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**AN ANALYSIS OF SELECT ILLINOIS SCHOOL BOARD EFFICACY,  
AND BOARD-AUTHORIZED STRATEGIES TOWARD GREATER  
EDUCATIONAL EQUITY THROUGH A FRAMEWORK OF SOCIAL  
JUSTICE ADVOCACY AND CHANGE THEORY**

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by

Perry Hill, IV

B.A., Eastern Illinois University, 1999

M.S.Ed., Eastern Illinois University, 2001

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Doctor of Philosophy Degree

Department of Educational Administration and Higher Education

in the Graduate School

Southern Illinois University Carbondale

May 2020

DISSERTATION APPROVAL

AN ANALYSIS OF SELECT ILLINOIS SCHOOL BOARD EFFICACY, AND BOARD-  
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for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the field of Educational Administration

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December 6, 2019

AN ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION OF

Perry Hill, IV, for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Educational Administration, presented on December 6, 2019, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: AN ANALYSIS OF SELECT ILLINOIS SCHOOL BOARD EFFICACY, AND BOARD-AUTHORIZED STRATEGIES TOWARD GREATER EDUCATIONAL EQUITY THROUGH A FRAMEWORK OF SOCIAL JUSTICE ADVOCACY AND CHANGE THEORY

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Judith Green, Ph.D.

The presence and prevalence of educational inequities within public education continue to foster structures that limit student opportunities for specific student subgroups. Such limitations negate the tenets of public education and conflict with a system that should embrace success for all. This study explored district leadership, in the form of school boards and governance teams within the frameworks of Change Theory and Social Justice Advocacy, to identify patterns in approaches that could initiate and sustain systemic reform toward greater educational equity.

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my grandparents and parents. These individuals serve as life-long inspirations who instilled in me the importance of channeling one's passion, maintaining perseverance to accomplish one's goal(s), and achieving excellence for a good greater than oneself.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Achieving greater educational equity stands as a national priority embedded within a history of hindrances that have limited the full potential of systematic public education. United States' history records past educational equality gains through the perseverance of denied minorities, through laws mandating the right for all to equal educational access, through legal decrees for integration, and through many other victories. However, the push for educational equality remains incomplete and previously achieved advances have been constrained due to the recurring, expansion of educational inequities. In order to elaborate on educational inequities, the meaning of educational equity must be known. Martire and Condon (2017) define educational equity as an education system that provides for the distinct needs of students whom the system serves. Bennett (2017) defines it as “the just and fair distribution of resources based upon students’ needs” (p. 13). Combining these definitions shares the essential hope for the expansion of equity in public education amidst equity’s waning existence: specifically, the expansion of remedies to meet the unique needs of all students in the education system.

Educational inequities within public education offer mediocrity, underachievement, and exclusion to particular student groups. This targeted exclusion derived from strategic, systematic inaction to avoid or delay addressing distinct student needs and to perpetuate a status quo constructed upon societal stratification (Domhoff, 2012). Hammond (1998, para. 3) characterizes “the U.S. educational system [as] one of the most unequal in the industrialized world, and students routinely receive dramatically different learning opportunities based on their social status.” These words carry even more significance when noting that wealth disparities between the rich and nonrich have dramatically spiked along with concentrations of poverty

within the past thirty years (Fry & Taylor, 2012). The growth of these poverty concentrations points to escalations of residential segregation and further educational inequities along the lines of ethnicity and class (Orfield, Kucsera, & Siegel-Hawley, 2012). These trends of stratification reflect the platforms that covertly and overtly uphold inequities in public education. Educational inequities linked to minuscule school funding, a lack of access to educational resources, minimized student achievement, limited post-educational opportunities, and many other realities for some groups best serve the beneficiaries of what Domhoff (2012) refers to as the “power network” (para. 4). Alarming, each of these inequities and many others stands as by-products of factors such as household wealth, ethnicity, gender, religious status, disabilities, and language proficiency (Baker, 2014; Office of Civil Rights, 2000).

Educational inequities involve individualistic dynamics that warrant more focus, more resources, and more adjustments provided to students based on individual needs to ensure that each student achieves the standard outcome set for all pupils. Even more, contending with more profound inequities in public education requires an expansive immersion into the history of discrimination and systems of marginalization still evident today shown by the deficiency gaps within academic achievement and opportunity among student subgroups. Addressing individualistic dynamics in subgroups such as the poor, students of color, females, religious minorities, students in special education, and other subgroups, far surpass any simple remedy. Addressing these individualistic dynamics requires rethinking and reprioritizing components of the education system, along with the governmental system that sustains the education system. Moreover, with cumulative, ethnic minority populations set to become the dominant population by 2050, institutions must reassess their systems to ensure that equitable structures exist to support all (Treuhaft & Madland, 2011). Only when components within these systems are



modified will the system be able to correct generational marginalization of student subgroups: marginalization that continues to affect self-esteem negatively, minimizes professional accomplishments, and fosters its perpetuation throughout adulthood (Larson, 2010). In order to confront and amend realities wrought by the existing system, it is necessary to identify a standard for change and to specify how the change may be realized. Furthermore, attaining greater equity within the existing system requires presenting the agent through which change may occur.

This study explores the work of select-northern Illinois governance teams toward ensuring greater equity for the students they serve. Each governance team taking part in this study expressed an interest in diminishing educational inequities and in changing existing systems to do so. This study measured the extent of the governance teamwork toward greater equity within standards specifying the role of the Board and specific frameworks to enact systemic change. With respect to achieving greater educational equity, Illinois governance team leadership remains an area of study with little research. This study examined how decision-makers initiated, authorized, and oversaw steps toward equity areas within local, educational purviews.

The National School Board Association has conducted research involving school boards that coincides with aspects of this study. Namely, research resulting in a framework entitled *Key Works of School Boards* (2015) and research from the National School Board Association Center of Public Education which produced *Eight Characteristics of Effective School Boards* (2011). The research entitled *Key Works of School Boards* (2015) identified and elaborated on the fundamental competencies school boards should possess to effectively increase student academic performance for all students (National School Board Association, 2000). Specifically, these competencies entail skills related to vision, standards, assessment, accountability, alignment,

climate, collaboration, and community engagement, as well as continuous improvement (Scott, 2009). The *Eight Characteristics of Effective School Boards* notes common characteristics of effectiveness exhibited by high-achieving school boards (National School Board Association Center for Public Education, 2011). An existing framework, the Quality Schools Action Framework (Montecel, 2005), delves into the delivery of outcomes for educational institutions. Montecel (2005), analyzed this framework and noted that this framework focuses on “contextual and moderating factors that may impede or accelerate school system change” (para.10). The framework offers five questions a community should ponder to gain clarity on school system needs and results (2005):

1. What do we need?
2. How do we make change happen?
3. Which fundamentals must be secured?
4. Where do we focus on systems change?
5. What outcomes will result? (p. 3)

The research mentioned above offers much to complement the intent of this study. However, this study’s investigation involved coupling Illinois school board governance concepts with two pre-existing frameworks supportive of systematic change. In addition, this study highlighted the authority and role of school boards as agents of change working to restructure systems internally. The two frameworks used for this study were Change Theory and Social Justice Advocacy. The core elements of these frameworks were explored and then applied to a governance team context. This contextual application enabled a robust analysis of the work done by governance teams toward ensuring greater equity for students.

Federal and state governments have an external influence on the direction of public

education, and this study did not minimize the role these governmental entities fill. The reliance on school boards, as opposed to other governmental levels, centers on the uniqueness of a school board operating as a governance body rather than a legislative body. In short, this distinction calls on school boards to govern or guide a district from a trustee perspective rather than the delegate perspective normally attributed to state general assemblies and congressional bodies. A trustee perspective charges a policy-oriented board to use data to address issues in the best interest of the entire district. A delegate perspective charges a body to address issues communicated from their constituency with actions taken after the body talks, persuades, or compromises to yield an outcome benefitting the constituency raising the issue (Ikejiaku, 2013). The trustee perspective provides an opportunity for data collection, analysis, and reflection to establish a productive direction for the vast majority of students in the district, particularly when the school board considers matters of significant equity. In addition, this perspective allows school boards a more immediate glimpse into the effects of leadership toward equity that uses statutes, policies, prioritization, and delegation to in-district agents. The board's use of these tools toward equity, also, represents the limits to which any public school board should function. These tools stem from a statutory expectation of effective board governance; these tools highlight fundamental duties all boards should uphold. In effect, these fundamental duties are entitled *The Foundational Principles of Effective Governance* (Illinois Association of School Boards, 2019).

The Foundational Principles of Effective Governance (Illinois Association of School Boards, 2019) promote an adapted fusion of the Policy Governance Model—detailing board decision-making processes (Carver & Carver, 2016). These fundamental duties, generally, embody the role parameters of school boards found in Illinois statutes and represent the

underlying premise in a vast majority of Illinois school board policy manuals. In short, these Foundational Principles of Effective Governance (Illinois Association of School Boards, 2019) serve as the job description of public-school boards within Illinois. The Foundational Principles of Effective Governance (Illinois Association of School Boards, 2019) are as follows:

1. The Board Clarifies the District Purpose.
2. The Board Connects with the Community.
3. The Board Employs a Superintendent.
4. The Board Delegates Authority.
5. The Board Monitors Performance.
6. The Board Takes Responsibility for Itself. (p. 1-2)

It is upon these principles that a school board provides public leadership and with such tools does a board practice what Boyle and Burns (2012) described as “the art and science of solving policy problems, making policy choices and crafting solutions on behalf of the public good” (p. 139). Only through coupling adherence to statutes and standards with creative thinking will board leadership yield outcomes that meet public needs.

Change Theory, otherwise known as Theory of Action, will be employed for this study. Change Theory’s theoretical reliance on reflection as a means to ascertain optimal strategies toward desired results makes it an appropriate theory for this study. The process of reflection can be exclusive to the agent desiring change, or the reflection process can be inclusive and involve a group of agents within an existing system. This reflective approach supports a call by agents truly desiring change, along with those served, to comprehensively analyze past and present perspectives along with systematic actions to effectively assess the magnitude of the inequity plight (Bennett, 2017). Approaches of this nature foster understanding of underlying

rationales for system trends and increases the likelihood of devising functional strategies to overcome systematic hindrances to equity. The appeal of this theory in setting a standard for systematic and social change stems from its classification of users as “system thinkers in action” (Fullan, 2005, p. 8). This theoretical classification demands the use of active agents or leaders within the system to initiate and sustain needed change using “change knowledge” or objective justification (2005, p. 13). Such a classification directly aligns with my hope that correcting issues of educational inequities can occur through a renewed focus of leadership within the existing system. This position remains promising and realistic, in that the existing system has undergone tremendous changes in previous decades. If a change occurred previously, then we can only hope that an infusion of renewed thoughts toward expansive justice, reflection on evidence revealing denied individual rights, and the presentation of unmet needs via objective data should provide the necessary ingredients to refine the system. After all, the system has demonstrated its capability to evolve, and this evolution affirms its worth against constructing a new system (Halpin & Cook, 2010).

Consequently, this study amplifies the significance of working for change in the existing public education system. The desire for change among school boards, as government-delegated leaders of districts, presented a rare opportunity to denote patterns in goals, strategies, and success levels toward greater equity that may be duplicated. Underpinning these patterns or approaches is a seven-fold standard or a set of “core premises” (Fullan, 2006, p. 8) that emerged from research involving successful, systemic change within noneducation institutions. These “core premises” (Fullan, 2006, p. 8) were applied to the governance team planning and actions in this study to assess and justify positions, activities, and missteps. As noted by Fullan, when referring to Change Theory as a gauge of comprehensive assessment by system leaders, “As

leaders hone their theory of action, it will become more easily evident what represents good, bad, and incomplete theories” (2006, p. 8). The actions taken by a leader can provide indicators of intent, demonstrate one’s character, and reveal embraced philosophical areas. Further elaboration on each of the seven core premises occurs in Chapter 2.

With Change Theory encompassing an all-inclusive systems focus, this framework could stand alone in the research conducted for this study. However, adding a compatible second framework, Social Justice Advocacy, enables an added criterion to this study in which to compare steps to reach systemic change. Such an added criterion allows for discernment in critiquing if these steps were able to address systemic issues through empowerment for those disenfranchised (Klugman, 2010). The origin of Social-Justice Advocacy stems from its component words—*social* and *justice*. The early practice of social justice entailed a focus on individual acts leading to a collective or common good, particularly acts that benefited individuals lacking certain skills or means. Later democratic applications of social justice entailed promoting a position of protection for those disadvantaged by a system using government intervention. Social Justice Advocacy would also entail standing ready to intervene with governmental systems if the government acted outside the scope of a common good allotted to and benefitting all. The origins of this framework hold true, presently, in that Social Justice Advocacy strives to ensure meaning in the acts that impact individual rights as well as those that result in inequities. Social Justice Framework Advocates practice vigilance through recurring activism aimed at readjusting or overhauling systems promoting disenfranchisement. The framework’s initial stage begins with an investigation of underlying causes of inequities within the system-in-question and then advances to a pursuit of routes that elevate the power of the disadvantaged.

The significance of Social Justice Advocacy for this study involves its link to Change Theory and the foundational tenet that Social Justice Advocacy combats inequities derived from a power structure that has historically and continues to discount subgroups. The link of this framework to Change Theory is its shared importance in conducting a thorough investigation of an issue prior to engaging in advocacy and activism. The investigation aims to produce a comprehensive understanding of the systematic elements at work in order to determine how Social Justice Advocacy values can lead to a more equitable condition. Social Justice Advocacy values stress the need for a humanistic perspective in overcoming inequities, and it is this perspective that provides substance to any change. Klugman (2010) noted that this perspective is as follows:

1. Resources should be distributed so that everyone can live a decent life.
2. Human beings all have equal human rights and should be recognized in all of their diversity.
3. All people should be represented and be able to advocate on their own behalf. (p. 3)

This qualitative study involved the governance teams—inclusive of a school board and a superintendent—of four northern Illinois districts working toward greater educational equity for their students. The governance teams were selected based on their assessment that greater equity is needed to remedy data-proven areas of deficiency. Areas of deficiency included one or more of the following areas:

1. the presence of achievement gaps among student subgroups;
2. the overrepresentation of student subgroups receiving student discipline penalties;
3. the level of success attained on a mandated state assessment; and
4. comparative school funding levels between the district and the state.

Although the selected governance teams self-identified their need for greater equity, their acknowledgment was verified by me using data provided to the public via the Illinois Interactive School Report Card. The work of this study aimed to positively affect one or more of the following components of educational inequity:

- Educational resource access to student subgroups;
- Overrepresentation of student subgroups with student discipline;
- Academic underperformance of student subgroups.

Educational researchers Thomas & Bainbridge (2000) recounted the words of Ronald Edmonds, an educator classified as “the father of the effective-schools movement,” with a declaration supporting this study of “all students can learn the basic curriculum” (Thomas & Bainbridge, 2000, p. 2). This quote, which many people have shortened and misconstrued to say ‘all students can learn,’ hailed from the context of students reaching a level of basic academic achievement despite individualistic dynamics (2000). A major caveat of Edmonds’ proclamation hinged on the following conditions:

- if necessary resources are made available;
- if there is state and community support. (Thomas & Bainbridge, 2001).

Later, Edmonds included more systematic conditions to all students learning, such as:

- State legislatures provide adequate financial support for schools, as required by a number of current state Supreme Court decisions.
- Every child has adequate health care, as required for appropriate cognitive development.
- Every classroom is staffed by a certified teacher with an adequate salary.
- Every child attends a school that meets the life-safety codes established by the states.



- Every child is cared for in a high-quality child-care facility.
- And each child has the opportunity to learn according to his or her developmental needs (Thomas & Bainbridge, 2000).

Edmonds' systematic conditions affirmed the continued need for an approach toward greater equity in public educational institutions. Moreover, the structure of public education oversight makes it clear that the call for reform of the public education system must be answered by the local body that authorizes all matters within a district jurisdiction—the school board. Failure to equitably make the resources for systematic conditions available and to apply these resources appropriately hampers the effectiveness of an educational system to prepare each student for success. It is from this hope of greater educational equity and systematic reform that this study sought to link the model approaches set forth by districts to selected frameworks. The link of these approaches to a Change Theory framework offered a format with which school boards may engage in effective systematic restructuring. The link of these approaches to a Social Justice Advocacy framework offered a means of assessing the quality of team efforts to ensure the attainment of desired, equitable outcomes—addressing individual student needs to ensure success for all students. It is this particular pursuit and its byproduct of distributing items and values such as resources and opportunities that make the attainment of greater educational equity a cause of social justice.

The governance teams selected for this study expressed a commitment to address blatant areas of inequities inherent in their public education systems. Each team was selected based on their communication of a self-identified need for greater equity to the researcher as he operated in his profession as a field services director for the Illinois Association of School Boards. Each team sought assistance in focusing on the board's role in leading a process that yielded greater

educational equity. Initiating this commitment derived from school boards operating within their statutory and policy roles to proactively and/or reactively address the mater of inequities. The intent of this study was to affirm that approaches coincided with Change Theory and Social Justice Advocacy frameworks to provide greater preliminary direction to other governance teams planning to address educational inequities in public education.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions utilized for this study were open-ended questions in order to gain a detailed view of the processes transpiring within each stage a governance team took toward attaining greater equity.

1. How does a school board stay within its statutory and policy-stipulated roles to set goals addressing areas of identified, in-district inequity?
2. How does a governance team ensure board efficacy with the strategies devised and enacted by the superintendent?
3. How does a school board promote change to address identified, in-district inequity working inclusively with the community?
4. How does a school board promote change to address identified, in-district inequity with staff buy-in to the process?
5. How does a school board prioritize its goals to achieve greater educational equity?

### **Overview of Methodology**

The purpose of this study was to analyze goals and the efficacy of strategies authorized by selected Illinois school boards toward achieving greater educational equity through the frameworks of Change Theory and Social Justice Advocacy. This study employed a qualitative methodological approach. A qualitative approach is appropriate for this study since the

researcher explored how educational governance boards pursue the issue of educational equity and dynamics within systematic public education. Specific categories explored involved the work of governance teams—school boards and superintendents—in leading reform efforts. The merit of using qualitative methodology to analyze reform efforts was noted by Merriam, who affirmed that “this type of analysis attends to ferreting out the essence or basic structure of a phenomenon” (1998, p. 197).

The exploration of the structural phenomena surrounding board work toward equity was weighed against the Foundational Principles of Effective Governance (Illinois Association of School Boards, 2019). This comparison is necessary to ascertain if a board is staying within its job description and utilizing state-delegated powers to labor for greater equity. As this study finds, participating governance teams stayed within their statutory and policy-reinforced roles to initiate and maintain work toward an enhanced focus on equity reform. The adherence to the roles aided both participating school boards and superintendents to advance in their reform efforts with greater clarity in knowing the parameters each would undertake. Moreover, given some of the contributing factors of educational inequities—student accessibility to quality staff, student accessibility to curriculum and activities, existing achievement gaps, existing opportunity gaps, and diminished district-community relationship—this study included categories demonstrating the tie between the board’s expected role and its work to remedy contributing factors to inequities.

The selection of each governance team and the contributions of these teams provided an indication of how governance team planning and actions toward greater equity compared among districts with varying district resources, student achievement dynamics, and other district cultural phenomena. The framework of Social Justice Advocacy served as the tool to weigh the

substance of the plans and actions taken by the boards, along with the implementation strategies of the superintendents. Substantive measures taken within the context of Social Justice addressed issues with resource prioritization and distribution, along with the understanding that each student has unique resource needs. The framework of Change Theory served as the tool to gauge the effectiveness of the plan and actions of the board toward achieving systematic reform and intended results. This framework enabled the superintendent to monitor implementation strategies based on communicated, outcome expectations from the board—thus supporting board efficacy.

