# Community Co-design for Equity: A Framework for Municipalities and School Districts

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# INTRODUCTION

This framework began, for me, with a question—not about programs or outcomes, but about power:

> *What would it look like if the people most impacted by inequity were not just consulted but given the tools, space, and authority to redesign the systems that shape their lives?*

I started asking that question in earnest during the Greater Englewood Listening Campaign, a community-based inquiry launched after years of top-down decisions—including the closure of ten schools in a short span—shattered trust in public institutions. Through empathy interviews, one-on-ones, and collaborative forums, I listened to families, students, educators, and local leaders articulate what they had long known: that policy done *to* communities, rather than *with* them, perpetuates harm—even when cloaked in good intentions. That campaign didn't just gather stories—it catalyzed a deeper truth: our systems were built without community, and if we are to pursue justice, they must be rebuilt *through* community.

That process—and the wisdom shared with me—reframed everything I understood about equity work. It also propelled me into formal leadership. As the founding Equity Policy Strategist and later Director of Racial Equity Initiatives at Chicago Public Schools, I took those lessons with me. From 2019 to 2023, I led the development and implementation of CPS's Equity Policy Review Process. We didn't just audit policies—we required every one of them to undergo a listening campaign. We built co-design labs rooted in qualitative inquiry and community epistemology. And we institutionalized empathy interviews—turning individual stories into systems change. By the end of that chapter, over half of CPS's 150+ policies had been reviewed and reshaped with community at the center. It was one of the most ambitious district-level policy equity processes in the country. But it didn't start in an office. It started on the block.

The framework outlined in this guide is rooted in that lived work—but it also reaches back further. Community co-design, as a practice, stands on the shoulders of long struggles for participatory democracy and collective

liberation. It draws on the civil rights movement's radical imagination, the Black Panther Party's community clinics and breakfast programs, the feminist consciousness-raising circles that politicized the personal, and the global human rights campaigns that redefined accountability from below. More recently, we've seen that legacy carried forward in movements like Occupy Wall Street, Standing Rock, the Free Palestine Movement, and Black Lives Matter—each of which refused to separate procedural justice from structural justice, and each of which modeled decentralized, emergent governance led by those directly affected.

Co-design is not new—but what we are doing now is reanimating it as a methodology of equity. A strategy not just for participation, but for transformation.

This guide walks through a seven-phase framework for that transformation. It is not linear. It does not seek neatness. Instead, it follows the messy, miraculous rhythms of community wisdom. It begins with critical self-reflection, moves through relationship-building and readiness, dives into equity audits and empathy-based listening, and then opens into collaborative solution design, shared implementation, and iterative evaluation. At every step, the emphasis is on belonging, power redistribution, and systems redesign. And at every step, the question is the same: *Are we building with or are we building over?*

I offer this not as a neutral tool, but as an active stance—a stance against extraction, against bureaucracy-as-usual, and against the dangerous myth that equity can be achieved without ceding control. This is a framework for letting go. For trusting people. For believing that liberation is co-authored, not prescribed.

It's also a framework grounded in imagination. We are not just fixing broken policies. We are imagining something new together. And if we do it right—if we listen deeply, redistribute power boldly, and stay rooted in love and rigor—then what we build will be more just. It will be more beautiful. Let's begin again. Let's begin with the listening.

## HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS OF CO-DESIGN

This framework draws from the legacy of grassroots movements that operationalized community-led change through direct action, participatory democracy, and institutional disruption (Mills, 1959). From Ella Baker's decentralized leadership model to the Highlander Folk School's participatory organizing strategies, co-design as we understand it today has deep historical roots (Ransby, 2003).

The principles of co-design are evident in movements that have challenged structural inequities, including.

- The Civil Rights Movement, where organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) engaged in community-led decision-making models that disrupted hierarchical governance structures (Ransby, 2003).
- Black Lives Matter, which operates through horizontal leadership and community-led policy advocacy, ensuring that those most impacted by state violence shape the movement's demands (Garza, 2014).
- Indigenous sovereignty efforts, which emphasize land stewardship, communal decision-making, and resistance to settler colonial governance structures (Tuck & Yang, 2012).
- Occupy Wall Street, which used radical participatory democracy to challenge corporate control of public policy and resource distribution (Graeber, 2013).

These movements provide critical lessons for institutional co-design efforts, demonstrating that real power-sharing requires institutions to not just consult communities but to restructure governance and decision-making mechanisms entirely (Powell & Ake, 2021).

