cycles and other discussions, allowed district leaders to provide quantitative evidence of a difference in performance for specific populations of students across the district. Mining the data for insights, principals were able to identify students who were consistently falling behind academically. As a result, initiatives such as full-day kindergarten, before- and after-school programs, and additional, intensive reading and math instruction were developed. At the district level, the examination of data supported the creation of policies designed to reallocate resources for specific programs and students.

**Investing in coalition building.** What may be a by-product of all the planning and processing that occurred in Eugene is the way this investment resulted in the creation of a broad coalition of constituents having a shared interest in the process and the outcomes of equity policies within the district. The length and complexity of the processes at work are also an indication of the degree of coalition building that may be necessary to make an equity agenda a reality and to sustain it over time.

Not all our districts displayed such a continuous and persistent dialogue among stakeholders orchestrated by district leaders. That is not to say that an equity agenda was either absent or uncontested. In New York City, for example, a primary justification for the elaborate accountability system (fashioned by leaders with backgrounds in civil rights law, among other experiences) was to provide multiple streams of feedback to educators and other audiences in the hope of addressing established achievement gaps among the city's diverse student population. Under a mayoral control arrangement, and absent a viable school board, the city's then current reform arrangement did not create the same space or context for the public deliberation of value-based principles that the Eugene case exemplifies (Fruchter, 2007). Under such circumstances, coalition building to support an equity agenda must find other avenues of influence.

**Translating equity principles into tangible investments.** Finally, the fact that planning is punctuated by periodic actions that build incrementally on each other means that an equity agenda is more than just talk. These actions may not be, nor need to be, the most central, and perhaps controversial piece of an equity-oriented improvement plan, but rather practical, first and second steps that convey a sense of forward motion and hope—what some have called early "big wins" in the equity-focused investment process (City, 2010). The Eugene case illustrates one way that participants arrived at principles that embodied an aspiration to address inequities, resulting in specific decisions about the development and implementation of resource investment strategies. The resulting steps set the stage for the next round of agenda-building and deliberation.
Anticipating and Persevering in the Face of Pushback

As they shepherd the conversation, district leaders encounter a third and unavoidable phase of investing for equity. They will face pushback from constituencies who feel slighted by the impending or recent allocation decisions. Issues of equity and fairness as they relate to the investment of resources across a district can create pockets of tension both inside and outside schools and districts (Brantlinger, 2003). Challenges at times can be less about the actual amount of dollars going to a school and more about the ability of parents to control access to, and opportunities for gaining, social capital from schools or programs. One of the least understood and most complex dimensions of pursuing a district-wide equity agenda is in anticipating the types and degrees of staff, parental, and community pushback. Clearly, not everyone is going to consistently support district actions that invest resources differentially.

A growing cadre of parents in Eugene, for example, began to push back on the notion of differential funding for schools, and questioned the fairness of a funding formula that was designed to be unequal. The district’s proposal, noted earlier in the chapter, to provide transportation to a school of choice for students who could not get to the school otherwise stimulated a vigorous counter response from parents with children already attending that school (who were providing their own transportation on a daily basis).

What incidents like this began to suggest was that parents in the (non-targeted) schools—those with fewer ELL students, students from low-income backgrounds, or students from single-parent households—were comfortable with the targeted schools getting additional resources if the resources were used within those targeted schools, but not when special resources were used to integrate those targeted students into other schools or programs across the district, thereby “saddling” a more advantaged school with new needs. A particularly troubling representation of this perspective was seen in the dismay expressed by some parents toward teachers who had decided to send their own children to a targeted school. “That’s a good school for those students, but . . .” was the sentiment expressed by one parent.

The pressure to resist changes in resource reallocation practices can also come from school personnel who are impacted, especially when resources are limited or shrinking. In the Eugene case, early efforts to provide the targeted schools with additional resources came at a time when there was a modest increase in the size of the district budget. The district was able to supply all schools with an incremental increase while simultaneously directing proportionately more resources to the targeted schools to help meet the district’s equity goals. Under those circumstances, educators throughout the district could readily understand and support the adjustments made in the district’s resource allocation system. However, when resources became more limited (as in the subsequent fiscal environment), concerns mounted from those working in schools that were not targeted for
additional supports, as they may have felt they were being asked to continue to improve performance with proportionately fewer resources than those schools identified as needing additional, equity-based supports.

For purposes of better understanding the nature of this kind of pushback, we locate it in relation to what we call the margin of perceived competitive advantage. A general summary of this pattern of behavior is that those who have historically held a competitive advantage within a society and school system have a dynamic, flexible threshold of acceptance or support for allowing others who have not held the same advantages to receive temporarily an unequal distribution of access to resources so that they can catch up. This acceptance and support usually lasts up until the point at which the historically advantaged people (“the haves”) perceive their ability to maintain and perpetuate a margin of increased access to, and control of, information or resources (their “advantage”) is threatened by others’ progress (“the have-nots”).

Looking at these episodes of inconsistent and conditional support from a school’s or district leader’s perspective, one can begin to anticipate how and when they might experience pushback from staff, families, or other community members. If superintendents or district leaders were trying to move forward with a targeted funding formula that treated schools disproportionately, they might expect both support and potential pushback at predictable points and, knowing that, take proactive steps to counter the pressures to back away from differential investments. As they do so, they will likely need to replicate the kinds of tactics discussed above to shepherd the equity conversation over time. As in the Eugene case, they will be getting out in front of the issue, naming it and framing it in the most productive way possible, engaging in broad-based conversation around data about what is and (to the extent data can be generated) around the likely effects of different scenarios and, as they do so, build coalitions of support.