It is noted that the researcher of this study is employed by the Illinois Association of School Boards as the Director of Field Service for the three largest divisions or regions in the state. In this capacity, the researcher is charged with aiding public school boards and superintendents in their efforts to uphold state statutes, board policy, and Illinois school board governance principles. Consequently, the beliefs of the researcher surrounding this study are rooted within a professional expectation that the existing structures of the public education system can address issues such as educational inequities.

It is noted that the researcher's beliefs toward internal reform may serve as a bias. Also, the use of school boards or governance teams known to the researcher may present a bias due to a pre-existing working relationship forged between the researcher and those teams. However, it is also noted that these preceding, potentially-contributing areas of bias might serve as an aid in securing greater detail in the data collected. If interviewees and study participants hold a pre-existing, professional relationship with the researcher, they are more prone to share greater detail due to pre-established trust. Another element of bias that may be present involves the tie between the participating boards and the superintendent for each board. This bias may stem

from a board serving as the employer of the superintendent, thus presenting a possible hindrance in the researcher gaining full disclosure of superintendent viewpoints on action taken by a board.

Qualitative data collection will include the following:

- Collect and analyze board meeting agendas and board meeting minutes.
- Conduct semi-structured interviews, audiotape the interviews, and transcribe the interviews.
- Collect observational notes.
- Find and include citations to support qualitative data collection techniques.

### **Limitations**

Limitations of this study entail the withdrawal of some research participants who initially committed due to unforeseen circumstances. Despite this challenge, representation from each of the selected governance teams did occur, and the data collected provides insight into the equity reforms planned and/or enacted. Other limitations include the researcher's unavailability to attend all participating governance team school board meeting sessions due to work conflicts along with a similar dynamic for interviewees. Such conflicts prompted delays in the planned interview schedule and swifter completion of this study. Moreover, it was observed that due to the researcher's professional ties with each interviewee, many participants responded to interview questions with governance clichés promoted by the researcher's company of employment instead of greater elaboration on their responses. This lack of elaboration was routinely combatted by the researcher with techniques such as asking interviewees to further explain their responses.

The remaining chapters and content descriptors of this study include Chapter 2: Literature review; Chapter 3: Methodology; Chapter 4: Findings; and Chapter 5: Analysis and synthesis.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Educational inequities represent an overlooked opportunity to advance the cause for educational equality amidst competing societal priorities. The recognition of unequal treatment among public school students and corrective action steps toward equal treatment of all students represents a significant prize in the long, hard-fought civil rights movement. Even more, this prize resulted in legal outcomes that mandated the goal of equal treatment among students regardless of one's individual status. This corrective focus on equality within public education for all students emerged from the landmark United States Supreme Court decision of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954). A significant contention reinforcing the significance of public education and its equal delivery to all students is found within words embedded in this landmark ruling:

Today, education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments. Compulsory school attendance laws and the great expenditures for education both demonstrate our recognition of the importance of education to our democratic society. It is required in the performance of our most basic public responsibilities, even service in the armed forces. It is the foundation of good citizenship. Today it is a principal instrument in awakening the child to cultural values, in preparing him for later professional training, and in helping him to adjust normally to his environment. In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms.

(*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 1954, p. 493)

The historical struggle of some Americans to shatter the belief of "Separate but Equal" in the

public education system proved to be a venture that yielded numerous intrinsic, social, and economic benefits while shifting a governmental focus toward enforcement and protection of this right (Brownstein & National Journal, 2014). Despite these victories amplifying educational equality for all, there remains a looming reality that continues to plague the public education systems in our nation: the guarantee of educational equity within public education systems.

This looming reality exists as a subset of educational equality, and its presence marks a substantial hindrance to all students in public education who expect educational equality. Although the presence of educational equity in public education remains diminished and overlooked, it stands as the vehicle to ensure equality for all students—including those student populations historically marginalized by an education system based on the individual distinctions of learning styles/needs, ethnic-cultural backgrounds, gender, and other areas of uniqueness (Bennett, 2017). After all, only when such unique needs are addressed for each student and strategies toward achievement enabled, will past and present effects of systematic marginalization be minimized to grant all students a glimpse of the vision that is educational equality.

The meaning of educational equity has varied among those institutions defining the term. The definition—regardless of the agent defining the term—includes components that reveal the universal need for its implementation. This need embraces the equal treatment of all students but acknowledges that exclusively relying on educational equality to remedy systematic shortcomings restricts the widespread parameters intended with the dismantling of “Separate but Equal” educational approaches (*Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1896, para. 1). Moreover, exclusively focusing on educational equality without analyzing progress within educational equity components overlooks the consistently lagging performance of some student groups sharing

unique backgrounds and conditions (Bennett, 2017).

This lagging performance does not discount the contribution of policies and laws promoting educational equality. Rather, this performance stems from a reality that the levels of pre-existing educational conditions were too low and so long delayed in certain marginalized communities that lingering effects would remain, even after equality movements, due to deficiencies in our system (Coleman et al., 1966). Some marginalized communities include the low-socioeconomic population, students of color, females, special education students, and English Language Learner students. Two definitions of educational equity to consider derive from a national governing entity and an international governing entity.

- “All students are provided with the unique supports needed to succeed” (Atchison, Diffey, Rafa, & Sarubbi, 2017, p. 1).
- Personal or social circumstances are not obstacles such as gender, ethnic origin or family background, are not obstacles to achieving educational potential (fairness), and all individuals reach at least a basic minimum level of skills (inclusion). In these education systems, the vast majority of students have the opportunity to attain high-level skills regardless of their own personal and socio-economic circumstances (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2012, p. 9).

These definitions are provided to demonstrate the universality of the meaning of educational equity. In synthesizing and simplifying a definition for equity, a definition through synonyms used by the Education Trust when comparing equality to equity is applicable for this study. “Equality has become synonymous with ‘leveling the playing field.’ So let’s make equity synonymous with ‘more for those who need it’” (Mann, 2014, para. 5). The equity link to equality transcends marginalization and disenfranchisement so equality may be achieved.



Addressing the guarantee of equity enables greater attainment of the equality decreed in the 1954 United States Supreme Court ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*; however addressing this guarantee entails overhauling a perpetuating system of generational marginalization. Despite profound civil rights triumphs for public education, the incomplete dismantling of “Separate but Equal” (*Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1896, para. 1) policies shifted the approaches of the existing education system to preserve its role in social stratification (Collins, 1971). This stratification upholds societal priorities of politicized nationalism and economics under the auspices of rugged individualism. The emphasis on rugged individualism stresses that each individual has the same opportunity for success as anyone else (Lynch, 2000). The interlacing of this concept of rugged individualism stems from the interpretation championed by some authorities of the definition of equality. Equality involves the equal treatment of all. From this position of individualism, governmental authorities pushed platforms against public educational institutions that cast scrutiny over past successes. These platforms justified authorities penalizing schools for circumstantial underperformance. These platforms delayed a focus on aiding all in achieving a base standard of student achievement. Even more, these platforms diverted attention from a deeper need for a systematic overhaul (Bertram, 2012).

Decades of demands for heightened accountability involving student achievement resulted in greater vigilance without an equitable vision for attainment. The effect of this heightened accountability spawned student performance data documenting generational failures to redirect the education system toward equitable means of attaining student proficiency. This situation emerged in the form of what is classified as looming deficiency gaps among student subgroups. Instruments of accountability such as *A Nation at Risk*, *Goals 2000*, and *No Child Left Behind* offered awareness of academic needs and articulated shortcomings in the existing

education system; however, these instruments fell short in convincing governmental authorities to fully act toward a remedy of equal educational opportunity and access for all students. In fact, *A Nation at Risk* (United States National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) offered justification for its educational critique as working to address “the rising tide of mediocrity” ( p. 14) permeating the system. Despite the justification and scrutiny presented in *A Nation at Risk*; despite the educational adjustments made by five United States Presidents who served after the release of this report; despite a host of State governors championing Goals 2000; despite increased assessments, an end to educational deficiencies and the systematic inequities that foster them still has not been reached.

Examples of these deficiency gaps include learning gaps, achievement gaps, and opportunity gaps. Learning gaps reflect the disparity between the actual knowledge acquired by a student and his or her expected level of knowledge when compared to other students in the same or similar grade or age level (Great Schools Partnership, 2013a). Achievement gaps reflect the disparity in student performance within comparative student subgroups (Great Schools Partnership, 2013b). Opportunity gaps reflect the disparity in student access to schools and resources needed to attain success (Great Schools Partnership, 2013c). The existence of each gap reinforces a need for greater equity, and each gap validates a historic breakdown in systemic education that upholds and sustains a set societal order rather than promoting egalitarianism. It is the promotion of this social order that resulted in overlooked and/or underemphasized growth in concentrations of students intertwined within each deficiency gap. Even more, these concentrations of students share commonalities in their classification as student subgroups.

These student subgroups hail from subgroups sharing commonalities in ethnicities—such as African-American, Hispanic, and Native American; economic status—one of low

socioeconomic levels or the poor; populations with limited English language skills; culturally-distinctive populations usually differing from the macroculture religion, and other diverse groups that societal systems, historically, used to perpetuate disenfranchisement. Amidst a system upholding stratification, looming and blatant inequities galvanized communities to attack the status quo in order to attain denied opportunities and access for students. Such attacks included the 1946 acknowledgment of educational disenfranchisement by a California federal court ruling in *Mendez et al. v. Westminster*. This case prohibited the educational segregation of Mexican-Americans in Orange County, California and was later applied throughout Southwestern states (Blanco, 2010). Additional attacks on disenfranchisement would expand to research such as the Clark Doll Tests, which would verify that systematic societal inequalities promoted perceptions and realities of inferiority among young African-American generations (Clark & Clark, 1947).

The Clark Doll Tests (Clark & Clark, 1947) would serve as an integral component in the 1954 United States Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. This case would delegitimize the societal system of “Separate But Equal” in public education. Further attacks on disenfranchisement in 1954 would transpire through the federal court ruling of *Hernandez v. Texas*. This ruling would proclaim that the Fourteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution applied to more than individuals of the Caucasian and African-American ethnicities (*Hernandez v. Texas*, 1954). The United States Supreme Court would rule that this amendment also applies to Americans of nonwhite or nonblack descent; thus, the use of Jim Crow laws for all, in public education and beyond, were prohibited (*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 1954).

More attacks on systematic disenfranchisement erupted in 1966 with the release of the *Coleman Report* from the National Center for Educational Statistics. This report documented the

presence as well as the persistence of segregation among nonwhite students (Coleman et al., 1966). The report noted and expounded on the depth of the difference between the quality of education and its lasting post-schooling impact upon nonwhite students compared to White students. The *Coleman Report* affirmed the presence of profoundly diminished opportunities available to nonwhite students beyond grade 12. These diminished opportunities perpetuated the continued subjugation of societal microcultures by the authorities of the status quo (Coleman et al., 1966).

Despite the legal and governmental acknowledgment of systematic shortcomings in such rulings and reports, the recurrence of educational gaps among the same student subgroups has continued to the present. These recurring trends suggest that an overdue and prolonged need to expeditiously and comprehensively address the issue of educational equity in public education exists. Governmental decrees and laws such as the No Child Left Behind Act have heightened attention regarding educational accountability and prompted strategies employed by many districts. Despite the incorporation of these strategies and the deployment of ample professional development to countless administrators, teachers, general staff, students, and parents, much work remains left to close—and not simply narrow—education deficiency gaps (Ladd, 2017). Although the advances toward inclusion with these stakeholders remain a notable accomplishment, the narrowing—but prolonged—inability to close the gaps raise doubts on the effectiveness of additional avenues awaiting implementation toward closure. Consequently, prospective avenues might require a fresh regrouping of thought and actions from agents within the educational system to change it from within (Caposey, 2012; Illinois Association of School Boards, 2018). Such agents might include leadership from school boards and district leaders working with legislators in order to overhaul mindsets and internal processes that may

unintentionally inhibit gap closure.

Coupled with the inability to close existing gaps among student subgroups are additional points of evidence that suggest regrouping and revisiting development and application areas are urgently needed. A United States Commission on Civil Rights report entitled *Minorities in Special Education* noted that an overrepresentation of minorities in special education exists and has existed since the research was reported in 1982 (United States Commission on Civil Rights, 2007). Moreover, overrepresented student subgroups, when compared to the general education student population, were students identified as English-Language Learners, African-American, Hispanic, and Native American. The report also revealed that these subgroups tended to reside in low socioeconomic households.

In addition to the report entitled the *Minorities in Special Education* (2007) , the United States Department of Education Office of Civil Rights reported another matter of overrepresentation involving student subgroups involved in school discipline—particularly exclusionary discipline (United States Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2014). The report uncovered an overrepresentation of student subgroups being disciplined when compared to the White student population. The report findings indicated that the overrepresented student subgroups were identified as African-American, Hispanic, and Native American. Furthermore, the report disclosed that the overrepresented student subgroups tended to reside in low socioeconomic households.

Amidst academic and service efforts to enhance the quality of student performance in public schools through legislative mandate, there remains an unacknowledged, unattended, and all-inclusive reality involving the same student subgroups. This reality inhibits growth, hinders advancement to a student’s potential, and demands action rather than solitary documentation.

With cumulative, ethnic minority populations set to become the dominant population by 2050, institutions must reassess their systems to ensure that equitable structures exist to support all (Treuhaft & Madland, 2011). Public education, specifically, stands as a pivotal gateway in instilling social and academic foundations for generations. As such, public schools must ensure that their systems embody the principles of equity, fairness, and egalitarianism.

Affirming the presence and positioning of these principles in district systems involve sound direction, guidance, and delegation. Consequently, district leadership stands as a paramount commodity in attaining impactful change to the crises of educational inequities. The agent charged with guiding public schools, per Illinois statute, is the Board of Education or the School Board of a school district. Specifically, a significant Illinois statute empowering Boards of Education reads, “It is the duty of a school board [t]o adopt and enforce all necessary rules for the management and government of the public schools of their district” (105 Illinois Compiled Statutes 5/10-20.5{1979}). Per the statute, the governing body called the Board of Education sets the course for a school district. For public schools, Boards of Education do this by fusing democratic principles, statutory mandates, community standards, and collective priorities into a functional framework from which the district serves all its students. Despite the presence of a district framework, the emergence of persistent and exacerbated educational issues impacting like-student subgroups evokes a need to explore the proactive and reactive responses of the governing body serving as district leadership.

Past analyses have explored actions to narrow a still-open achievement and learning gap (Poliakoff, 2006). Similar analyses have occurred in contending with a still-bursting overrepresentation of student ethnic subgroups in special education (United States Commission on Civil Rights, 2009). Continued analyses have transpired in the studies of an ever-present

overrepresentation of student ethnic subgroups being suspended (United States Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2014). Although these analyses identify alarming and unacceptable trends, further study of actions taken by the primary district leader—the School Board—to address these areas of inequity might demonstrate the possibilities available for systemic change when a Board rallies to the cause.

Such issues as the persistent presence of gaps in learning and achievement, the overrepresentation of student subgroups in special education, and the overrepresentation of suspended student subgroups, indicate that the educational system designed to extend opportunities for all has hindered opportunities for some. In the wake of these issues, numerous studies have been conducted to reveal the rationale for these phenomena from the perspective of impacted students and teachers, along with strategies employed by administrators (Carter & Welner, 2013; Haberman, 2017). However, the efforts of the governing body or unit providing district guidance have received minimal to no attention within a formal study.

Social Justice Advocacy provides outlets for an organization to expand or focus its efforts on areas of significant need (Klugman, 2010). The meaning and motivation for the act of Social Justice Advocacy stem from the two component words contained within the term. The two component words are Social Justice and Advocacy. Social Justice refers to the abilities of an entity to collaborate with others toward the development of a structure that secures items of collective worth—both tangible and intangible items (Novak, 2009). This structural development entails allying with others of like-minds and like-needs toward common aims. In many instances, social justice promoters recognize the deficiencies or imbalanced distribution of resources promised by the established system. These promoters' actions, in turn, ensure the fulfillment of unfulfilled, societal promises to all citizens. A general definition of the term

*Social Justice* derives from its nineteenth-century European origins. These origins supported the historical presence of the Aristotelian and Aquinian virtue of “general justice in a contemporary form” along with a focus on associations or adoptions for the care of services used by all in the community (Novak, 2009, p.7). This association or adoption of *service* was designed to ensure viability and utility for all through upkeep from the designated familial assignment.

An example of this relationship would be an assigned family serving as caretakers of a bridge used by everyone in a town. Such assignments might have stemmed from the talent or interest of a group, but an understood expectation entailed the collective good emerging from the individual sacrifice of all to a common cause. Through evolution and American democratic adaptation, the original term would shift from the term, “virtue of general justice” to “Social Justice” (Novak, 2009). This shift would retain the crux of its original meaning, but the shift prompted an enlargement of the membership base from familial members to members sharing more general commonalities such as ethnicities and culture. Ultimately, the evolved trend of Social Justice would center on “a small band of brothers (or sisters) who are outside the family who, for certain purposes, volunteers to give time and effort to accomplish something” (Novak, 2009, p. 9). The construction of these connections aided in the evolution of Social Justice and yielded a formal definition of Social Justice offered for this study: “The capacity to organize with others to accomplish certain ends for the good of the whole community” (Novak, 2009, p. 1). This definition for Social Justice stands because its presence as a component of the value, equality, holds firm in its origin as well as its contemporary application (Novak, 2009).

Understanding that varied definitions of Social Justice encompass numerous ideological realms, the following definition of Social Justice is offered as a clarification for this study. The definition of *Social Justice* from Papageorgiou (1980) states, “Equality of the burdens, the



advantages, and the opportunities of citizenship” (p. 110). This definition suggests true equality rests within similar, if not identical, circumstances among individuals. It also suggests that rights and liberties granted with citizenship should serve as safeguard measures to prevent the development of inequalities among citizenry.

From the definition of Papageorgiou, the link of Social Justice to equality stands and, as a result, its connection to a byproduct of equality—equity—remains an outcome desired for all generational citizenry. It is also noted that the intimate relationship existing between the act of Social Justice and securing equality along with its byproducts presents a moral imperative such that “violation of it is intimately related to the concept of inequality” (Papageorgiou, 1980, p. 110). Such Social Justice abuses deny individual rights and offset historic steps toward equality.

This study utilized a Social Justice framework that encompassed the domain of advocacy: Social Justice Advocacy. Just as Social Justice upholds a progressive meaning embedded in the tide of activism, the meaning of advocacy amplifies the general action taken to promote an interest or position. The action of advocacy has provided education on issues and has redefined, reordered, and revolutionized society. One example includes the advocacy efforts by founding fathers of the United States to spawn a nation from promoted philosophical, political, financial, and socially-stratified positions. As was true in the history of the United States, advocacy remains a means of promoting varied interests through education and through the persuasion of governmental leaders (Weiser, n.d.). For the purposes of this study, advocacy is defined as “advocates publicly expressing their interest in specific causes and [who] take clear actions to support the positive advancement of those causes” (Kelly, 2015, para. 1).