## CO-DESIGN IN AN ERA OF INEQUITY

We live in a time of democratic erosion and persistent systemic inequities. Traditional top-down decision-making in schools, districts, and municipalities has often marginalized the very communities most affected by those decisions. Community co-design offers a transformative alternative. It is both a methodology and a political stance rooted in historic struggles for racial and social justice. Co-design invites those most impacted by policies—students, families, frontline staff, and community members—to become co-authors of solutions. When the people who have firsthand experience of a problem help craft the vision for change, the solutions are grounded in lived reality. In contrast to token consultation or after-the-fact feedback, co-design means shaping initiatives with the community from the very beginning, not simply for the community. In the words of one Englewood school leader reflecting on years of imposed reforms: "It's about having candid conversations…about what it means to turn things around after things have been done poorly for so long." Such voices underscore why co-design is urgently needed to rebuild trust and achieve lasting change.

## WHAT CO-DESIGN IS NOT

It is helpful to clarify what community co-design is not to distinguish it from less inclusive forms of engagement. Co-design is not a one-time town hall or a survey seeking input on decisions already made. It is not a perfunctory stakeholder committee with no real authority. It is not a mere "consultation" or an advisory panel whose recommendations can be easily ignored. And importantly, co-design is not a linear checklist process that ends with a report on a shelf—it is an ongoing cycle of design, implementation, reflection, and

refinement. In short, community co-design is not tokenism. It requires more than inviting a few community representatives to a meeting; it demands that institutions genuinely cede some power and actively incorporate community knowledge as expert knowledge. As scholar-practitioners note, co-design rejects the notion of communities as passive consultees and instead treats them as equal partners in governance.