Conclusions

As they seek to ensure the success of all children, educators in charge of allocating resources in the nation’s schools and school districts face some of the most vexing issues in contemporary public education. Students who have been historically underserved generally need more than their more advantaged peers; hard-to-staff schools often require a greater investment in staffing than those that have little difficulty attracting staff; budgets are finite, and sometimes shrinking, while the policy environment and public aspirations for education are increasing; and so on. District and school leaders in the sites we studied were more than willing to take these challenges on. Both rhetorically and practically, these leaders placed a high value on achieving greater equities in schooling, especially through addressing both the opportunity gaps that were readily apparent and the resulting disparities in performance that collectively reflected the achievement gap. But in taking
up this challenge, they predictably encountered some conceptual, technical, and political issues that needed to be addressed if an equity agenda was to be sustained over time. Three broad observations capture what we learned from these sites.

First, investing staffing resources equitably—which generally means in a differentiated and ostensibly unequal way—is difficult conceptual work. Leaders and other stakeholders have to come to grips with the slippery definitions of equality, equity, and adequacy, and the fact that more than one conception of fairness is at work within these terms. Since pursuing the goal of equitable learning improvement almost always means more than equalizing resources, opportunities, or treatments, leaders find themselves in the position of differentially investing resources to realize an equity agenda. But finding the “right” level of differential investment—the most appropriately unequal treatment of unequal circumstances—involves tricky judgments, weighing of trade-offs, and clarity about core values and one’s philosophical grounds for action. This means that leaders must simultaneously engage all stakeholders in a conversation about what equity means and reach for consensus, while still adhering to core convictions about the need for action embedded in principles of social justice (Marshall & Ward, 2004).

Second, a variety of technical and structural solutions to this conceptual puzzle are possible and feasible to implement in many schools and districts. With careful attention to what current or projected resources are available, leaders can: reconsider how funding formulas take into account measurable factors associated with educational disadvantages; invest in staff capacity that helps support more equitable practices across a school and even within each classroom; alter how students, teachers, and schools are assigned to each other; change how instructional time is allocated; and pool existing resources to amass enough of them to enable particular needs to be met. These kinds of actions imply investment activity at both the district and school level, and can often be used in combination to fashion a multipronged approach to equitable learning improvement.

Third, leaders investing in equity in these ways are likely—almost certain—to encounter stiff resistance from stakeholders who have traditionally been advantaged by existing systems, and the leaders will need to adjudicate the inevitable contest over what is fair (Theoharis, 2007). At least the resistance is predictable: astute leaders can often anticipate where and under what circumstances advantaged interests are likely to feel their advantages are most threatened long before these concerns materialize and find public voice.

Our findings, especially well dramatized in the case of Eugene, point to three principles at work in situations where district leaders grapple constructively with the equity challenges in front of them. First, pursuing an equity agenda means a great deal of planning, undertaken across a long period of time and perhaps in multiple cycles of planning. These cycles do far more than establish goals, timelines, and steps forward; rather, they build awareness, offer many occasions to air differences, get equity issues and considerations into full view, articulate
equity-related principles, and build sufficient working consensus around them—all as groundwork supporting the more specific plans and strategies that make teaching and learning more equitable.

In addition, leaders recognize that, accompanying the planning processes is a need to nurture an “equity conversation” over time—and in this conversation, help all participants learn, get clearer about each others’ core values, and give voice in an inclusive way to all affected parties, not only those whose voices are most frequently heard. Such a conversation can be nurtured in various ways, especially by proactively getting out in front of the issue rather than reacting to an equity-related debate framed by events or other parties, and using data as a reference point for the conversation, so that it stays focused and minimizes conflict. Leaders also shepherd the equity conversation by building coalitions that broaden the base of support for decisions that could be unpopular. As the conversation proceeds, leaders also look for and seize opportunities to take practical steps forward, often small ones at first, but those with symbolic power and the capacity to build trust and hope in further steps.

Finally, leaders anticipate pushback from various quarters, and especially from those groups who are most advantaged by current arrangements. In the face of this resistance, leaders stay the course, making adjustments as needed to maintain forward motion, and once again, build alliances and use other devices to carry the day.

Our analysis found the overarching principle was that the pursuit of equity goals meant taking the long view—implied by the notion of investment itself (as discussed more fully in Chapter 6 within this volume)—and engaging in processes that unfolded over years. While there are strategic advantages to students’ learning when educational leaders operate from a long-range, investment perspective, successful long-range investment planning depends upon incremental, short-term implementation successes and lessons, grounded in an ongoing inquiry process.

The leadership actions undertaken in our case study districts and schools were certainly influenced by the availability of resources, and the fiscal circumstances in which the cases were located clearly changed over the time period studied. However, it would be a mistake to assume that investing in learning improvement can only be contemplated in times of fiscal plenty. Quite the contrary: most of our sites had experienced severe retrenchment in recent years, and had used these times as occasions for creative improvisation on what they had been doing before.

In a similar spirit, the current or recent financial hard times also provide the opportunity for leaders to critically examine their investments in staffing resources and consider ways in which resources can be shifted, reallocated, or repurposed with a more strategic scope or focus (Calvo & Miles, 2012). The economic challenges further increase the tensions that leaders must negotiate when it comes to decision making about staffing resources, particularly with respect to the differential allocation of scarce resources among schools and students with varying
needs. As at times of relative plenty, there are strong voices that assert that the only “fair” thing to do is to make sure everyone bears the burden “equally,” a move that tends to reinforce any inequities in the current resource allocation system. So the challenge of finding the most equitable way of proceeding still remains, even if the main business of the day is making cuts. This challenge and the commitment to meet it lie at the heart of learning-focused leadership. Taken together, our case studies served to underscore the importance of investing for equity in learning improvement and to articulate the complexities involved when leaders work collaboratively with students, educators, and community members towards accomplishing the goal of creating an excellent education for all.