The narrowing of advocacy as a tool for Social Justice emboldens its democratic application within the existing political systems targeted for social change (Weiser, n.d.). The

desired social change in this study encompasses greater educational equity in public schools. Although the equity denied in the current educational system involves a host of areas such as performance gaps, systematic funding, and marginalization of populations based on cultures, ethnicities, and economics—just to name a few areas—the merging of advocacy to a Social Justice platform strengthens a call for resource equity, fairness, and respect for diversity, as well as the eradication of existing forms of social oppression (Bennett, 2017; Feagin, 2001). Moreover, such an alignment between advocacy and Social Justice upholds the achievement of an Aristotelian concept called the common good. The common good stands as the determinant in classifying a government or system as right and just (Smith, 1999). Achieving this classification is based on a government’s or system’s priority of service to everyone in the community versus some individuals (Smith, 1999). Systems or governments prioritizing service for some individuals over everyone serve as an indication that the governmental actions performed for some are wrong and unjust (Smith, 1999). The coupling of social justice to advocacy and to the common good presents a key question in the bout for greater educational equity. The question is, who decides what the common good is toward greater educational equity (Novak, 2009)? The answer to this question, thus far, has been dodged or ignored for too long and has resulted in generations being omitted from the gains an equalized and equitable system could offer.

Pondering the question of who decides what is the common good toward greater educational equity along with identifying educational funding and budgetary sources points to an answer that charges governmental bodies at each level—federal, state, and local—with this responsibility. As such, this key question offers legitimacy to the agents of focus for this study, which are locally-elected school boards in the State of Illinois. After all, it is the elected school

board that stands as a state-statute authorized, policy-making body to guide the framework for district operations. Specifically, Illinois statute—105 Illinois Compiled Statutes 5/10-20—grants broad yet stipulated powers to locally-elected school boards that affirms:

The school board has the powers enumerated in the Sections of this Article following this Section. This enumeration of powers is not exclusive, but the board may exercise all other powers not inconsistent with this Act that may be requisite or proper for the maintenance, operation, and development of any school or schools under the jurisdiction of the board. This grant of powers does not release a school board from any duty imposed upon it by this Act or any other law (105 Illinois Compiled Statutes 5/10-20).

With federal and—even more so—state governments providing a bulk of mandated oversight for school districts, school boards have significant flexibility in the actions they can take to positively champion equity within their districts (Villareal, 2007). Board-led actions such as budget approval, goal-setting, and policy prioritization represent state-delegated authority yielded to locally-elected school boards and can guide district resources and administrators toward a more equitable pathway (Villareal, 2007). As such, a commitment to Social Justice Advocacy by a school board offers the opportunity to enhance long-term equitable services. An elaboration on the work of school boards relative to greater educational equity through a framework of Social Justice Advocacy will follow the detailed description of this framework.

Two definitions are presented to support the use of Social Justice Advocacy in this study. These definitions demonstrate the universality of the embedded values of Social Justice and advocacy, reflect the desired outcomes, and the definitions showcase the benefits in leading change toward greater equity—both inside and outside educational realms. The first definition demonstrates how the framework coincides with international intentions of equity. The second

definition demonstrates the functionality of the same framework in an educational institution context within the United States. The first definition of a Social Justice Advocacy framework is:

Social Justice Advocacy is action working for structural and enduring changes that increase the power of those who are the most disadvantaged politically, economically, and socially. It tackles the root and avoidable causes of inequities for those who are systematically and institutionally disadvantaged by their race, ethnicity, economic status, nationality, gender, gender expression, age, sexual orientation, or religion (LaMarche, 2009).

The second definition of a Social Justice Advocacy framework is:

Organized efforts aimed at influencing public attitudes, policies, and laws to create a more socially just society guided by the vision of human rights that may include awareness of socio-economic inequities, protection of social rights as well as racial identity, experiences of oppression, and spirituality (Penn State University, 2018).

The historical transitioning of the United States involving periods of activism demonstrates the merit of Social Justice Advocacy in education (Penn State University, 2018). Examples of such activism displays are entrenched in national struggles with education in three consecutive decades: the 1950s, the 1960s, and the 1970s. Movements such as the Civil Rights Movement, the women's rights, and the anti-war movement were fueled with the spirit of Social Justice Advocacy and contributed to a societal shift toward greater social change (Penn State University, 2018). This framework provided guidance throughout these decades of change. Consequently, the growth of inequities in education following these decades warrant revisiting Social Justice Advocacy strategies to "right injustices, increase access, and improve educational outcomes for all students" (Ratts, DeKruyf, & Chen-Hayes, 2007, p. 91). The framework of Social Justice

Advocacy hinges upon three interrelated premises that correlate to the intent of this study. These premises are:

1. Resources should be distributed so that everyone can live a decent life.
2. Human beings all have human rights and should be recognized in all of their diversity.
3. All people should be represented and be able to advocate on their own behalf.

(Klugman, 2010).

The distribution and the quality of resources stand as factors in determining whether a system meets a pivotal standard of equity. Klugman (2010) notes that resource distribution should consider a base amount of resources to enable everyone to lead a quality existence and that the resource distributor should consider the level of access and control exerted by individuals to the resources. Imbalance in distribution to parties that inhibit him/her from reaching his/her full potential indicates a need to revisit or overhaul the system of distribution. Such imbalances include unevenness in educational opportunities linked to curriculum offerings, staffing needs, and institutional funding.

The first premise upholds the need for equality, but it also denotes a distinction between a heightened call for equality as opposed to equity. Social Justice Advocacy toward greater educational equity recognizes a need for equality from the perspective of universally maximizing one's potential (Klugman, 2010). Analyses of what might be needed to ensure that a student or individual gains the resources or tools to meet even a minimal standard of attainment may vary based on the controlled and uncontrolled realities of each individual. As such, school boards working toward greater educational equity in a Social Justice Advocacy context should confer to create and prioritize goals to be aligned throughout all areas of the district.

The second premise addresses the significance of a governing entity having an awareness of the diversity that comprises its institution. With an awareness of this diversity, a governing entity should rally around the reality that basic resources or outcomes are due to each individual served by the institution (Klugman, 2010). In the case of public education, such resources or outcomes might entail district leaders embracing the expectation that all students will be prepared for college—whether the students choose to apply or not—and channeling resources to achieve this end based on the objective achievement levels of each student. It is the second premise that advances the notion that public institutions are obligated to reform and directly challenge inhibitors of marginalization in order to ensure collective benefits for all (Gruskin & Ferguson, 2009).

The third premise upholds that all individuals served by an institution should be represented by that institution. This representation expands into participation in the institutional processes where one might share his or her position on an issue (Klugman, 2010). In the case of education, school board members serve as elected officials who represent citizens within a jurisdiction. The collective board is charged with, proactively, engaging the community to identify the community's standards for education and to infuse the standards benefitting all students into the district (Illinois Association of School Boards, 2017). Implications involving educational equity entail an institution or a system operating on behalf of all. Such a reality expands the meaning of representation to encompass both direct and indirect representation, along with highlighting the intentionality of working for a collective good.

A Theory of Change Framework, within the Social Justice Advocacy context, presents pathways to change for organizations that enable the organization to attain demanded outcomes (Klugman, 2011). The demanded outcomes represent areas of influence pushed upon an

organization due to pressure from external and/or internal circumstances. The intensity of the influence exerted upon the organization grows to a point when the organization interprets a heightened sense of urgency to revise and/or add an approach to its aims. Institutional or systemic change demanded from internal and/or external forces encompass measurable outcomes; they derive from varied, contributing factors; and they insist on deliverables that reflect the initial social justice values, which prompted the organization shift (2011).

A close connection between Social Justice Advocacy, the Theory-of-Change Framework, and school boards involves the link of school board policies. School board policy reflects the affirmations and elaborations of a board to comply with governmental mandates, to advance its specific priorities, and to ensure the direction for its district (Selbee & Lovern, 2015). The use of policy typically represents a means of upholding the status quo; however, the policy can be shifted if its outcomes inflict detriment, and the advocates of a cause are strategic in their demands for change. School boards act within the scope of policy and serve as elected bodies or trustees—acting for the general good of their communities. As such, school boards stand as a governmental body where communities weigh social justice values to ascertain if a need for advocacy exists. With governmental and many organizational tendencies weighted on upholding the status quo and a need present to promote and ensure greater social justice, a framework of Change Theory provides a means of enhancing or restructuring “organizational capacity” (Klugman, 2011, p. 97). In short, the historical inability of systemic education to promote all-inclusive success warrants a method to gain what Letts, Ryan, and Grossman (1999) called “‘adaptive capacity’—learning and shifting to advance” (p. 135). The influx of adaptive capacity yields strengthened organizational capacity. It is this influx that fuels needed educational reform, and it is this approach that justifies performing reform within the existing

system over recreating the system. Educational policy specialists assert that “building on the best of what remains of their architecture—and sweeping the rest out of the way—will take time and patience. But that’s what’s called for” (Hess, Petrilli, & West, 2011, p. 65). Initiating systemic reforms using proven elements of functionality from the current system minimizes a need for a full overhaul while enacting change through somewhat familiar pathways.

Social Justice Advocacy measures the retention or presence of social justice values in the reform occurring through Change Theory (Klugman, 2011). This relationship offers institutions or organizations a structure for renewal and adjustment to address and embody overlooked or previously-ignored social justice values (Klugman, 2011). For this study, the overlooked or previously-ignored social justice values encompass attaining greater educational equity—in all of its forms—within public education. As such, the fusion of these frameworks offers a route for education system rebirth to diminish group marginalization, and offer prolonged opportunities as well as success for all students.

Achieving greater equity within the existing public education system stands as a feasible and realistic goal. In order to do so, efforts targeting this aim must fall to those with a passion, a push, the prowess, and the power to act toward a greater good for all students (King, 2016). These requirements of reform necessitate the emergence of Change Theory as a course for reform. As stated by Fullan (2006):

Change theory or change knowledge can be very powerful in informing education reform strategies and, in turn, getting results—but only in the hands (and minds, and hearts) of people who have a deep knowledge of the dynamics of how the factors in question operate to get particular results (p. 3).

Securing a commitment for equity reform is key among the leadership of school districts. This



stands as an optimal reform approach when leadership understands the significance of educational equity along with the questionable structures of the existing system.

Change Theory, sometimes referred to as Change Knowledge, provides a framework or approach to achieve desired outcomes for systemic change (Fullan, 2006). This framework has proved beneficial for independent, collective, and organizational strategizing, enactment, as well as evaluating reform efforts (Laing & Todd, 2015a). The benefits of this framework over others stems from its inclusiveness and its reflective basis that takes into account a myriad of intertwining factors and multiplex actions that help and/or impede reform progress. In short, Change Theory promotes a more comprehensive analysis of foreseen and unforeseen—direct and indirect—causal factors that may be impacting the desired or undesired outcome. This framework offers flexibility to research to look, solely, beyond the performance of an initiative. Laing and Todd (2015a) added that Change Theory “changes the way of thinking from what you are doing to what you want to achieve (p. 3).” A definition of Change Theory used in this study is “a systematic and cumulative study of the links between activities, outcomes, and context of the initiative” (Fullbright-Anderson, Kubisch, & Connell, 1998, p. 2). Another definition of Change Theory, upon which the definition used in this study was based, is “a theory of how and why the program will work” (Weiss, 1995, p. 66). The analysis of the links referenced in the definition occurs in reality and not exclusively in the theoretical dimension. This situation enables the phenomena of practicality to modify approaches amidst steps to reach the desired outcome.

Specifically, Change Theory accomplishes these modifications through a reliance on “exploring the real-world setting in which the project is being implemented, the starting situation, and risks or opportunities that may influence achieving change, the actions to be taken

and the steps of change expected to take place” (Laing & Todd, 2015a, p. 4). Weighing all aspects of reform from the issue necessitating reform, to possible by-products of reform, to the strategies of implementation represent represents comprehensive points of consideration embedded within Change Theory. According to Funnell and Rogers (2011), the development of Change Theory is rooted within four approaches or models:

1. Deductive Model,
2. Inductive Model,
3. Mental Model, and
4. Collaborative Model. (p. 4)

The Deductive Model entails a researcher using pre-existing studies to collect evidence about questionable dynamics occurring in a system along with rationales for change. This model focuses on the present system, its inner-workings, and the resulting outcomes. In this study, there was an exploration of previous research relating to educational equity and dynamics that have occurred within the existing education system. These dynamics involved the distribution, the access, and the effects of educational resources to students—particularly with student subgroups.

The Inductive Model highlights the benefit of observing real-world activities, factors, and outcomes with a research topic. From these real-world situations, a more realistic and accurate understanding of the research emerges—compared to the traditional research approach of solely utilizing known facts about a phenomenon. In this study, time was devoted to analyzing multiple areas of school board leadership and governance team leadership relative to attaining greater equity. The interviews, observations, and interactions with the selected participants permitted the researcher to determine the magnitude to which other factors influence the desired outcome

of the team.

The Mental Model addresses the understanding stakeholders possess regarding a reform. This model also includes stakeholder receptivity about a reform or initiative. Funnell and Rogers (2011) noted a host of questions targeted at stakeholders that reveal the depth of their comprehension about the necessity for change. These are:

- Can you give me an example of where this program worked well? Why did you choose that example? What do you think is making it work well? (You can also ask about examples that are not working so well.) If the answers are about program processes only and not outcomes, then extend the questions by asking why those processes are important for program clients.
- How would life be better for participants or intended beneficiaries if this program worked well?
- What are current barriers to a good life for program participants? (you could explore this in relation to particular domains such as health, employment, or social participation.)
- Who else needs to be involved and how?
- Does the program try to influence those other parties, and if so, what would you expect them to do differently? (2011, p. 124).

The application of this model to this study entails the inclusion of district stakeholders in the reform initiatives put forward by the participating districts. In this study, this inclusion encompasses such acts as communicating a need for action, fulfilling ad hoc as well as standing committee advisory roles, and providing commentary on proposed strategies. Ensuring that stakeholders possess an understanding of each proposed step toward greater equity provides a

basis for greater buy-in to this systemic reform.

The Collaborative Model involves the merging of existing research on the focal topic with the level of understanding participants in a study possess on the topic. As such, efforts by participating governance teams to gain public perception on equity, share their equity vision, and amend approaches based on feedback and results meet the standards of this model. Even more, the inclusion of committees comprised by citizens, staff, and board members to assess the by-products and effectiveness of enacted steps embody a collaborative approach to ensure efficacy. This model also entails the researcher both reinforcing participant's understanding of an issue along with pressing them to uncover a deeper understanding (Laing & Todd, 2015b).

In this study, a merging of existing research on equity and board governance was prevalent in the assessed areas. The work performed by the boards and superintendents, along with their responses to the interview questions, helped to verify their level of understanding of these areas. The Researcher strove to support the words and works of the study participants but challenged each board to stay within the statutory and theoretical confines of board governance.

In addition to these models representing the basis of Change Theory, this theory promotes specific interview questions designed to explore the outcomes from the present system along with unforeseen and contributing factors that could lead to systemic reform (Laing & Todd, 2015a). These interview questions were:

1. What is the situation you face? What are the underlying causes?
2. What needs to change in the long term? How do you want things to be different?
3. How will these changes be made?
4. What actions will you take? What will participants experience as different?
5. What effect will those actions have? On whom? By when? What will happen next?

What will happen after that?

6. How will you know if change is happening? What will you see? How will you measure that?
7. What will happen for Person A, Person B, etc.?
8. What might prevent this from happening? (Laing & Todd, 2015a, p. 4)

The interview questions of this study utilized the structure of the interview framing questions noted by Laing and Todd (2015a) as integral to a Change Theory Framework, but exact wording was personalized to the research topic and dynamics being explored. Likewise, the structural connections of this study to the key components or models from which Change Theory derived provided preliminary assurance of a complementing topic and Change Theory framework. The completion of the research served as the ultimate determinant of whether this complementary tie results in “some internal validity or, in other words, makes sense” (Laing & Todd, 2015a, p. 4). With the key elements defining Change Theory presented and with Change Theory utilizing a multifaceted approach to understand factors contributing to final reform, noting the significance of theoretical application to a research topic stands as pivotal. Fullan (2006) gauged the most productive avenues from which to “illustrate how the basic premises translate into concrete strategies and actions (p. 8).” Fullan (2006) noted that these avenues consist of “seven core premises” (p. 8) that, when coupled with “reflective action” (p. 8) by the study participants, spawn outcomes lending themselves to systemic change. These seven areas are as follows:

1. A focus on motivation;
2. Capacity building, with a focus on result;
3. Learning in context;

4. Changing context;
5. A bias for reflective action;
6. Tri-level engagement;
7. Persistence and flexibility in staying the course (Fullan, 2006, p. 8).

Change Theory and Social Justice Advocacy provide frameworks to guide reforms toward greater equity within the public education system (Fullan, 2006). These frameworks, when used as a guide by public school leadership, might serve to remedy past assumptions placed on student groups while raising the scope of student potential. An extreme, determining factor of work toward greater equity rests with school district leadership—particularly the highest level of local leadership—which is the board of education. Gene Maeroff (2010), the late founding director of the Hechinger Institute, affirmed this reality by noting:

Reformers sally forth as if school boards did not exist and as if top-down solutions could be implemented by fiat. School boards, though, despite having lost considerable authority in recent decades to state and federal officials, still have the ability to determine the extent to which reforms will even be attempted. Anyone seeking to improve schools ignores the power of school boards at some peril (p. 3).

School boards have at their access educational specialists, monitoring data, local perspectives, and the ability to directly engage communities. Bypassing or removing school board leadership as a reform agent alienates communities from reform and hinders needed change from occurring. Analyzing board leadership toward equity or any other topic requires an understanding of the underlying structures, obligation, and measures of effectiveness. These structures are found in sound adherence and application to school board governance (Illinois Association of School Boards, 2019).

The focus on school board governance provided the boundaries within which school boards in this study operated. These boundaries encompassed avenues authorized and delegated to Illinois school boards by state statute. In addition to state statute, these boundaries entailed adaptations rooted in the Policy Governance Model of John Carver (Carver, 2000). As such, the initial framework stands as a fusion of theory, statute, and functionality. The initial framework derives from the Illinois Association of School Boards, and it is labeled, *Foundational Principles of Effective Governance* (Illinois Association of School Boards, 2019). School boards studied in this research operated within the scope of these principles when planning and advancing their approaches toward equity and cultural competencies.

An exposition of this initial framework stems from the origin of Illinois school board authority—state statutes. Illinois state statutes describe the expectations of school boards. “The school board shall direct, through policy, the superintendent in his or her charge of the administration of the school district” (105 Illinois Compiled Statute 5/10-16.7 {2006}). “It is the duty of a school board [t]o adopt and enforce all necessary rules for the management and government of the public schools of their district” (105 Illinois Compiled Statute 5/10-20.5 {1979}). These two statutory expectations of school board roles promote crafting a framework from which entities within the district operate. These two statutory expectations also emphasize the role of generating an overarching vision or goals for the district rests with the school board. Given these two expectations, school boards serve as a guardian for the tenets of public education, particularly providing quality education for all—microcultures and the macroculture.

The necessity of public education and its platform highlight its role and point to this institution serving as a great equalizer in both preserving democratic tenets and fostering egalitarianism (Mann, 1848). Consequently, the public education system should promote

equitable approaches, and if components of the system run counter to these approaches, then its authorized leadership or its school boards should be the agents to return or overhaul the system back to its original aim.

The obligation of a school board consists of the act of effective governance (Carver, 2000). The role of a school board embodies the results of effective governance. This role involves a six-fold responsibility linked to the Policy Governance Model of John Carver (2000). This governance model, applied to public school boards, refers to the *Foundational Principles of Effective Governance* (Illinois Association of School Boards, 2019). The *Foundational Principles of Effective Governance* (2019) place fundamental duties upon a school board, and these duties are:

1. The Board Clarifies the District Purpose.
2. The Board Connects with the Community.
3. The Board Employs a Superintendent.
4. The Board Delegates Authority.
5. The Board Monitors Performance.
6. The Board Takes Responsibility for Itself. (p. 1-2)

The first duty, *The Board Clarifies the District Purpose*, refers to the board listening to the community to detect community values about education that will be used to craft clear, overarching, district goals (Illinois Association of School Boards, 2019). Within these values, such priorities as every student can learn and providing a multicultural education emerge. Values such as these are implanted into the essential focuses of the district known as the district purpose (Illinois Association of School Boards, 2017). Some refer to this district purpose as ends, inclusive of core values, core beliefs, mission statements, vision statements, and board



goals. It is the district's purpose that answers board questions of “who, gets what benefits, and for how much” (Illinois Association of School Boards, 2017, p. 1). These questions embody initial points of consideration and action from school boards on public/district business matters.

It is the district’s purpose that draws attention to the two primary concerns of a board: student learning and organizational effectiveness. It is the district’s purpose that is the common thread interwoven to every component or activity in the district, otherwise known as *comprehensive goal alignment*. Since many boards strive to establish the district purpose early, this Foundational Principle represents a profound opportunity for district leadership committed to ensuring an equitable education for all (United States Department of Education, 2014b). Enactment of this principle allows the district leaders to identify community values relative to education and fit those values into district priorities. This fit involves boards merging institutional purpose with realistic feasibility in order to attain desired outcomes for students. Also, as boards work through data collection and interact to detect educational values of the community, other community needs, such as needs associated classes, religious customs, family dynamics, and more, tend to emerge. These emerging areas of association directly relate to the delivery of expected outcomes for students, and their connecting needs contribute to the depth of the district's purpose or the equitable awareness of a district.

The second duty, *The Board Connects with the Community*, refers to the board developing a systematic approach to engage in a two-way dialogue with the entire community regarding educational matters and/or the district (Illinois Association of School Boards, 2019). The act of connecting with the community is called *community engagement*, and it is defined as “the process by which school boards actively involve diverse citizens in dialogue, deliberation, and collaborative thinking around common concerns for their public schools (Illinois Association

of School Boards, 2018).” The intent of community engagement centers on collecting and sharing information, but it also includes establishing trust between the school board, the superintendent, the district staff, and the community. The contribution of this board role toward more equitable education stems from a dominant interest of the elected board to listen and address owner concerns.

Illinois school board governance stresses the terms *owner* and *customer* among school board members to draw role distinctions between the priorities of boards and superintendents. In matters of board governance—to which board members should exclusively adhere—owner concerns should be prioritized over customer concerns (Illinois Association of School Boards, 2015). Owner concerns include those issues held by district owners, who are the taxpayers and/or the general stakeholders of the district. Owner concerns differ from customer concerns. Customer concerns include issues brought to boards regarding services offered by the district. Examples of customer concerns would be a parent complaining to a board member regarding the location of a school bus stop or a parent complaining to a board member about the grade a student received from a teacher. The board values both owner concerns and customer concerns, but the board relies on established policy to address matters about issues with service to its customers. An example that confirms this is the existing policy that references the need to follow a district chain of command for concerns related to district services.

Regarding equitable education, boards desire to hear from community members or owners to ascertain ways the board can better address their concerns and serve the broader public good. One example of a community engagement approach would entail the establishment of a community advisory committee for a specific issue before the school board. The board would identify a representative from each facet of the community, including representatives from the

community who have been silent voices relative to district involvement. The board would also identify two members to be active on this committee. This committee would receive information pertaining to the issue of interest to the board and provide insight on community views with committee members acting as educators and/or surveyors of the community on the issue. Ultimately, this committee could be used to provide a position or recommendation to the board.

This example provides four approaches of community engagement to which a board may opt to explore—to inform, to involve, to consult, or to collaborate—but an ongoing board acknowledgment of all community voices stands as paramount to district adaptability with factors that shift community values (Illinois Association of School Boards, 2018). With national statistics of public schools affirming that 46% of its students are classified in one or more minority ethnicity categories (Aud et al., 2011), with statistics revealing that 84% of educators are classified as being White (Feistritzer, 2011), and with 18% of the national populations not speaking English in the home (US Census Bureau, 2003), prioritization of a public education system committed to sustained equity presents viability to a system laden with growing challenges with which to contend.

The third duty, *The Board Employs a Superintendent*, refers to the board being intricately and directly involved in the personnel decision of one employee—the Superintendent (Illinois Association of School Boards, 2019). All other personnel positions are filled with board consideration of specific recommendations. The Board’s employee—the Superintendent—makes a recommendation with rationales to the board, and the board responds by voting *yay* or *nay*. The link to equitable approaches with this Foundational Principle starts with the board valuing and being committed to having a district that enables the same level of access and outcomes for all students served within the district purpose. With this initial step embedded in

the district purpose, the board can incorporate interview questions and desired/anticipated responses reflecting the theme of equitable education and cultural competencies. As the board moves to employ a superintendent, it must select a person whom the board believes is compatible and capable of proposing strategies that will allow equity-focused ends to be achieved within a window of time.

The fourth duty, *The Board Delegates Authority*, refers to the board recognizing that competent educational specialists are needed to carry out strategies that will allow the board's vision to come to fruition (Illinois Association of School Boards, 2019). Just as the delegate powers in the United States Constitution specify the boundaries of the federal government and the reserved powers of the United States Constitution grant both flexibilities coupled with authority for states to have domain over certain functions, a similar delegation method is followed by state governments to local jurisdictions relative to education. State statutes and undrafted topics related to education warrant the state government holding local school boards responsible for everything that occurs within a district jurisdiction. A board adheres to this delegation model and delegates the necessary authority to its employee—the superintendent. Likewise, the superintendent follows this model to recommend essential personnel to the board for hiring consideration and placement in areas to aid in the attainment of board goals or ends. This Foundational Principle links with equitable approaches of a district through its identification of personnel committed to complying with the vision of the board. This link is also apparent when the Board grants personnel the needed authority to bring the Board's purposes to fruition through institutional change. Moreover, this principle stresses the importance of the Board pairing delegation and trust for educational specialists with accountability and compliance to the district's purpose.

The fifth duty, *The Board Monitors Performance*, refers to the board using objective data to ascertain the rate of progress in achieving its goals or ends for the district (Illinois Association of School Boards, 2019). Inclusive in this principle is an understanding that objective data stands as a basis for determining validity. The link between this principle and equitable approaches of a district involves the board weighing the success rate of district initiatives that address matters of equity. The monitoring component allows the board to critique its ends and to determine if clarity exists in its efforts. The monitoring component can also aid the board in determining if redefining its goals or district purpose is necessary.

The sixth and final duty, *The Board Takes Responsibility for Itself*, refers to a board accepting responsibility for its structures, behavior, as well as its activities (Illinois Association of School Boards, 2019). This principle includes the board acting through established protocols that will aid a board in maintaining a continuity of leadership despite changes in board membership and in maintaining board efficiency in its work. The link between this principle and equitable approaches for a district is rooted in common board structures that enable a board member to be supplied with answers to questions and access to resources within the scope of his/her board member role. The link is also rooted in the creation and implementation of the processes employed by the board to place an equity proposal on the agenda for consideration.

The *Foundational Principles of Effective Governance* (Illinois Association of School Boards, 2017) serves as a standard for the optimal performance of Illinois public school boards. The application of these principles enables the reach of board actions to encompass students, the district staff, the community, and the superintendent. Due to Illinois school board members being elected public servants, *politics* bears mentioning. Politics is a reality when any position decides on resource allocation, including the school board. Although Illinois school board

members run without partisan political affiliation, the push of individual agendas without regard for sound governance limits board and governance team functionality. Effective school boards arise by including and involving all seven board members with advisement from the superintendent (National School Board Association, 2011). This united approach, rooted in sound governance concepts of the Foundational Principles of Effective Governance (Illinois Association of School Boards, 2019), provides a pathway for productivity that focuses on a greater good for the district, rather than on individual self-interest (Illinois Association of School Boards, 2019). Whereas this study focused on the approaches of select-governance teams toward greater equity, a byproduct of this study revealed the compatibility of sound governance to team intent, team actions, and team efficacy. The presence of this compatibility will be explored and supported through research methods that yield commonalities in outcomes.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

Researchers who seek to understand the interpretations of individuals from a set of experiences use qualitative research methods. Merriam (2009) affirmed this by stating, “qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (p. 13). Qualitative research enables the underlying, intangible, value-laden, humanistic factors such as culture and behaviors to emerge, to be identified, and to be explored relative to the topic being researched. Even more, qualitative research methods allow for greater depth of research to occur through analyses of factors that go beyond the validation of issues and strategies (Bickman & Rog, 2009). The depth of qualitative research is found in the expressiveness of subjects about identified issues. As Bickman and Rog (2009) noted, qualitative research “strives to improve our understanding of a problem, with the intent of contributing to the solution of that problem” (p. x). Noting these attributes of qualitative research, the researcher engaged in an exploration of school board efficacy related to goals and strategies linked to educational equity. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to analyze goals and the efficacy of board strategies authorized by selected Illinois school boards toward achieving greater educational equity through the frameworks of Change Theory and Social Justice Advocacy.

Selecting qualitative methodology for this study enabled a more comprehensive investigation into the systemic processes of public education that contribute to existing inequities. It also enabled an exploration of strategies Illinois school boards used to consider and enact policies to achieve the desired outcome of the school board. The comprehensiveness of this study derived from the flexibility of research to delve into the qualitative inquiry of how an

issue surfaced as well as how the situation was addressed. This flexibility was affirmed by Creswell (1994) in a description denoting qualitative research as “an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem based on building a complex, holistic picture formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting” (p. 2). In addition, this methodology enabled multiple aspects of problematic systems to be dissected using the data and accounts from the participants, currently charged with advancing the boards’ goals. Open-ended inquiries in semi-structured interviews enabled a holistic view of the studied dynamics. Each question was posed to each interviewee, with each response analyzed to identify patterns that account for similarities and differences in goals and outcomes. As noted by Warren and Karner (2005) and Johnson (2002), interviewee responses to the initial research questions may require follow-up questions to be asked in order to understand the complete meaning of participant responses and avoid assumptions being made about interviewee responses. The research questions guiding this study are as follows:

1. How does a school board stay within its statutory and policy-stipulated roles to set goals addressing areas of identified, in-district inequity?
2. How does a governance team ensure board efficacy with the strategies devised and enacted by the superintendent?
3. How does a school board promote change to address identified, in-district inequity working inclusively with the community?
4. How does a school board promote change to address identified, in-district inequity with staff buy-in to the process?
5. How does a school board prioritize its goals to achieve greater educational equity?

Each research question was designed to bring forth specific thoughts, plans, justifications,



and reinforcements regarding the participant's thoughts about systematic reform toward equity. The qualitative nature of these questions enabled the capturing of multiple interpretations of events contributing to outcomes. After all, the benefit of a qualitative approach is the production of detailed descriptions that capture how individuals experience a research issue. The resulting descriptive material provides an affective perspective on the human side along with revealing underlying, abstract factors that may not be apparent or in physical form (Mack, Woodsong, Macqueen, Guest, & Namey, 2005). In addition, the weighing of the school board and/or governance team activities against established school board roles may offer deducible approaches; however, the qualitative nature of this research allowed for further probing that yielded unforeseen rationales and outcomes. In short, allowances are made within qualitative research for a retreat from the confines of quantitative research, which prioritize generalization and uniformity as determinants of legitimacy. This flexibility in research added to this study and led to a collection of data containing full details, including where, how, and under what circumstances a phenomenon derived, evolved, and fared. Furthermore, these allowances for some deviation from traditional quantitative research approaches promoted the analyses of multiple—and in some cases—contrasting interpretations on areas of district prioritization among school boards. As Geertz (1973) described this process:

If anthropological interpretation is constructing a reading of what happens, then to divorce it from what happens—from what in this time or that place specific people say, what they do, what is done for them, from the whole vast business of the world's to divorce it from its application and render it vacant. A good interpretation of anything—a poem, a history, a ritual, an institution, a society—takes us to the heart of that of which it is the interpretation (p. 17).

The qualitative nature of this research considered a host of dimensions involving rationales for reform, developed strategies, community response, and board actions. Understanding each perspective captures points the board weighed to reach final action.

The design of these questions centered on demonstrating how school boards operating within a set standard of governance may achieve outcomes from a focus of school board action within their specified roles. The interviewees' responses presented opportunities to gauge the level of understanding and application a collective school board, and individual school board members exhibit in work to reform their branch of systemic public education. The researcher analyzed responses, plans, and actions of interviewees, boards, and governance teams, using established Illinois school board governance standards called the Foundational Principles of Effective Governance (Illinois Association of School Boards, 2019).

Mack et al. (2005) noted, prioritization of the collected data—expected and unexpected—lends itself to a thorough comprehension of the outcome detailed in a study. Addressing the research questions in this study provided insight into the processes and priorities of school boards regarding inequities within their systems. These questions also presented an opportunity to explore the extent to which board plans and actions toward greater equity coincide with the tenets of Social Justice Advocacy. As defined by Bennett (2017), educational equity refers to “the just and fair distribution of resources based upon students’ needs” (p. 13). This definition provided the outcome being pursued by boards, and the definition serves as the ultimate measurement used in this study to ascertain systemic reform effectiveness. Similarly, plans and/or actions of boards fitting the definitions, characteristics, and values of social justice and advocacy served as quality indicators of a board’s efforts to address inequities among disenfranchised student groups and to maintain a commitment of continuous success for all

(Klugman, 2010). As expressed by Carroll (2004), advocating for Social Justice “requires resource equity, fairness, and respect for diversity, as well as the eradication of existing forms of social oppression” (p. 32). As a public body charged with charting the district direction and upholding democratic tenets, school boards serve as ideal catalysts for equity reforms. Within this study, participating school boards and superintendents will possess a commitment to Social Justice for all and ensure individualized achievement.

Deciphering the crux of this form of advocacy and its tie to qualitative study requires understanding its origin. The origin of Social Justice Advocacy stems from its component words—social and justice. The early practice of social justice entailed a focus on individual acts leading to a collective or common good, particularly acts benefitting people lacking certain skills or means. Later democratic application of social justice entailed promoting a position of protection for those disadvantaged by a system using government intervention. Social Justice Advocacy would also entail standing ready to intervene with governmental systems if the government acted outside the scope of a common good allotted to and benefitting all. The origins of this framework hold true, presently, in that Social Justice Advocacy strives to ensure meaning in the acts that impact individual rights as well as those that result in inequities. Social Justice Advocacy is a framework that practices vigilance through recurring activism aimed at readjusting or overhauling systems promoting disenfranchisement. The framework’s initial stage begins with an investigation of underlying causes of inequities within the system-in-question and then advances to a pursuit of routes that elevate the power of the disadvantaged. The vigilance and protectionism within the meaning of Social Justice Advocacy lend itself to ongoing explorations revealing and resolving issues for the betterment of those impacted—thus benefiting the overall society. This exploration of connected factors to answer “what,” “why,” and “how”

are indicative of a qualitative focus (Agee, 2009).

Both the Change Theory Framework and Social Justice Advocacy Framework uphold the qualitative methodology and the research approaches utilized for this study. The research design used phenomenological and narrative approaches, which have a thin line of distinction. These approaches enable “the collection of extensive data on many variables over an extended period of time, in a naturalistic setting, in order to gain insights not possible using other types of research” (Gay & Airasian, 2000, p. 627). The narrative approach entails how the research participant shares and grasps his or her experiences, along with how those experiences were influenced by other factors. Phenomenological approaches entail using processes to work toward insight on a particular phenomenon (van Manen, 1990).

This research design includes analyzing the phenomenon and its contributing factors exclusive from the research participants, along with their experiences. A narrative approach allowed for the collection and comparison of accounts as they related to the personal and professional experiences of an individual governance team member (Czarniawska, 2004). The experiences of individual participants with issues of equity and acting within the scope of school board governance identified influences contributing to the overall perspective and actions of the board with matters of equity and systemic reform. These experiences pointed to differing motivations for courses taken, such as prioritization and distribution of resources to student subgroups.

In contrast, the phenomenological approach allowed for the exploration of how the individual experiences formed meaning and applied to an issue or phenomenon impacting the study group. Phenomenological approaches center on reflective analyses of life-world experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Von Eckartsberg, 1986). In this study, the issue or phenomenon

involved a more significant look into a collective understanding of governance and equity in the context of district deficiencies. The collected data, in the form of interviews and observational notes, presented a comprehensive view of the challenges, resolutions, plans, and actions undertaken by a board to remedy issues and to change its system. This study's intended outcomes were to identify commonalities in planning and strategies of school boards and governance teams as the findings relate to board governance along with the frameworks of Change Theory and Social Justice Advocacy. Other boards interested in enacting systemic equity reform could gain insight into dynamics and remedies to expand the rate of creativity surrounding equitable solutions for public education from these desired outcomes. The outcomes reinforced the study's goals to understand the meanings of human experiences (Creswell, 1998) and to explore concepts from new and fresh perspectives (Cohen, Kahn, & Steeves, 2000; Sanders, 1982).

Philosophical assumptions drawn in this research derive from a paradigm of pragmatism. Those who assert this school of thought believe that the value of all components within this study along with the outcome stem from their practical application. In exploring the inequities present in public education, it is necessary to dwell upon system impacts by using the realities revealed in data, and the experiences lived by both the district decision-makers and stakeholders. Addressing inequities of any sort requires understanding the system along with the contributing factors of the system tainting reality. For this reason, this study targets specialists in Illinois localities with greater familiarity and knowledge of institutional needs—school boards and superintendents. If attaining optimally-performing systems with equitable outcomes stand as the desired reality, working to reform the existing system offers a more immediate return than re-creating the system. In short, followers of pragmatism work within reality or existing systems

and cultivate constant thought or reflection toward improvements, adaptations, and evolution of the system toward betterment (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018).

The ontological stance of this research stems from a position mirroring pragmatism. This stance highlights the importance of the need to work within the existing system and to consider the past actions, misdeeds, and oversights that plagued the public education system throughout its existence. Along these same lines, this stance highlights the equal importance of working within the existing system for reform because of evidence showing past systematic adaptations to an improved state can occur. As Creswell (2013) once stated, “Reality is what is useful, is practical, and ‘works’” (p. 36-37). Equity reform need not always involve a complete overhaul, but reform can utilize functional components of the current system to achieve desired ends.

The epistemological stance of this study addressed various viewpoints, perspectives, or realities held by research participants and stakeholders. The focal reality is a reality held by the participating governance teams. This point centers on a reality that areas of the public education system do not best serve all students—particularly subgroups—in a district. Examples of these areas are the availability of resources to student subgroups, resource distribution to student subgroups, student achievement, the opportunities afforded to students beyond academics, staff diversity, student discipline, and curricular diversity.

A contrasting reality that is present among staff and community members is that the status quo remains sufficient in meeting the needs of students. Those in agreement with this perspective add that student subgroup underachievement is linked to individual merit and effort rather than systemic effects. Another contrasting reality to the participating governance team is that stakeholders and some school board members have differing views on the re-prioritization of resources to meet the immediate needs of impacted students. Ultimately, deciphering the

realities in this study hinged on the sharing of opinions and perspectives between the governance team, staff, and community regarding the work proposed and acted upon by a school board.

The awareness of these multiple realities was made known to me during an interview and/or while observing governance team activities. Likewise, the axiological stance of this study was identified through identical means—interviews and observation. The prioritization of the values revealed by this study was determined by their affirmation to statute, policy, Illinois school board governance standards, and utilized the frameworks of Social Justice Advocacy and Change Theory.

### **Trustworthiness**

Readers of this study should note that the researcher is employed by the Illinois Association of School Boards as the Director of Field Service for three of the largest division or regions in the state. The researcher provides school boards and superintendents within his assigned divisions with professional support as well as advisement on matters of board governance, which encompass compliance to statutes, policies, and fulfillment of school board governance principles. Consequently, the proximity of the researcher to this research topic and to study participants will impact the conduct and results of this study. The researcher's beliefs surrounding this study are rooted within a professional expectation that the existing structures of the public education system can address issues such as educational inequities. Further, the researcher believes that all governmental levels support systemic public education and promote a conservative-oriented status quo that is capable yet slow to evolve toward change. Such beliefs may result in a bias toward the anticipated outcomes of the study.

Additionally, as the researcher has been previously acquainted with many of the participants, the use of the school boards or governance teams who are known to the researcher

leaves potential for a researcher bias due to a pre-existing working relationship forged with these individuals.

Although the researcher's familiarity with the research and its subjects may pose a potential bias threat, such familiarity with the subject of Illinois educational equity may also contribute positively to the research overall. For example, if interviewees and study participants hold a pre-existing, professional relationship with the researcher, they may be more likely to share greater detail due to pre-established trust. Moreover, the researcher's personal experience and knowledge of Illinois education equity efforts facilitated the contextualization of this study.

Although the results of this study are specific to the Illinois districts represented in the study, the researcher strove to ensure transparency throughout all stages of research. By providing thick description of the data collection and analysis processes, the researcher hopes to facilitate the replication of this study in other districts and states and gain comparative data. As with all qualitative methods, there is a risk of researcher bias in the reporting of the interview questions.

### **Participant Selection and Profiles**

The study sampling technique was purposive sampling. This sampling model allows for the intentional selection of research participants to fit the research objectives (Palys, 2008). In this study, this form of sampling ensured districts with varying inequities and different demographics were used to ensure districts with varying inequities and differing characteristics were included. The rationale for this course stemmed from a need to compare and contrast approaches as it relates to equity reform. This sampling and intense investigation involved governance teams serving districts with diverse student populations and exhibiting deficiency gaps among student subgroups. The need for this sampling technique derived from the limited



nature of school boards, which have intensely acted toward greater equity.

This study emphasized the role of the board in leading a systematic reform effort with implications beyond one standardized assessment. As such, selected school boards who expressed an interest in leading and addressing recurring inequities of their district served as sampling participants. It is noted that, as the employee of the school board, the superintendent of each participating district was deeply involved in working with the board to both advise and implement board-authorized measures.

Specifically, the participant selection criteria included the following types of inequities: existing achievement gaps among student subgroups when compared to white students; limited school funding when compared to the state average; and access to curriculum and activities.

*Profiles of the participating districts and governance teams.*

**District A**

This governance team's district had school funding below the state average, but re-prioritized and reallocated district resources to satisfy a need for more individualized support for each student. In addition, the district achieved recent increases in student performance among students of color. The 2017-2018 Illinois Report Card (2019) reports demographics data for District A, a Kindergarten through Grade Eight public district, as having an enrollment of 2,939 students. Racial/Ethnic Diversity among the students entailed a composition of 81.8% Hispanic students; 10.1%, Black students; 5.4%, White students; 1.5%, Asian students; 0.9%; two or more races, 0.2%; American Indian students. Eighty-nine percent were classified as low income; 17% classified as having an Individualized Education Plan (IEP); 30% classified in the domain of English Language Learners (ELL); 94% rate of student attendance; 9% rate of student mobility; 15% rate of chronic absenteeism; and 15% rate of chronic truancy. This district, at 88.5% of

low-income students, exceeds the state average of 49.4%. This district, at 1.3% homeless students, is below the 2% state average. This district, at 29.8% English Learners, exceeds the state average of 11.7%. This district, at 94.1% student attendance, exceeds the 93.9% state average. This district has a mobility rate—the percentage of students who have experienced at least one transfer in or out of the school since the first school day in October and the last day of school—consistently higher than the state averages over the past three years, with district data revealing in 2019: 9% of student enrollment; in 2018: 9% of student enrollment; and in 2017: 15% of student enrollment. Demographic distinctions in the mobility rate indicated higher rates when compared to the state average among White students (16% compared to 6%), Hispanic students (8% compared to 7%), Asian students (7% compared to 6%), students of two or more races (15% compared to 8%), English Learners (11% compared to 9%), Students with an IEP (11% compared to 10%), and both males (9% compared to 7%), as well as females (9% compared to 6%). State mobility rate averages for the past three years were in 2019: 7% of student enrollment; in 2018: 7% of student enrollment; in 2017: 12% of student enrollment. This district has a chronic absenteeism rate of 15%—indicating students who miss 10% or more of school days—below the state average of 18%. Higher rates of chronic absenteeism existed among Black students (27%), Hispanic students (18%), American Indian students (33%), students identifying as two or more races (18%), Low income students (23%), Students with an IEP (25%) when compared to White students (13%) and the district average (17%). This district has a chronic truancy rate—indicating students who miss 5% or more of school days per year without a valid excuse—of 14.8% that exceeds the 11.2% state average. A four-year trend in the mobility rate exists with higher rates when compared to the state average in 2015 (12% of all students compared to the 9% state average), in 2016 (11% of all students compared to the 10%

state average), in 2017 (14% of all students compared to the 11% state average), and in 2018 (15% of all students compared to the 11% state average). Data indicated a four-year trend in the persistence of an achievement gap among students classified as nonlow income and low income. An achievement gap notes “the persistent difference in academic performance between different ethnic and racial groups, income levels, gender, and special student groups (Illinois State Board of Education, 2019, para. 1). Specifically, the data showed achievement gaps existed in the subjects of English Language Arts and Mathematics based on student performance on a state assessment called the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers or PARCC Assessment.

English Language Arts comparison from 2015-2018 revealed overall growth in student performance on the PARCC Assessment in the subject of English Language Arts, with data showing:

- 2015: 3% exceeding standards, 27% met standards, 31% approached standards, 24% partially met standards, 15% did not meet standards.
- 2016: 4% exceeding standards, 32% met standards, 31% approached standards, 21% partially met standards, 13% did not meet standards.
- 2017: 6% exceeding standards, 36% met standards, 30% approached standards, 18% partially met standards, 10% did not meet standards.
- 2018: 7% exceeding standards, 34% met standards, 29% approached standards, 17% partially met standards, 12% did not meet standards.

Mathematics comparison from 2015-2018 revealed overall growth in student performance on the PARCC Assessment in the subject of Mathematics, with data showing:

- 2015: 1% exceeding standards, 15% met standards, 29% approached standards, 37%

- partially met standards, 18% did not meet standards.
- 2016: 2% exceeding standards, 20% met standards, 30% approached standards, 33% partially met standards, 15% did not meet standards.
  - 2017: 2% exceeding standards, 21% met standards, 33% approached standards, 29% partially met standards, 16% did not meet standards.
  - 2018: 3% exceeding standards, 23% met standards, 31% approached standards, 29% partially met standards, 15% did not meet standards.

The data showed that a majority of the students tested did not meet state standards over a four-year time span, although growth was noted. The data also indicated that consistent performance rates indicating deficiencies among demographic groups support governance team efforts toward equity reform to offer personalized approaches to aid pupils in academic achievement deemed proficient by the district and state. Moreover, the presence of an achievement gap in all assessment subjects further justified reforms. Achievement gaps among district subgroup demographics persisted within a four-year trend, but this gap trend narrowed over three years—2015, 2016, and 2017—only to expand in 2018 in English Language Arts among Hispanic and low-income demographics. Furthermore, the IEP demographic noted a two-year gap growth in English Language Arts along with three years when the gap continually grew beyond the state average. In addition, this district consistently achieved lower achievement gap rates than the state average within the demographics of Black to White, low income to nonlow income, and IEP to non-IEP. The state average and the district gap rates among these demographics were high gap rates such as state averages of -14 to -30 and district rates ranging from -9 to -42 when compared to lower state averages of -7 to -22 and district gap rates of -2 to -13 among Hispanic to White in both English Language Arts and Mathematics. These findings support both a state-

wide and a district-wide need to contend with these gaps.

## **District B**

This governance team's district had school funding below the state average. In addition, achievement gaps exist between students of color and White students. The district has an overrepresentation of students of color receiving student disciplinary measures. The 2017-2018 Illinois Report Card (2019) reports demographics data for District B, a Kindergarten through Grade Eight public district, as having an enrollment of 11,444 students. Racial/Ethnic Diversity among the students entailed a composition of 60.1% Hispanic students; 23.2% Black students; 11.2% White students; 0.4% Asian students; 5.0% students of two or more races; 0.1% American Indian students. Ninety-six, point two percent were classified as low income; 14% classified as having an Individualized Education Plan (IEP); 24.7% classified in the domain English Language Learners (ELL); 93.9% rate of student attendance; 10% rate of student mobility; 25% rate of chronic absenteeism; and 19.4% rate of chronic truancy. This district, at 88.5% of low-income students, exceeds the state average of 49.4%. This district, at 2% homeless students, is even with the 2% state average. This district, at 24.7% English Language Learners, exceeds the state average of 11.7%. This district, at 93.9% student attendance, matches the 93.9% state average. This district has a mobility rate—the percentage of students who have experienced at least one transfer in or out of the school since the first school day in October and the last day of school—consistently higher than the state averages over the past three years, with district data revealing 2018: 10% of student enrollment, 2017: 9% of student enrollment, 2016: 16% of student enrollment. Demographic distinctions in the mobility rate indicated higher rates when compared to the state average among White students (10% compared to 5%), Hispanic students (7% compared to 7%), Asian students (16% compared to 6%), students identifying as two or

more races (13% compared to 8%), English Language Learners (8% compared to 9%), Students with an IEP (13% compared to 10%), and both males (10% compared to 7%) as well as females (10% compared to 6%). District mobility rate averages for the past three years were 2018: 10% of student enrollment, 2017: 9% of student enrollment, 2016: 16% of student enrollment. This district has a chronic absenteeism rate of 25%—indicating students who miss 10% or more of school days—below the state average of 17%. This district has a chronic truancy rate—indicating students who miss 5% or more of school days per year without a valid excuse—of 25%, that exceeds the 11.2% state average. A four-year trend in the mobility rate exists with higher rates when compared to the state average in 2015 (16% of all students compared to the 12% state average), in 2016 (16% of all students compared to the 12% state average), in 2017 (9% of all students compared to the 7% state average), and in 2018 (10% of all students compared to the 7% state average). Data indicated a four-year trend in the persistence of an achievement gap among students in English Language Arts and Mathematics across all demographics. This district narrowed the achievement gap in all demographics over four years—2015-2018. Despite the gap narrowing, the widest gaps among student demographics include Black students and Hispanic students when compared to White students. The English Language Arts achievement gap for Black students when compared to White students measured -23% in 2015, -21% in 2016, -21% in 2017, and -20%.in 2018, The English Language Arts achievement gap for Hispanic students when compared to White students measured -15% in 2015, -15% in 2016, -16% in 2017, and -14%.in 2018, Another achievement gap included student demographics with an IEP. The English Language Arts achievement gap for the student demographic with an IEP, when compared to student demographics without an IEP, measured -26% in 2015, -21% in 2016, -20% in 2017, and -19%.in 2018. Unlike the English Language

Arts achievement gap. The Mathematics achievement gap within these student demographics exhibited little to any narrowing over a four-year timespan with the greatest narrowing entailing 1% retraction. Specifically, the data showed achievement gaps existed in the subjects of English Language Arts and Mathematics based on student performance on a state assessment called the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers or PARCC Assessment.

English Language Arts comparison from 2015-2018 revealed overall growth in student performance on the PARCC Assessment in the subject of English Language Arts, with data showing:

- 2015: 2% exceeding standards, 24% met standards, 29% approached standards, 25% partially met standards, 20% did not meet standards.
- 2016: 2% exceeding standards, 19% met standards, 27% approached standards, 27% partially met standards, 25% did not meet standards.
- 2017: 2% exceeding standards, 20% met standards, 27% approached standards, 27% partially met standards, 25% did not meet standards.
- 2018: 1% exceeding standards, 18% met standards, 26% approached standards, 27% partially met standards, 27% did not meet standards.

Mathematics comparison from 2015-2018 revealed overall growth in student performance on the PARCC Assessment in the subject of Mathematics, with data showing:

- 2015: 1% exceeding standards, 16% met standards, 28% approached standards, 35% partially met standards, 20% did not meet standards.
- 2016: 1% exceeding standards, 17% met standards, 26% approached standards, 33% partially met standards, 23% did not meet standards.
- 2017: 1% exceeding standards, 17% met standards, 28% approached standards, 31%

- partially met standards, 23% did not meet standards.
- 2018: 1% exceeding standards, 15% met standards, 26% approached standards, 32% partially met standards, 26% did not meet standards.

The data showed that a majority of the students tested did not meet state standards over a four-year time span, although growth was noted. The data also showed that consistent performance rates indicating deficiencies among all demographic groups support governance team efforts toward equity reform. Moreover, the presence of an achievement gap in all assessment subjects further justifies reforms. Achievement gaps among district subgroup demographics persisted within a four-year trend, but this gap trend inconsistently narrowed over three years—2015, 2016, and 2017.

### **District C**

This governance team's district had school funding above the state average. This governance team's district, also, had little financial inequity and high levels of achievement among white students as well as students of color. However, achievement gaps exist between students of color and White students, along with students within low income and special education demographics. The 2017-2018 Illinois Report Card (2019) reports demographics data for District C, a Kindergarten through Grade Eight public district, as having an enrollment of 1,432 students. Racial/Ethnic Diversity among the students entailed a composition of 72.1% White students; 6.6% Black students; 10.1% Hispanic students; 5.3% Asian students; 0.2% American Indian students. Five-point-nine percent were classified as low-income; 13% classified as having an Individualized Education Plan (IEP); 2% classified in the domain of English Language Learners (ELL); 95.8% rate of student attendance; 1% rate of student mobility; 0% rate of chronic absenteeism; and 0% rate of chronic truancy. This district, at 5.9% low-income students,



is far below the state average of 49.4%. This district, at 0.4% homeless students, is far below the 2% state average. This district, educating 2% English Learners, has a percentage of students in this classification below the state average of 11.7%. This district, at 95.8% student attendance, is above the 93.9% state average. This district has a mobility rate—the percentage of students who have experienced at least one transfer in or out of the school since the first school day in October and the last day of school—far below state averages over the past three years, with district data revealing 2018: 1% of student enrollment, 2017: 3% of student enrollment, 2016: 2% of student enrollment. Demographic distinctions in the mobility rate indicated rates far below the state average among White students (1% compared to 5%), Hispanic students (4% compared to 7%), Asian students (1% compared to 6%), students identifying as two or more races (1% compared to 8%), English Learners (5% compared to 9%), Students with an IEP (2% compared to 10%), and both males (1% compared to 7%) as well as females (1% compared to 6%). District mobility rate averages for the past three years were 2018: 1% of student enrollment, 2017: 3% of student enrollment, 2016: 2% of student enrollment. Data indicated a four-year trend in the persistence of an achievement gap among Black students, Hispanic students, and students with an IEP in English Language Arts and Mathematics. Although these demographics exhibited a high rate of proficiency, the rates of nonproficiency exceeded the rates of the demographics with the highest proficiency rates in English Language Arts and Mathematics—White students and Asian students. This district narrowed the achievement gap in all demographics over four years—2015-2018. Specifically, the data showed achievement gaps existed in the subjects of English Language Arts and Mathematics based on student performance on a state assessment called the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers or PARCC Assessment.

English Language Arts comparison from 2015-2018 revealed overall growth in student

performance on the PARCC Assessment in the subject of English Language Arts, with data showing:

- 2015: 26% exceeding standards, 50% met standards, 15% approached standards, 6% partially met standards, 3% did not meet standards.
- 2016: 31% exceeding standards, 46% met standards, 15% approached standards, 6% partially met standards, 2% did not meet standards.
- 2017: 26% exceeding standards, 47% met standards, 18% approached standards, 6% partially met standards, 3% did not meet standards.
- 2018: 25% exceeding standards, 46% met standards, 20% approached standards, 7% partially met standards, 3% did not meet standards.

Mathematics comparison from 2015-2018 revealed overall growth in student performance on the PARCC Assessment in the subject of Mathematics, with data showing:

- 2015: 14% exceeding standards, 48% met standards, 24% approached standards, 10% partially met standards, 4% did not meet standards.
- 2016: 15% exceeding standards, 48% met standards, 22% approached standards, 11% partially met standards, 4% did not meet standards.
- 2017: 13% exceeding standards, 51% met standards, 22% approached standards, 9% partially met standards, 5% did not meet standards.
- 2018: 12% exceeding standards, 51% met standards, 24% approached standards, 10% partially met standards, 3% did not meet standards.

The data showed that a majority of the students tested did meet state standards over a four-year time span, but an achievement gap in both English Language Arts and Mathematics persisted with Black students, Hispanic students, and students with an IEP.

## **District D**

This governance team's district had school funding above the state average. This governance team's district passed a tax referendum that enabled an infusion of resources directed at equity reform. This district has a state assessment participation rate 10% below the state average due to parents opting their students out of standardized testing on philosophical principles. This phenomenon along with achievement gaps among students of color, students in special education, and students in the low-income demographics have contributed to underperformance within this district.

The 2017-2018 Illinois Report Card (2019) reports demographics data for District D, a Kindergarten through Grade Eight public district, as having an enrollment of 6,165 students. Racial/Ethnic Diversity among the students entailed a composition of 53.9% White students; 17.2% Black students; 12.5% Hispanic students; 12.5% students identifying as two or more races; 3.8% Asian students; with 17.5% classified as low-income; 13% classified as having an Individualized Education Plan (IEP); 11.7% classified in the domain English Language Learners (ELL); with a 95.6% rate of student attendance; 4% rate of student mobility; 8% rate of chronic absenteeism; and 4.7% rate of chronic truancy. This district, at 17.5% of low-income students, is far below the state average of 49.4%. This district, at 1.1% homeless students, is below the 2% state average. This district, at 2.6% English Language Learners, exceeds the state average of 11.7%. This district, at 95.8% student attendance, is far below the 93.9% state average. This district has a mobility rate—the percentage of students who have experienced at least one transfer in or out of the school since the first school day in October and the last day of school—far below state averages over the past three years, with district data revealing 2018: 4% of student enrollment, 2017: 4% of student enrollment, 2016: 5% of student enrollment.

Demographic distinctions in the mobility rate indicated rates below the state average in all demographics except Asian students and students identified as English Language Learners. Mobility rates surpassing state averages included Asian students (8% compared to 6%) and English Language Learners (20% compared to 9%). Mobility demographics below the state average were among White students (2% compared to 5%), Black students (10% compared to 14%), Hispanic students (6% compared to 7%), students identifying as two or more races (3% compared to 8%), students with an IEP (9% compared to 10%), and both males (5% compared to 7%) as well as females (4% compared to 6%). District mobility rate averages for the past three years were 2018: 1% of student enrollment, 2017: 3% of student enrollment, 2016: 2% of student enrollment. Data indicated a four-year trend in the persistence of an achievement gap among Black students, Hispanic students, students with an IEP, and students in the low income demographic within English Language Arts and Mathematics. This district narrowed the achievement gap in all demographics containing achievement gaps over four years—2015-2018. Specifically, the data showed achievement gaps existed in the subjects of English Language Arts and Mathematics based on student performance on a state assessment called the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers or PARCC Assessment.

English Language Arts comparison from 2015-2018 revealed overall growth in student performance on the PARCC Assessment in the subject of English Language Arts, with data showing:

- 2015: 17% exceeding standards, 51% met standards, 19% approached standards, 9% partially met standards, 4% did not meet standards.
- 2016: 10% exceeding standards, 45% met standards, 24% approached standards, 14% partially met standards, 8% did not meet standards.

- 2017: 9% exceeding standards, 42% met standards, 26% approached standards, 14% partially met standards, 8% did not meet standards.
- 2018: 7% exceeding standards, 35% met standards, 23% approached standards, 16% partially met standards, 12% did not meet standards.

Mathematics comparison from 2015-2018 revealed overall growth in student performance on the PARCC Assessment in the subject of Mathematics, with data showing:

- 2015: 10% exceeding standards, 39% met standards, 26% approached standards, 17% partially met standards, 7% did not meet standards.
- 2016: 9% exceeding standards, 40% met standards, 25% approached standards, 16% partially met standards, 10% did not meet standards.
- 2017: 8% exceeding standards, 38% met standards, 26% approached standards, 17% partially met standards, 11% did not meet standards.
- 2018: 8% exceeding standards, 33% met standards, 22% approached standards, 17% partially met standards, 12% did not meet standards.

The researcher used qualitative methods in order to gain insights into school board goals and strategies and to explore the overall efficacy of school boards in achieving improved equity in education. The frameworks of Change Theory and Social Justice Advocacy were used to guide the research, enabling the researcher to gain an understanding of the present state of equity efforts in the selected Illinois school districts, and the various factors that influenced the experiences and efficacy of the school board. Qualitative methods allowed the researcher the flexibility to fully explore the research topic, by providing a “holistic picture formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting” (Creswell 1994, p. 2). Semi-structured interviews among school board members and superintendents were conducted in

an attempt to gather firsthand insight and experiences related to equity improving efforts. After combining qualitative phenomenological and narrative methodologies, the researcher used content analysis strategies to inductively identify the themes and trends that emerged within the interview responses.

Through multiple stages of content analysis coding to identify commonalities in planning and strategies of school boards and governance teams as they relate to board governance, the researcher extracted meaning from the result themes and trends found within the data. In this chapter, the trends that emerged through the analysis process are described in detail, before considering the interpretations and implications of these findings in Chapter 5.

### **Demographics and Setting**

Twelve participants were selected to participate in this study and willingly completed semi-structured interviews with the researcher. All participants were associated with governance teams from one of four strategically selected Illinois school districts, either as school board members or as district superintendents. The participating governance teams include the following:

#### **Participant 1**

Participant 1 has served on the District B School Board for two years. This participant served as a newer board member who joined the board after the initial decision was made to pursue greater educational equity in the district.

#### **Participant 2**

Participant 2 has served on the District B School Board for eight years. This participant reflected upon historical civil rights events that transpired in the community needs and need to be witnessed within the community, as well as observable and statistical deficiencies in the district

as rationales for action toward greater reform.

### **Participant 3**

Participant 3 has served on the District B School Board for eight years. This participant provided insight into the evolution of mindsets among board members in determining the necessity for equity reform. This participant also provided insight on the criteria developed in the search for the superintendent leading the charge for greater reform with the board.

### **Participant 4**

Participant 4 has served as superintendent of the District B School Board for three years. This participant initiated the charge of the school board and district to advance toward greater equity reform, ensuring that board governance served as a framework for board leadership during this evolution.

### **Participant 5**

Participant 5 has served on the District C School Board for four years. This participant served on the board as steps toward equity reform implementation occurred. This participant noted the distinction of mindsets among community groups represented on ad hoc committees developed to gain insight on equity for the district.

### **Participant 6**

Participant 6 has served on the District C School Board for three years. This participant joined the board after the initial steps of equity reform implementation began. This participant had children in the district and shared the rationale of the board for seeking to support all students despite the district consistently meeting proficiency standards of the state.

### **Participant 7**

Participant 7 has served on the District A School Board for twelve years. This participant

attended the district as a student and had a parent who served on the school board for years prior to running for a seat. This participant shared the history of the district and the journey of the board in selecting the superintendent who led the charge for equity reform along with the unexpected successes reaped.

### **Participant 8**

Participant 8 served as the superintendent of the District A School Board for seven years. The selection and employment of this participant entailed planning and implementing equity reform. This participant provided essentials of the rationale, steps, and setbacks that occurred prior to encountering signs of progress with stages of reform.

### **Participant 9**

Participant 9 has served as superintendent of the District C School Board for eight years. This participant worked with a board member to devise a plan of action to address academic deficiencies embedded within student subgroup performance—despite having a district that consistently met proficiency. This participant devised strategies to fuse the board, the community, feeder districts, and staff in approaches that would provide ongoing support for equity reform.

### **Participant 10**

Participant 10 has served on the District D School Board for four years. This participant served as the board president who worked with the superintendent to lead the charge toward equity reform in the district. This participant provided a legal perspective on the mandate for equity reform within the district and the philosophical rationale of the board in advancing a first-time equity policy.



### **Participant 11**

Participant 11 has served on the District C School Board for eight years. This participant served as a board president and was the key board member in devising approaches that would fuse a majority of the community and staff in embracing equity reform. This participant worked heavily with the superintendent to ensure that reform stayed at the forefront of board and district priorities.

### **Participant 12**

Participant 12 has served on the District D School Board for twelve years. This participant served as the longest-serving board member on the board and provided both historical as well as current accounts of challenges to equity reform within the district. This participant had an integral role in present equity policy development and passage of a tax referendum that provided additional resources to the district, which supported reform.

Interviews were conducted in a convenient location familiar to the participants, in order to foster an environment in which the participants felt comfortable. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the interviews, further supporting a setting where participants felt safe and able to speak openly regarding their perceptions and experiences with educational equity. Anonymity was maintained throughout the study through the use of monikers to protect the identity of individuals and school districts.

### **Data Collection**

Before conducting the study, the research was first reviewed and approved by the researcher's Institution Review Board (IRB). Throughout the data collection period, the researcher used various tools to facilitate the data collection process. Once the study design was approved, and the IRB confirmed that the research posed minimal-to-no threat to the

participants, data were collected using purposive sampling methods. Purposive sampling allows for the intentional selection of research participants to fit the specific research objectives (Palys, 2008). Such strategic sampling methods enabled the researcher to identify and select districts that were characterized by varying levels of inequity. By ensuring that the selected districts and their governance boards were of a diverse background, the researcher was better equipped to assess the tools, strategies, and priorities of the different governance boards as they attempted to promote equity in their districts. Specifically, the participant selection criteria assessed the following types of inequities, when selecting districts for study: existing achievement gaps among student subgroups when compared to white students, limited school funding when compared to the state average, access to curriculum and activities, language proficiency, and district finance information.

The researcher was able to utilize his personal experiences and connections within the Illinois Association of School Boards in order to solicit participation from the twelve individuals in this study. The researcher strove to remain objective in his engagement with participants, despite personal connections to individuals and the subject matter. Semi-structured interviews were selected as the most suitable interview methodology due to the flexible nature of the interview design. While interview questions were designed to efficiently guide the interviews according to research goals, the overall semi-structured organization of the interview allowed both interviewer and interviewee to elaborate and clarify relevant topics that emerged through the course of the discussion. All interviews occurred in an office within the district central administrative complex of each district and were recorded in full using a recording device. In addition, the researcher took handwritten notes during the interviews. Following the completion of the interview, the recordings were transcribed into Microsoft Word files. The researcher then

compared the transcriptions with the handwritten notes to ensure accuracy.

In addition to engaging in interviews with the participants, the researcher observed the governance teams at various public locations, including publicly viewed board meetings, community forums, and other events. These observations provided the researcher with topics and themes regarding the teams' desired outcomes of systemic change, expanded insight into the goals and strategies of the governance team, as well as the team's interaction with the community.

The data analysis involved some statistical comparisons in the form of district-school demographics linked to district-state academic success, student characteristics, student subgroup success, achievement gap performance, district finance, as well as student attendance, and mobility test score comparisons. However, the bulk of the data was nonnumerical and centered on processes used by selected governance teams to bring about greater equity. The research setting was the natural setting of the participants. Specifically, observations of governance teams transpired in natural settings such as locations posted on school board meeting agendas and noted in announcements for committee meetings and staff meetings.

### **Data Coding and Analysis**

Following the completion of the data collection process, the first stage of data analysis involved organizing the raw data. Transcribed interview data were saved as Microsoft Word files, which were subsequently uploaded into NVivo software to facilitate the analysis process. NVivo enabled the researcher to systematically arrange and review his data files, thereby facilitating the coding and further organization of the data. Qualitative content analysis strategies were selected as most suitable for this study, due to the aims of the researcher, who sought to gain insight into the efficacy, priorities, and strategies pertaining to educational equity

in Illinois school districts. Specifically, the researcher relied upon a combination of phenomenology and narrative strategies to seek a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and perceptions of the participants regarding the selected phenomenon of improving educational equity within the district.

To begin the analysis process, the researcher conducted a preliminary reading of the texts in full. This initial consideration of the data served to familiarize the researcher with the data. Although coding had not yet been initiated, this stage of analysis was essential in allowing the researcher to gain a contextual understanding of the data, as well as to begin identifying broad topics and trends that repeatedly appeared within the data. Upon completing the initial data review, the researcher began coding. Interview responses were carefully read in turn and manually organized according to the topics and themes that emerged from within the text. The researcher used inductive coding methods, extracting codes from the texts as the themes emerged. Multiple stages of coding were conducted, with each coding round serving to further organize the data into more specific and meaningful groups. The codes that resulted from the multiple rounds of data organization represented those themes that were most significant and relevant to the research questions of this study.

Following the completion of the coding process, when the researcher felt content that the data organization was an accurate representation of the data population as a whole, he performed one final review of the texts and resulting codes. It was during this review stage, that coding groups were revised, thus ensuring that the results remained true to the data population. At this stage, coding groups were combined, adapted, or eliminated, in order to most clearly organize the results. The themes that resulted in this study are a result of multiple systematic and meaningful stages of analysis conducted upon the data and are considered representative

selections from the data population.

Chapter 4 presents the results of the study, contains the themes linked to each research question, and offers a discussion of equity reform using research yielded from data collection and analysis strategies.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

Chapter 4 presents the results of the study, including the themes that emerged from within the texts via the qualitative analysis process. The thematic discussion has been organized according to the study's research questions. Each theme is described and substantiated using textual evidence from the data collection and analysis phases.

#### **Themes related to the roles of governance teams in addressed educational equity**

This section includes each theme that emerged for the first research question of the study: how does a school board stay within its statutory and policy-stipulated roles to set goals addressing areas of identified, in-district inequity?

##### ***Governance teams unanimously acknowledge a need for equity in their district***

All twelve participants stated that they feel a need for improved equity exists within their district. Not only did participants affirm that their districts are in need of improving equity for all students, but the majority of responses utilized strong vocabulary in their discussion of equity needs, such as, "A need for equity, absolutely, exists in public education" (Participant 5) and, "There is definitely a need for equity" (Participant 3). The use of strong vocabulary to affirm their opinion of district equity demonstrates the seriousness with which the governance team members are approaching the equity issues. Rather than merely acknowledging the existence of equity issues, the respondents express a fervent belief that equity is a priority of their governance team.

##### ***Governance teams attribute inequities to changing demographics within the district***

Within their discussion of the need for equity improvements, many governance team members attributed equity needs as related to changing demographics within the district. Five of the

twelve participants explicitly referenced the impact of changing community demographics upon equity in their schools. For example, Participant 1 stated:

We have changing demographics in our educational system. There has been an increase in Latin, Spanish-speaking families in the district; there have been changes in our public housing, and it is still happening, so there is definitely a need for equity to be at the front of our mission in a lot of our actions to address those needs in the district.

This governance team member highlights the increase in Spanish-speaking families within the district as one example where improvements are needed to ensure equity. With an increase in Spanish-speakers within the district, the schools need to adapt their resources in order to better support the needs of the families that comprise the schools. As demographics are changing within the district, so should the resources that are made available to those families.

Another example of attributing equity needs to changing demographics can be seen in the following statement of Participant 7:

In our district, over the last 20 years or so, there was a huge shift in the racial make-up of the district. . . . When I went to this district, we had a fair amount of White students, and the amount of Hispanics and African-Americans was very small. Now, we have shifted. We are probably close to 85% Hispanic, 10-11% African American, 3-5% Caucasian. As a school board and a superintendent, we realize that, and that has given us more of a focus on equity.

Similarly to Participant 1, Participant 7 describes the changes that have taken place within the demographic makeup of the district, which has, in turn, resulted in an increased prioritization upon equity efforts by the governance team.

***Members of the governance team differentiate between “equity” and “equality”***

In discussing their definitions and priorities pertaining to equity, governance team members commonly differentiated between “equity” and “equality” within the district. Participant 3 succinctly summarizes this idea, defining equity by stating, “Educational equity—my definition—would be providing what each child needs to succeed, not equally, but based on their needs.” Governance teams included in this study defined *equity* not in the ability to provide equal resources for all students, but for all students to be provided the resources required in order to achieve their potential. This means that students that are less privileged will require additional resources. Therefore, providing *equal* resources for all students would not be an equitable solution. Participant 11 also depicted this sentiment in their response, stating:

[Equity] means the amount of resources necessary based on a kid’s characteristics for that kid to succeed academically. So, equity sure doesn’t mean equal and different kids come to the table with different skills, different backgrounds, etc., and the educational system needs to recognize that in its resource allocation to ensure those kids that need a little bit more invested in them because of their background makes that happen.

### **Themes related to the efficacy of board actions regarding equity-related goals**

This section includes each theme that emerged from the second research question of the study: how does a governance team ensure board efficacy with the strategies devised and enacted by the superintendent?

#### ***Governance teams form “Equity Committees” to provide informed recommendations related to district equity***

One of the strategies repeatedly referenced by governance team members related to promoting district equity was the formation of an equity committee or equity board. As Participant 6 described: “That was the first step, to form [an Equity] committee. That committee did a lot of



research and asking questions; we looked at the data, we pulled in people as needed like our curriculum director comes in as necessary just to make sure we are tackling the right questions.”

Similarly, Participant 12 also expressed considerable importance upon the role of the equity committee in supporting board and district equity efforts. They described their opinion as:

However, when that committee is formed it is going to be a big “Next Step” because you need more people who are focused on that as a priority. Board members have to pay attention to budget and contracting issues and staffing issues and a bunch of other things. You need some people who are just focused on equity, and having a director of equity keeps the administrative focus, and either an administrative or board committee or both will help keep the focus on them and keep things moving forward.

In their description of the equity committee, Participant 12 highlights the challenges the board needs to overcome. Although equity is a significant priority of the board, there are other tasks and priorities that also require the attention of board members. Participant 12 describes the importance of forming an equity committee as providing consistency in assessing equity needs and efforts within the district's schools by designating individuals to focus on this specific priority year-round.

***Governance teams rely on research and training to promote increased equity within their districts***

In describing their efforts and processes for increasing equity within their districts, governance team members repeatedly referenced the importance of conducting research into demonstrated equity strategies and outcomes, in order to determine best practices. For example, boards and committees utilized available resources, such as books and training events, in order to expand

their awareness surrounding equity efforts. Participant 11 describes their experience with equity research as:

We had all that stuff out there. We had the research of Picus and Odden; we had books we were going to read and did read, on and on. When we were done, our committee met, and we met regularly to discuss our readings and what we thought they said. And our committee came up with these recommendations that the Board unanimously adopted that I ran through before: change the pedagogy, implement professional development, change the hiring practices, make the Equity Committee a standing committee, charge the Equity Committee with monitoring performance, and embed the equity lens in the strategic plan. All those came out the Equity Committee, and the Board unanimously adopted all of them.

In order to make informed decisions and sound recommendations regarding their district's implementation of equity policy, the board engaged with various resources related to equity, including various research and texts.

Additionally, some governance teams elected to bring in outside individuals to serve as an equity resource for the school board. For example, Participant 4 stated: “We have also partnered with an organization called Generation Ready, and one of their facilitators has been working with the leadership team and done some work with the board during this process because I do not proclaim to have all of this dialed in. I think we are all works in progress, so having an outside facilitator helps that as well.”

Two additional participants highlighted the National School Board Association (NSBA) conferences as contributing to their awareness and willingness to advocate for increasing equity efforts in their educational communities. For example, Participant 3 describes the impact of

attending the NSBA conference as “There were four of us that went and that set us on fire, and when we came back here, the superintendent (Participant 8) took it, and she took off with it.”

***Governance teams utilize data and reports to substantiate and assess their equity efforts***

In addition to conducting research into equity policy, as previously discussed, governance teams also stated that data, evidence, and reports are beneficial in substantiating and promoting equity efforts, both within the governance team and the broader community. Data facilitates the governance team in their establishment of an understanding of the current state of their district equity, as well as provides evidence to relevant shareholders in the process. Participant 4 described the role of data in initiating their district equity efforts, stating: “Because we have data to examine, we start with data. We look at our discipline data and our academic data, which give us some objective ways to examine where we are and plan for where we need to be.” Similarly, Participant 7 summarized their district’s use of data to promote the need for equity, stating: “A lot of that can be seen with the data. That is how it can be promoted because it is hard to argue with data and sharing this with the community—the data and progress going on.”

Other participants described their efforts to maintain a data-driven approach to initiating and monitoring equity efforts. For example, "Ensuring we are doing equitable work instead of equal work, we look at data to identify the areas of greater need and prioritize those needs and start from there" (Participant 4). This participant describes the use of data to initially approach the equity conversation, before continuing on to describe the role of data in monitoring and continuing to influence the impact of equity over time. They stated:

We have done some changes . . . we are looking at using the data to help drive those decisions so we can impact where there are the greatest levers. In Michael Fullan’s work, he talks about levers and looking at where is the place that will move you. You can’t stay

there forever, but it is going to move you, and then you can look at and reprioritize for the next lever to move you again. So, that is the approach we have been taking.

***Governance team members identify their role in promoting equity to be to design the policy pertaining to equity in the district***

Participants expressed a belief that establishing clear roles and responsibilities of the parties involved in equity efforts has positively influenced the overall equity efforts. For example, Participant 1 explained their district's approach as:

Our goal is to guide and provide governance and be advocates for our school district and to create policy. So, allowing those schools and the Cabinet to leverage the implementation of those policies and ideas and not stepping on their feet and getting in their way. Staying in our lane has helped us to regard the roles and responsibilities.

By delineating the roles and responsibilities of superintendents and board members, governance teams are able to improve the efficiency of their efforts. Participant 10 elaborates on this statement from Participant 1, explaining:

We have to write a good policy—a policy that has teeth and provides good direction and outlasts us as a board. Those are our roles and responsibilities, and that policy includes accountability. Through that policy, we will provide the direction to the administrative team who will implement it and report back. I think we give them the support they need to do the work because without the policy they may have hesitated and not known the exact direction and what direction was supported by the community.

As Participant 10 notes, “it is only when all parties are able to effectively accomplish their individual roles, that the overall goal of equity can be achieved.” Through the successful design of equity policy by the school board, in turn, the superintendent, staff, and faculty will then be

able to implement this policy effectively.

***Governance team members identify the role of the superintendent as the implementation, promotion, and monitoring of equity policy***

Governance team members describe the role of the superintendent as leading the charge for implementation of the determined equity policy within the district and the community. While school board members are charged with the drafting of equity policy, community engagement and district implementation fall on the shoulders of the superintendent. In assessing their experiences working with their superintendent, Participant 11 stated: “Our Superintendent is really good at keeping us informed on what they are doing; our Superintendent takes all charges on equity seriously.”

Another way of describing the role of the superintendent was portrayed in the explanation of Participant 3. They stated:

[The board members] are on the balcony and can see everything, but we cannot zero in on all the small things that are going on and we cannot take the word of two people we may run onto at Jewel [grocery store] and come back to the rest of the board and say, “well, we have to change this because I ran into two people...” We have to trust [the superintendent’s] judgment because she has this vision, and I trust her with the vision.

Utilizing the metaphor of the balcony and the dance floor, Participant 3 describes the differentiation between the board and superintendent roles. As the individuals on the “balcony,” board members are tasked with using their broad district overview in order to design policy, while the superintendent on the “dance floor” is tasked with providing insight into the day-to-day details and implementation of equity policy. Once the board members have designed the policy, it is up to the superintendent to carry that policy effectively into the community and the schools.

### *Themes related to community engagement with district equity goals and strategies*

This section includes each theme that emerged from the third research question of the study: how does a school board promote change to address identified, in-district inequity working inclusively with the community?

#### *Governance teams feel that communication is central to promoting community support of equity efforts*

Multiple governance team members expressed the sentiment that promoting positive communication with community members is essential to ensuring effective equity efforts in the district. For example, Participant 10 described the role of communication in promoting equity-related changes as, “Communication is key there, ongoing opportunities for the public to see and hear and read about what is happening and encouraging cultural change.” Similarly, Participant 6 stated, “Communication is key. Equity work for some is hard to wrap your head around what it means . . . being open to feedback and listening and helping the community understand why this work is so important and will benefit every child in the school district.”

Other participants described specific examples of efforts to promote open communication within the governance team and the community, such as Participant 8’s explanation of their district’s “Community Coffee” events. Community Coffee events provide an opportunity for governance teams and community members to meet on a level playing field to discuss issues they feel strongly about. At these events:

we have coffee and cookies and a snack and tables and chairs, and we just invite parents and the community to come out. We have no agenda. I have all the central office administrators present, and we do a phone blast and email blast and post it on the website from this time to this time we have a “Community Coffee” at this school, so come out

and share your suggestions and we listen. (Participant 8)

Participant 12 also discussed the role of communication in their equity efforts, stating: “You have to come up with different communication strategies. You have to make sure you are not moving too quickly before people understand what the problem is before you try to solve it.”

Such responses reflect the belief that communication is important in all aspects of equity efforts, from equity and policy design and intra-governance team interaction, as well as in implementation and community buy-in.

***Governance teams communicate with community members via electronic communication methods***

Within the discussion of communicating with community members, governance team members expressed the use of electronic communication as a common strategy for informing community members of relevant changes in the district. Electronic communication methods include the use of the school or district webpages, social media accounts, or other communication strategies, such as emails and newsletters. One-third of the participants listed the school or district website as a tool for informing and communicating with community members. Websites are used to post relevant updates to district and school policy, as well as to make resources available to the community, such as recordings of previous school board meetings and events. In addition to websites, districts used public relations tools and individuals in order to maximize their efforts through social media accounts and other forms of electronic community outreach.

Participant 12 clearly detailed many of their strategies for communicating with the public when they stated:

[Public Relations] are helping us better understand that Twitter is good for some things, Facebook is good for some things, websites are good for some things, direct mailings are

good for some things, public meetings are good for some things, but for different types of communications different methods are necessary instead of, “here is the best method we should always use for everything.”

Such a statement reflects the importance of maintaining variety and accessibility when it comes to public communication. Communication is not “one size fits all” and requires careful and constant effort to ensure the public remains familiar with district equity efforts. Participant 4 expressed similar sentiments, stating: “I think the message is out there in a lot of different ways and people can access it in multiple channels. Everyone has their own way to connect in.”

***Governance teams strive to include community perspectives in their creation of equity policy***

Not only do governance teams strive to effectively communicate board implemented decisions and policy changes to the public, but they also strive to promote dialogue with community members, in order to promote effective equity efforts in the district. Governance teams engage with community members through the use of public forums and town halls, which provide community members with an arena to voice their opinions. Other formats through which community members are encouraged to voice their opinions are through the regular conducting of surveys. For example, consider Participant 11’s explanation of community engagement efforts, that, “In addition to the IAB [Inclusiveness Advisory Board] and all the town hall forums, and newsletters, and it is on our website, we also do surveys—that are climate surveys—every two years of parents and students and faculty that deal with all these equity issues and other issues.”

Participant 6’s statement regarding the importance of providing an outlet for community concern and opinion is also representative of many participant responses. Participant 6 stated:

Allowing the community to voice their concern. . . . We provided the community with a



chance to come to us and ask us whatever question they have about what we are doing. Parents want to make sure their kid is not going to lose out because we are doing this work. So, being open to feedback and listening and helping the community understand why this work is so important and will benefit every child in the school district.

Eight total participants included community-governance team conversation as a significant component of their equity efforts. While the forums for community engagement are often referred to by different names, such as “Community Coffee” (Participant 8), “Let’s Talk” (Participant 3) or the more generic “parent chat” (Participant 2), all serve to promote an open discussion between governance teams and community members surrounding the topics which families and individuals feel are important to the work of the district, in order “to gauge the temperature on where the equity journey is going or what areas we need to adjust” (Participant 7).

### **Themes related to staff engagement with district equity goals and strategies**

This section includes each theme that emerged from the fourth research question of the study: how does a school board promote change to address identified, in-district inequity with staff buy-in to the process?

#### ***Governance teams feel that staff professional development is central to facilitating staff buy-in to equity efforts***

Five of the twelve participants highlighted staff participation in professional development in promoting buy-ins to equity efforts among teachers and schools. As teachers are the individuals engaging with students and families on a daily basis, it is essential that they support district governance team efforts to improve equity. Participant 6 thoughtfully describes the importance of securing staff buy-in in their statement that:

It is led by the superintendent and the principals in the building. They have a lot of opportunities to sit with teachers and have conversations and get teacher feedback because it is important to understand what it means for a teacher in their specific classroom, every day, to do the things we are talking about. So, they are open to listening to what they have to say, but we constantly reiterate the importance of the work. At some point, you might have a teacher who says this is not for me, but if you create the idea that this is the culture of the district and you must make the decision does this fit within what you want to do, you must make that decision.

Participant 6 demonstrates that a long-term increase in district equity is dependent on leadership's ability to construct a positive culture within the district. Securing staff buy-in requires more effort than simply providing one-time training to teachers and staff; rather, it requires consistent work to ensure the district is upholding equity standards. Participant 4 summarizes their opinion of staff buy-in as "That is the fun part . . . it's about inclusion and staff buy-in." They describe the importance of staff buy-in as ensuring that all district leadership, staff, and faculty feel included in the equity conversation and efforts, in order to establish an overall culture of equity moving forward.

***District staff and teachers are invited to participate in the equity building conversations/ trainings***

In addition to providing professional development, in order to contribute to an overall culture of district equity, governance team members also expressed the importance of welcoming staff and faculty perspectives in the design of equity strategies. For example, Participant 10 stated, in addition to providing:

... staff support and the professional development support, another thing is putting them

in the conversation and acknowledging it is different. It is not about being firm...asking them to change and sticking to it. I trust these teachers—we have a great teaching staff, but we need everyone to have a growth mindset as we are asking the students to have a growth mindset, and we need to listen and hear them, but also continue to push everyone to grow.

This statement demonstrates that successful equity efforts will not be entirely top-down initiated. The staff and teachers who are implementing equity on a daily basis must be included in the conversation, in order to bring about effective change in the district. Promoting equity is a process, which requires buy-in and participation from all parties involved, from leadership to community members.

Participant 8 detailed a specific example of a time when open communication between school staff and district leadership resulted in effective equity implementation efforts, despite initial push back. They explained:

I had a board room full of teachers who, during “public comment”, very professionally stood up and gave their comment about dual language and why we had to slow it down. The Board took all that feedback in, and they decided to delay it. The decision for the delay was to provide the staff with more professional development so that they understood what dual language was and help prepare them for implementation. So, that is an example of how they took a step back and listened to the staff. We delayed it a year, but we still implemented something that was believed in, and it was in our operational plan—but because the staff was still struggling with it, we took a whole year and provided all staff professional development on second language acquisition and why we were moving toward it and why it was good for kids and what the impact was. We

still had some staff no matter what we did, they still did not buy-in, but we were able to move forward.

In this example, open communication enabled the governance team and the teachers to reach a compromise regarding the implementation of equity efforts. Rather than impose a board decision upon teachers unilaterally, the governance team opted to include staff perspectives in their decision making. While this resulted in a delay in the implementation of strategies, it supported overall staff support and buy-in of the measures in the long term. Therefore, this can be considered a positive example of effective leadership-staff communication in collaborating on creating a culture of equity.

### **Themes related to the prioritization of board goals related to increasing district equity**

This section includes each theme that emerged from the fifth and final research question of the study: how does a school board prioritize its goals to achieve greater educational equity?

#### ***Diversifying staff via updated hiring processes is considered a common strategy for promoting equity within districts***

One strategy that was repeatedly named by governance team members in their discussion of changes made to promote equity in the district was an effort to promote more equitable hiring practices. Upon review of their staff and faculty demographics, some districts came to the realization that their staff populations were not necessarily reflective of the demographics of the students. As a result, students of minorities were less likely to see themselves represented in their teachers and school administrators. Participant 10 described their experience with changing hiring practices as “hiring more minority teachers, more male teachers so that the teaching staff reflects the student population. . . . Everything we are doing and all the decision we are making and all the resource allocation should be done with an equity lens.”

Similarly, Participant 11 described another example of utilizing hiring practices to diversify staff and promote equity. They explained:

One [factor] is the culture and the climate the kid is entering into, and the way you approach culture and climate is looking at the composition of your faculty and looking at the competency of your faculty, so one thing we quickly discovered was that our faculty was almost all-white. So, our African-American and Latino kids were not seeing teachers or administrators who looked like them, and that was problematic. One of the charges the Equity Committee gave the administration at District C was to change its hiring practices to diversify our faculty and administration . . . and we have implemented a change in hiring practices. I think it is competency-based hiring, and there is a whole way to go about that. We have hired an HR consulting firm that is an expert at this in helping districts diversify their faculty and administration. Since that time, over 35% of our new hires have been minorities. So, we feel pretty good that at least on that element, we are moving forward. Now obviously, diversifying your faculty and administration to the point where you are comfortable you reached the right number takes time because people have to resign—you know what I mean. It is not like you can wave a magic wand and diversify your faculty, but it looks very promising for what we are doing.

In their explanation, Participant 11 details both the benefits and challenges associated with changing hiring practices, citing the time and effort necessary to diversify, as well as the importance of ensuring students feel well represented by staff and administration. Participant 9 expressed similar sentiments, albeit in a much briefer statement that: “Specifically, areas of focus include recruiting/hiring to ensure a diverse faculty and staff that is more representative of the community we serve.”

***Governance teams identify updating pedagogy in order to improve equity within the district***

Another equity strengthening strategy that was discussed by multiple governance team members was the revision of pedagogy and curriculum. Five participants highlighted updating pedagogy to be more equitable as a priority for their district equity efforts. For example, Participant 11 stated: “The 3rd major thing we looked at was pedagogy itself. And we charged the administration with making a recommendation for changing [the district’s] pedagogy based on what the evidence indicates are approaches that eliminate gaps in achievement by race and ethnicity.” After conducting research into alternatives, the governance team of Participant 11 determined that utilizing Universal Design for Learning (UDL) strategies would be a more equitable approach to educating the children of the district and proceeded to implement this change.

Participant 9 expressed similar efforts to promote equity via pedagogy updates, stating: “we need to focus on equity in classroom pedagogy—how to ensure students in classrooms and the teaching-learning experiences we are providing have equal access to learning, enlightenment, and knowledge through the way we teach them and engage them.” Additionally, Participants 5 and 6 each reference a need to create equitable curriculum within the classroom. For example, Participant 5’s statement that “we are also working closely with curriculum at the moment and going through the books that we make available for the kids in the classroom to make sure those books deal effectively with questions of diversity and equity so that we are providing that lens for our kids.”

***Governance teams highlight implicit biases as impacting equity within the district***

Five participants included implicit biases in their discussion of district equity. Governance team members expressed the importance of overcoming implicit biases in order to promote equity

across the district. For example, in their discussion of the way in which their district framed the equity discussion, Participant 6 stated:

Obviously, we cannot control those things a kid brings with him, but once they get here, those are the things we can control. What structures have historically gotten in the way of children achieving or what institutional biases or personal biases on the part of teachers and staff have gotten in the way that we can try to mitigate to greatest extent that we can?

In acknowledging the presence of biases within the institution and the classroom, the governance team is striving to overcome these identified biases in order to promote increased equity.

Participant 11's governance team took a similar approach, as explained in their statement that:

The second [equity] element had to do with how do we provide professional development to get them to the point where they are better at reaching our African American and Latino kids, given the fact that they are doing such a great job to get there? So, we hired the National Equity Project to provide evidence-based professional development on implicit bias.

Similar to Participant 6's governance team, the governance team of Participant 11 also chose to tackle implicit biases head-on, by providing training and professional development across the district. Other governance members expressed a focus on implicit biases, as well, such as, "we are focused on implicit bias" (Participant 10) and, "we came to some tough discussion, but it was enlightening to think that this would be good for the others . . . you realize you have your biases and your prejudices that you did not realize were there" (Participant 3). Governance team member responses such as these reflect district realizations that it is necessary to first identify biases in order to then combat inequities.

### ***Governance teams perceive improving equity as an ongoing process***

Throughout their discussions of enhancing equity in their districts, governance team members define equity building as an on-going process. In discussing the achievement goals of their equity efforts, multiple participants stated that they do not anticipate experiencing a full achievement of the goals. Rather, they expect to continue striving towards improvement and adaptability to the changing demographics and needs of the community. For example,

Participant 4 stated:

To me, it is a life-long process. I do not believe that we will ever get to a point where we say, “Check, we did that” because we are human, and we have to constantly look at the continuum of growth and how we are doing. And situations will come up where we are going to fall backwards, and we will have to examine those and look at them and rebuild the pieces we need to help us get to the next step. I do not know that it is ever a journey that is over. It is too personal to who we are as people. And when we are dealing with human beings, I do not know that we can ever say it is done.

Expressing similar sentiments, Participant 7 stated, “There is always going to be room to improve” and Participant 3 stated, “I do not think there is ever a point when we can say, ‘Okay, good job, we are done.’” Due to the tendency for humans to change and grow, the efforts to achieve equity within schools will necessarily need to change over time as well. The combination of resources that contribute to an equitable district this year might look drastically different in a few years’ time.

### ***Governance team members assess equity according to the ability to meet all students’ unique needs***

Despite an ability to achieve full equity, participating governance team members defined their



equity goals as an ability to meet the needs of students. As previously noted, this does not mean that all students are provided equal resources but that all students are provided whatever resources are necessary to enable them to fulfill their full potential. Examples of participant responses regarding these goals include: “When all kids experience [the district] the same way. Not the “same way” meaning equality, but the “same way” meaning a way that meets their individual needs and not just some kids getting their needs met” (Participant 10) and “No statistically meaningful correlation between race, ethnicity, and expected academic performance. Period” (Participant 11).

Participant 9 provided a bit more description into their goals for district equity achievements, stating:

In terms of specifically academic achievement of our goal will be specifically that an individual’s membership in any subgroup is not a predictor of their academic achievement. It does not mean all subgroups will perform the same or at the same level, but that would be a nice aspiration . . . but instead that the characteristics students have are not an impediment in any way to their ability to achieve things. When it comes to the school community in general, we will know when we have achieved educational equity when all of our stakeholders are able to say that they feel this is a place they belong and feel included and see themselves as an important element of the larger school community.

## **Summary**

This chapter provides the results of this study’s exploration into district governance teams’ efforts to achieve equity within the selected Illinois school districts. The chapter upholds a description of the study’s demographics while utilizing discussion of the data collection and analysis strategies infused throughout the research. Data were collected using purposive

sampling and strategically conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 Illinois governance team members. Qualitative phenomenology and narrative content analysis strategies were used to inductively code the resulting interview transcripts, with the researcher gaining insight into the themes that emerged from within the data responses.

Significant themes were each discussed in turn and were substantiated through the inclusion of textual evidence. Notable themes were related to the five guiding research questions of this study:

1. How does a school board stay within its statutory and policy-stipulated roles to set goals addressing areas of identified, in-district inequity?

*Governance teams unanimously acknowledge a need for equity in their district*

*Governance teams attribute inequities to changing demographics within the district*

*Members of the governance team differentiate between equity and equality*

2. How does a governance team ensure board efficacy with the strategies devised and enacted by the superintendent?

*Governance teams form Equity Committees to provide informed recommendations related to district equity*

*Governance teams rely on research and training to promote increased equity within their districts*

*Governance teams utilize data and reports to substantiate and assess their equity efforts*

*Governance team members identify their role in promoting equity to be to design the policy pertaining to equity in the district*

*Governance team members identify the role of the superintendent as the implementation, promotion, and monitoring of equity policy*

3. How does a school board promote change to address identified, in-district inequity working inclusively with the community?

*Governance teams feel that communication is central to promoting community support of equity efforts*

*Governance teams communicate with community members via electronic communication methods*

*Governance teams strive to include community perspectives in their creation of equity policy*

4. How does a school board promote change to address identified, in-district inequity with staff buy-in to the process?

*Governance teams feel that staff professional development is central to facilitating staff buy-in to equity efforts*

*District staff and teachers are invited to participate in the equity building conversations/ trainings*

5. How does a school board prioritize its goals to achieve greater educational equity?

*Diversifying staff via updated hiring processes is considered a common strategy for promoting equity within districts*

*Governance teams identify updating pedagogy in order to improve equity within the district*

*Governance teams highlight implicit biases as impacting equity within the district*

*Governance teams perceive improving equity as an ongoing process*

*Governance team members assess equity according to the ability to meet all students' unique needs*

Themes included in this chapter represent the recurring trends and topics that were identified

through the systematic coding and organization of the data population. Notable themes included: the differentiation between the school board and superintendent roles, common strategies for engaging with district community and staff members, and the approaches utilized in an attempt to improve district equity thus far. In the next chapter, the themes presented in this chapter are discussed according to the guiding frameworks of the study—Change Theory and Social Justice Advocacy.

## CHAPTER 5

### ANALYSIS AND SYNTHESIS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the work of selected northern Illinois governance teams toward ensuring greater equity for the public school students they serve. Each governance team participating in this study expressed an interest in diminishing educational inequities and in changing existing systems to do so. As such, commonalities in rationales and approaches of district leadership toward this aim were sought within the standards of the role of the Board and Superintendent. These standards exist in the form of state statutes and Board Policy; however, this research study utilized a school board job description adopted by each board called the Illinois Association of School Boards' *Foundational Principles of Effective Governance* (2019). Commonalities in rationales and approaches of district leadership toward this aim were sought using specific frameworks that yield systemic change—specifically, Change Theory and Social Justice Advocacy. This chapter includes a discussion of common themes among the research findings and relates these themes to Change Theory and Social Justice Advocacy. The chapter concludes with information on the limitations of this study, areas for future research, and a summary.

This chapter contains information about the research questions guiding this study:

1. How does a school board stay within its statutory and policy-stipulated roles to set goals addressing areas of identified, in-district inequity?
2. How does a governance team ensure board efficacy with the strategies devised and enacted by the superintendent?
3. How does a school board promote change to address identified, in-district inequity working inclusively with the community?

4. How does a school board promote change to address identified, in-district inequity with staff buy-in to the process?
5. How does a school board prioritize its goals to achieve greater educational equity?

The pursuit of greater educational equity within the selected northern Illinois public school districts began with the people leading the charge. District leadership teams included locally-elected school board members and their sole employee: district superintendents. These two entities, the board and the superintendent, comprised the governance team of each district. The relationships of each board and the superintendent in each district did have distinctions. For example, distinctions existed in the strategies put forward, but the district leadership teams also had common desires and rationales that resulted in an outgrowth of greater educational equity.

These commonalities in the desires and rationales of participating governance teams revealed themselves in the form of common themes arising from the analysis of the semi-structured interviews of research participants. Utilizing an amalgamation of qualitative methodologies provided an increased means of identifying, interpreting, and comparing interview responses. The qualitative methodologies used in this research included phenomenological and narrative methodologies, as well as content analysis strategies. When applied to the material from each research participant, these methodological approaches enabled each research question to be answered. The answers or responses to each research question were analyzed to identify common themes about equity reforms among all of the governance teams.

Change Theory and Social Justice Advocacy frameworks provided interrelated values for this research study. These values supported the rationales for systemic change along with guidance in evaluating effectiveness. The synthesis of these theories and their application to this study entails analyzing commonalities of leadership in action among the selected public school

district governance teams. These commonalities yielded approaches that may prove beneficial for other governance teams desiring greater education equity in districts and those seeking systemic change to do so. As Fullan (2006) noted, “as leaders hone their theory of action (also referred to as Change Theory), it will become more easily evident what represents good, bad, and incomplete theories” (p. 8). Fullan continued by labeling what he described as seven underlying core premises with proven results of yielding systemic change within institutions:

1. A focus on motivation;
2. Capacity building, with a focus on results;
3. Learning in context;
4. Changing context;
5. A bias for reflective action;
6. Tri-level engagement;
7. Persistence and flexibility in staying the course (p. 8).

These seven premises each hold a presence within the words and the work of the governance teams participating in this research. As indicated by a common theme to Research Question 1, Governance teams unanimously acknowledge a need for equity in their district.

This need served as the fuel or motivation for the work of the governance teams.

Moreover, this need was rooted in data outcomes. Some data outcomes were so significant in prompting action by district leadership that they were verbalized by Participant 4 with words such as “pretty alarming—the suspension data, the expulsion data, the observational data.” Other motivational factors include additional impassioned positions such as Participant 9’s declaration:

It is an expectation of our community that all of the children in the families that we serve should have the opportunity to be their fullest selves.

Consequently, an obligatory, moral action must be taken to overcome some systemic factors that have—in the past—caused inadvertent barriers to all children having equal access to the highest aspirational elements of what our school district can provide.

Change Theory promotes building capacity to attain intended results. Fullan (2006) expounded on capacity building by noting that it involves “helping to develop individual and collective knowledge and competencies, resources, and motivation” (p. 9). Such areas were and are provided by each participating governance team and serve as a pivotal element in securing understanding of the equity priorities along with staff buy-in into the reform. As Participant 6 stated:

They (administrators) have a lot of opportunities to sit down with teachers and have conversations and get teacher feedback because it is important to understand what it means for a teacher in their specific classroom, every day, to do the things we are talking about.

Despite the range of capacity-building that exists among research participants, each board must recognize that the intent of professional development and the equity reform movement must never be forgotten. As Participant 6 shared, “the school district must not waiver on setting the culture and how important it is because it is truly meant to benefit every child.”

Achieving board efficacy with equity reforms derives from the existence and guidance of board goals. This concept of ensuring board intent amidst implementation by a superintendent stands as the core element of Research Question 2. The themes linked to this research question entail boards exercising their roles of adopting an equity goal into board policy and then monitoring enacted strategies to verify that outcomes meet expectations. Participant 11 described the exercise of board roles by noting,



So, the strategies have to be improved by us. So, we [the board] go to the superintendent and say here are the things [goals] and [you] make recommendations. He [the superintendent] makes a recommendation and then we [the board] either approve it or don't approve it. If we don't approve it, we don't do it. If we approve it, we do it and it is just a question of monitoring.

Upholding these roles not only enables the assessment of board efficacy, but they justify the actions taken in each theme of this research question. Such theme-based action included formation of a stakeholder committee, requesting professional development on equity, monitoring equity with data, clarifying the board role in reforms, and clarifying the superintendent role in equity reform. Furthermore, the themes of Research Question 2 support the motivational focus emphasized by Fullan (2006). Setting and adopting a board goal toward equity reform equates to a board expectation or district mandate for action. Although preliminary steps of consulting and buy-in lead to goal clarification, the board goal offers alignment to district stakeholders on equity. It also transforms the moral imperative of equitable education into a board and district expectation. This imperative offers motivational compliance to district staff and fuses varied reform strategies rooted in Change Theory. As noted by Fullan (2006), “moral purpose is a great potential motivator, but by itself won't go anywhere, unless other conditions conspire to mobilize several key aspects of motivation” (p. 8). The byproducts of each Research Question 2 theme—committees, training, data, policy, and monitoring—yield common mechanisms to compare strategic outcomes to board efficacy. Moreover, these themes supplied each participating district with direction from which to advance all equity reform strategies.

The outcomes of each theme to Research Question 3 demonstrated the dual presence of

essential reform essentials, pressure, and support (Fullan, 2006). With this dual presence, the participating governance teams fostered efforts to build capacity. It is noted that the second premise, Capacity building, with a focus on results and the third premise, Learning in Context, overlap in significance (p. 8). The third premise provided insight into the practical application of the reforms that targeted building capacity via professional development. Learning in context encourages equity changes to be made within the settings that will directly impact students. If reform is sought by the governance teams, the staff members responsible for delivering the reform should demonstrate the reforms in more than a training setting, but rather within the place and context of work. As Elmore (2004) noted, “Improvement is more a function of learning to do the right things in the settings where you work” (p. 73) .

The themes related to Research Question 4 nestled with the themes of Research Question 3 in highlighting that an inclusive process is required to forge systemic change. The common themes developed from these research questions showed that multiple parties or district stakeholders must actively participate in any reform if the district is to achieve the fourth premise of Changing Context (Fullan, 2006, p. 8). Even more, a benefit from this research entails sharing insights on shared approaches toward equity in the hope of expanding a knowledge base of options among varied district governance teams. Fullan (2006) noted an outcome of *lateral capacity* as a desired step with Changing Context. Specifically, “the bigger context in which one works must incorporate the other premises, such as promoting capacity building and being motivating. This leads on to establish ‘lateral capacity building’ in which schools and districts learn from each other” (2006, p. 10). It is noted that three of the participating governance teams practiced lateral capacity when they shared their equity journeys with other Illinois school boards at an Illinois Association of School Boards conference on equity. Two of the participating

governance teams have formed a tri-board with all feeder boards and their high school to share and expound on coordination to infuse equity into their systems.

The themes related to Research Question 4 and the themes of Research Question 3 emphasized a shared approach toward reform acceptance. The fifth premise of Change Theory, *A bias for reflective action*, entails rallying stakeholders to persuade them of the benefits of reforming an aspect of a system or the entire system. Each of these common themes supports building acceptance of equity through communication and educational outlets. The strength of this premise hinges on compiling stakeholder feedback and the art of devising approaches that merge board intent with input. As noted by John Dewey, “We do not learn from experience . . . we learn from reflecting on experience” (1933, p. 78).

This power of reflection was, also, noted by Participant 8 in an anecdote regarding equity implementation of a dual language component:

One of the five-year goals was to implement the dual language program in this district, and we were ready to go and present to the Board the plan for dual language. What I did not anticipate was that it was not the community that had push-back, but it was the actual staff. Our staff felt threatened by the implementation of dual language because they thought they were going to lose their jobs because we had to replace them with Spanish-speaking teachers, even though I addressed it up front. I knew that was an issue. On the night the board was supposed to vote for the implementation of the dual-language for the following school year, I had a board room full of teachers who, during “public comment” very professionally stood up and gave their comment about dual language and why we had to slow it down. The Board took all that feedback in, and they decided to delay it. The decision for the delay was to provide the staff with more professional development

so that they understood what dual language was and help prepare them for implementation.

The sixth premise of Change Theory is *Tri-Level Engagement* and its inclusion of multiple stakeholders to prompt systemic change. These Tri-Level stakeholders include

1. School and Community,
2. District, and
3. State.

This research meets all aspects of Tri-Level Engagement because the authority given to school boards in this study derived from the State of Illinois. The authority of the superintendents derived from delegated powers of boards along with direct State authority. The presence of communities is high in this study because the citizens in the communities elect the school board members. These boards opt to include their community members due to accountability and the need to build support for equity reform. Every theme for each research question intertwines Tri-Level stakeholders within this study to the point that Participant 10 recounted the convictions of the community necessitating board action. Participant 10 shared,

The board is a reflection of the community. Many of the people who have been recently elected have focused on equity; so as a result, the board reflects the community's desire to stop hovering. I like that word for describing what we have been doing. Stop hovering and move forward with strategies and a policy that provides direction and support to an administration so they can implement it in the schools.

The Board represents an active agent to transform ongoing dialogue and debate into decision making. Moreover, when Tri-Level Engagement occurs, leaders within each level can convey perspectives to galvanize systemic reform in favor of equitable integration. As Fullan (2005)

stated, “If enough leaders across the same system engage in permeable connectivity, they change the system for itself” (p. 11). Leadership weighing their roles with the needs and capabilities of a district enable the structural transformation of a system aligned with meeting the desires of an informed public.

The seventh premise to Change Theory entails persistence and flexibility in staying the course (p. 8). The presence of this premise stands as a requirement for boards opting to advance equity. Persistence and flexibility with equity reform stem from a board considering stakeholder feedback, customizing an approach, embracing an obligation to act, and expecting challenges.

As Participant 9 noted:

How they do it [promote change toward equity] is by having a clear, shared vision for what they want their district to represent...for what they want for the students in their charge . . . for what they want their administrative team, faculty, staff to achieve within those goals. It is a lot to ask of folks volunteering their time to serve their community. What equity is . . . is not viewed the same among all stakeholders. There is going to be tension and disagreement. Board members must be courageous, and this is an important trait they need to bring to the table in order for it to be successful.

A board, acting as the official decision-makers of a district, must maintain commitment for equity reform despite naysayers. A board must have a clear understanding of community expectations and convey the board vision and rationale. Differing views do not require abandonment, but embracing flexibility and exploration of options to ascertain if accomplishing the same aim might occur using a varied approach. With these factors achieved, a board can advance with both buy-in and equity reforms.

The theory of Social Justice Advocacy permeates this study through an interconnected

commitment to educational equity reform. At its core, the promotion of Social Justice Advocacy is realized when its unique values of uplifting the disadvantaged and disenfranchised through structural reform of an institution occur. These forms of uplift “deal with advocacy efforts that either implicitly or explicitly embrace social justice values when deciding what to do and how to do it” (Klugman, 2010, p. 2). The words of Klugman in clarifying Social Justice Advocacy link the distinct yet complementary roles of both entities of a governance team, the Board and the Superintendent. The decisions that address the *what* in a district’s purpose or direction are made by the Board while the decisions of *how* flow from the *what* and are orchestrated by the Superintendent. As such, the incorporation of Social Justice Advocacy theory provides a method of further explaining the impassioned morality and urgency of district leadership for lasting educational equity reform. As Participant 4 noted, “take a hard look at what’s there and why it is there...acknowledging the past but not continuing to repeat it. That is the goal.”

Klugman (2010) upheld that the embodiment of Social Justice Advocacy in a reform movement is evident when three interlocked values emerge:

1. Resources should be distributed so that everyone can live a decent life.
2. Human beings all have equal human rights and should be recognized in all of their diversity.
3. All people should be represented and be able to advocate on their behalf (p. 3).

Every common theme of this study contains examples of these values. From the role of the board in equity reform to resource prioritization, meeting the individual needs of all students was and is a paramount pursuit of governance teams—particularly involving students where data shows persistent deficiency gaps. Data from these districts indicate that the students with these persistent gaps tend to have consistent classifications. These classifications are low

socioeconomic status and children of color whose backgrounds tend to be ladled with a history of inequitable, institutional disenfranchisement. Social Justice Advocacy offers a gauge for which one should strive and standards by which one might assess progress toward systemic reform in public schools. Participant 8 expounded on these social justice obligations by stating,

Just the word ‘public’ says we need to take care of the needs of children. They do not come in nice packs of 25, they come with varying experiences, cultures, ways of thinking, so I think equity is something that needs to be addressed and is part of this country’s history of inequities. That is why it needs to be even more so addressed.

As demonstrated by the research findings, the values of Social Justice Advocacy permeate participant responses.

Each participating governance team opted to take on the cause of increasing the focus and actions on equity within their public institutions. They chose to initiate advocacy for a cause that has been deemed a right of all children but has historically, in some cases, been disavowed by institutional hindrances. This pursuit of greater educational equity did not spontaneously spawn, but it was cultivated through the hope that the right to an education would result in a better life for all children. As shown by the themes in this study, initiating and expanding an equity mindset toward social justice reform is an ongoing process. Prioritizing or reallocating resources, promoting a mindset of success for all, and fostering continued community involvement or advocacy toward equity stand as initial steps to change. With Change Theory coupled with Social Justice Advocacy, Reisman, Gienapp, and Stachowiak (2007) argued that outcome categories might be assessed to verify initial levels of advancement in early social justice work. These interim outcomes are:

- Shifts in social norms,

- Strengthened organizational capacity,
- Strengthened base of support,
- Strengthened alliances,
- Strengthened base of support,
- Improved policies, and
- Changes in impact (p. 17).

The themes of each participating governance team have demonstrated progress in each of these outcome categories. Participant 12 affirmed this reality by remarking, “Equity is a midpoint of where we are now to where we need to be, which is justice.”

In assessing how long the equity journey and reform might take before it is attained, Participant 6 commented:

Check back in about 20 years. It is a long game. That is actually one of my fears.

Because we are data-driven and if 2 years from now someone says ‘we have been putting all this effort and these resources against this equity thing, has anything changed? Well, no nothing really looks different. Okay, well, then we have failed.’ I think that is a mistake . . . It is like turning the Titanic. You are changing systems; you are changing perceptions, and it will take some time. How will we know? I really do not know the answer to that question.

The researcher maintains that qualitative research was the correct methodology for this study. Justification for using this methodology stems from the need to assess processes, relationships among governance team members, and analyze public school systems. This methodology enabled an exploration of deeper insight into the intent, the rationale, the passion, the actions, and the bigger picture of systemic reform. A qualitative approach, also, allows the



researcher to encourage interviewees to expound on his/her experiences and to elaborate on a given response. Moreover, elaborating on a response from an interviewee may uncover additional perspectives or topics that were not initially considered by the researcher. Although a qualitative approach offers the benefit of a comparison with the ability to uncover the rationale for varied and common actions or responses, the use of a quantitative approach with this study would have enabled inclusion of a larger sampling group. Incorporation of a larger sampling group would have allowed for more valid generalizations, and findings would have been completed faster. In addition, use of a quantitative approach would have minimized the possibility of a subjective interpretation of findings.

The outcomes of this study could provide a basis for future research on approaches school boards and governance teams could take to enact equity reform in their systems. With common themes identified, a larger sampling of governance teams using a quantitative approach could occur with comparisons made against the qualitative themes in this study and the emerging themes from a quantitative study. Similar and identical themes could serve the basis for the suggested steps a governance team could use as a guide toward reform. With common themes in existence and accessible, a governance team needs only strategize or customize methods linked to each theme and district feasibility.

Furthermore, this prospect reveals a possible future use by state school board associations with an in-district workshop opportunity that fosters dialogue among governance teams regarding equity. Such an opportunity would need to be further developed, but the outcomes of this research serve as a first step. Subsequent steps would involve a state school board association(s) conducting research on the *Foundational Principles of Effective Governance* (Illinois Association of School Boards, 2019) to correlate the common themes of this study and

aligning findings with an equity framework which the Illinois Association of School Boards is currently exploring. The next step could then involve the development of online survey questions about equitable practices, such as those themes found in this study, categorized by each *Foundational Principle of Effective Governance* principle (Illinois Association of School Boards, 2019). The ultimate outcome would be an online survey that any interested governance team could complete prior to an in-district workshop. The responses to this prospective survey could serve as an initial tool for holding dialogues that might yield board actions and directives to a superintendent who wants to propose customized strategies toward equity reform.

With this research complete, self-reflection by the researcher reveals no change in personal convictions of support for the public education system, its ability to adapt, and the dire need for comprehensive equity reform if educational equality would be realized. This research did reinforce the sense of urgency the researcher holds for equity reform within public education. Moreover, the researcher's sense of urgency following this study stems from verification of the approximately 80-year possession of detailed, multiple data by governmental authorities noting generational damage inflicted upon students from marginalized communities. Despite possession of these data by governmental agents equipped and charged to act for the *common good* of all, little change and adaptation to the system transpired. It is this researcher's hope that content and outcomes of this study will aid in necessitating a move for swifter as well as comprehensive equity reform. As noted in a report from the Century Foundation (2019) on school integration, "growing momentum in favor of diversity in schools is good news for all students." Although equity reform goes beyond a call for educational diversity, its emphasis and coordination with greater diversity efforts can deliver society along with all students—White students and all those students from marginalized communities—benefits inclusive of academic,

cognitive, civic, social-emotional, and economic progression (The Century Foundation, 2019).

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## APPENDIX

### Interview Questions

The following interview questions were used for this study:

1. What is the definition of educational equity?
2. How did the Board/district arrive at this definition?
3. Does a need for equity exist in the public education system? Explain.
4. Why does a need for educational equity exist in the district?
5. On what areas of equity does the board/district focus?
6. How will the district know when it has achieved educational equity?
7. What prompted the school board to focus on educational equity?
8. How does your school board achieve educational equity in the district without disregarding a school board's statutory and codified (policy-stipulated) roles/responsibilities?
9. How did the Board-Superintendent relationship help or hinder decisions about who would perform certain tasks?
10. What are/were the processes/steps the board underwent to develop an applicable policy addressing equity?
11. Who were/are the parties involved in the development, the implementation, and the monitoring of the board's equity approach?
12. How has/does the board/district educate the community on equity and the district's plan?
13. How does the school board craft its policies to address the equity venture and its outcomes?
14. How did the board prioritize the areas where more equitable needs exist?
15. What practices are used to ensure equitable resource allocation, distribution, sources of funding, and timeliness/appropriateness of funding?



16. What steps have been developed to ensure that appropriate monitoring, accountability, and follow-up measures are present to address attempts to impede or deny the district's equity efforts?
17. In what way(s), has the school-parent-community partnership been accessed for dialogue on the need for equity in key areas?
18. How does the district profile content (via the Illinois Report Card) affirm/reinforce the district effort toward greater educational equity?
19. Why has your district opted to pursue greater educational equity?
20. Detail the steps taken to initiate your district approach toward greater educational equity.
21. Elaborate on the role of your school board in its equity conversation and initiative.
22. What type of engagement occurred with staff and community regarding board prioritization of greater educational equity?
23. Share any "Aha" moments that impacted the board/district approach to greater equity in your district.
24. Identify any "next steps" that are planned with the board, staff, and/or community to solidify the prioritization of greater educational equity.
25. How does a school board stay within its statutory and policy-stipulated roles to set goals addressing areas of identified, in-district inequity?
26. How does a governance team ensure board efficacy with the strategies devised and enacted by the superintendent?
27. How does a school board promote change to address identified, in-district inequity working inclusively with the community?

28. How does a school board promote change to address identified, in-district inequity with staff buy-in to the process?
29. How does a school board overcome the limits of power held by local governments to remedy factors of inequity currently impacting the district?
30. How does a school board prioritize its goals to achieve greater educational equity?

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