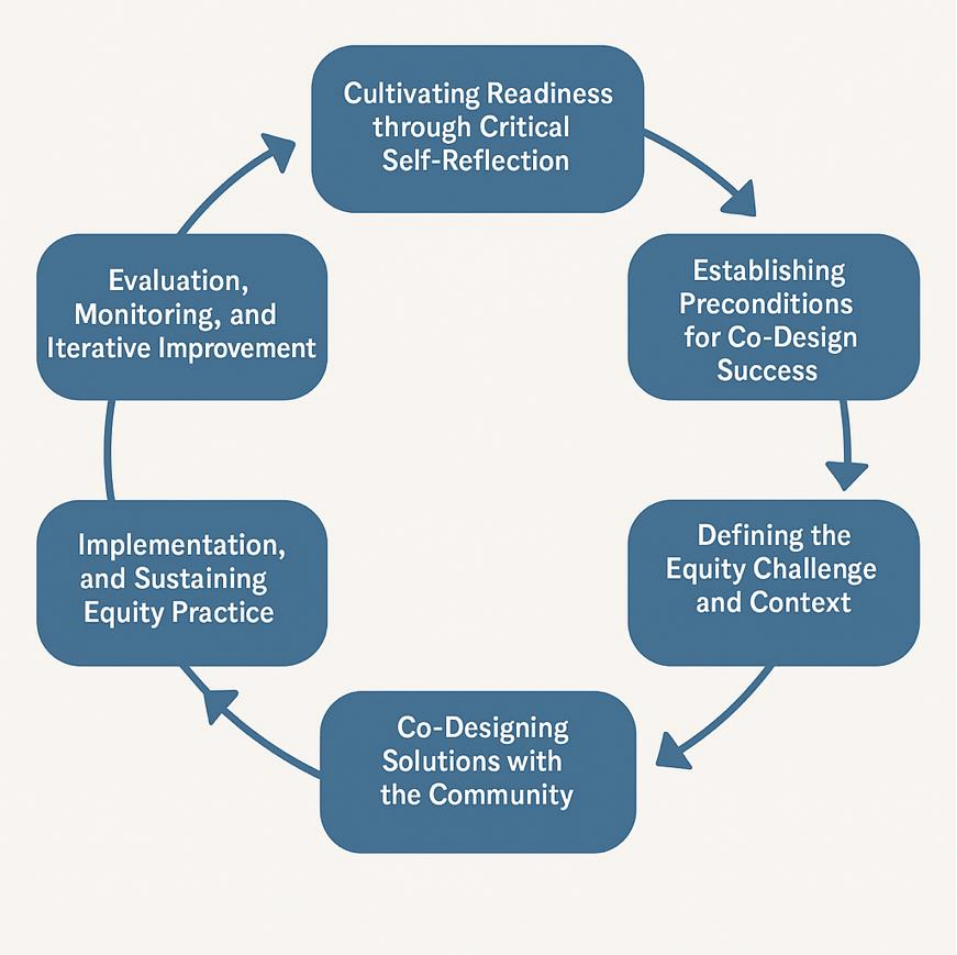
## WHAT CO-DESIGN IS

Community co-design is an intentional, rigorous partnership. It is a structured process of collective problem-solving that centers on those who have been historically excluded from decision-making. Co-design efforts elevate marginalized voices not out of charity or symbolic inclusion, but because those voices carry critical expertise about systemic harms and potential remedies. The co-design approach insists that equity initiatives must be co-created from the start with the communities they aim to serve. This means families helping design a school's discipline policy, students co-authoring a district's equity vision, or neighborhood residents working with city officials to redesign public spaces. In community co-design, solutions emerge from dialogue, mutual learning, and shared leadership between institutional decision-makers and community members. The process is iterative and often challenging—it surfaces uncomfortable truths about power imbalances—but it also generates innovative solutions that address root causes rather than treating symptoms. Co-designed solutions tend to reflect a deeper understanding of issues, greater cultural relevance, and broader buy-in from stakeholders. For example, in Chicago's Greater Englewood neighborhood, years of top-down school closures bred distrust; through a community listening campaign, residents articulated priorities like stopping "racialized attacks on Black communities" and truly factoring community voice into school planning. These community-defined priorities form the basis of co-designed strategies that differ markedly from central-office mandates. Co-design, at its core, is about redistributing power in how decisions are made—it treats community members as designers of policy, not just as beneficiaries or observers.

## WHY CO-DESIGN NOW?

In an era of eroding public trust in institutions, community co-design is not just a feel-good option—it is a necessary and rigorous practice for systemic change. Our public systems face complex challenges: racial achievement gaps, resource inequities, discipline policies that disproportionately harm students of color, city plans that ignore certain neighborhoods, and more. Traditional policymaking has struggled to solve these issues in ways that communities find legitimate and just. Co-design offers a path to democratic renewal. It operationalizes the belief that the people closest to a problem are often closest to the solution. This ethos aligns with long-standing movements for participatory democracy and community control of public institutions. In

times when many feel disillusioned by "business as usual," co-design provides a method to rebuild civic trust by doing democracy—working democratically side by side across roles to design a better future. As one Englewood resident asked, after witnessing years of decisions made without community input, "What would it look like to truly factor community voice into a 10-year facilities plan…10 years in advance?" That question captures a hunger for deeper engagement and foresight that co-design processes can fulfill. By inviting communities into the planning and design phase (not just the feedback phase), institutions signal a break from the past and a commitment to shared ownership of solutions. In short, community co-design positions families, students, and front-line staff as co-authors of system transformation, recognizing that lasting equity gains come when those with lived experience of inequity are in the driver's seat of change. This framework lays out how to put that principle into practice, step by step, in schools, districts, municipalities, and universities.



## OVERVIEW OF THE FRAMEWORK

### CHAPTER 1: CULTIVATING READINESS THROUGH CRITICAL SELF-REFLECTION

The journey begins with introspection. Institutions must prepare themselves by examining their own identities, power dynamics, and commitments. This chapter outlines tools for building equity consciousness among team members, including autobiographical reflection, equity stances, and readiness assessments. Drawing on historical participatory movements and critical theories, it argues that co-design cannot begin without organizational humility and courage.

### CHAPTER 2: ESTABLISHING PRECONDITIONS FOR CO-DESIGN SUCCESS

Even the most reflective team needs the right environment to thrive. Chapter 2 details how to set the stage through institutional commitment, policy alignment, resource allocation, and inclusive stakeholder outreach. It emphasizes building trust, shared norms, and relational infrastructure that signals co-design is not a side project but a core strategy for equity.

### CHAPTER 3: DEFINING THE EQUITY CHALLENGE AND CONTEXT

This chapter focuses on developing a precise, equity-framed problem statement. Teams explore both data and lived experience to understand who is most impacted, why the inequity persists, and what root causes must be addressed. The Greater Englewood example demonstrates how communities can redefine problems through collective voice and systemic analysis.

### CHAPTER 4: CONDUCTING EQUITY AUDITS AND COMMUNITY LISTENING

Here, institutions deepen their understanding through equity audits and structured listening. Drawing on LRFB's signature empathy interview methodology, the chapter shows how to combine quantitative audits with qualitative narratives to build a fuller picture of the challenge. The aim is to gather stories, identify disparities, and mobilize community wisdom to inform next steps.

### CHAPTER 5: CO-DESIGNING SOLUTIONS WITH THE COMMUNITY

This is where the heart of the work unfolds. Chapter 5 walks through how to facilitate inclusive ideation sessions grounded in shared power, transparency, and empathy. Participants design solutions that respond to root causes, reflect lived realities, and push for structural change. The section includes tools for prototyping, prioritizing, and integrating feedback from the broader community.

### CHAPTER 6: IMPLEMENTATION AND SUSTAINING EQUITY PRACTICE

Co-design is only powerful if it leads to action. This chapter guides institutions in moving from design to implementation while maintaining community leadership. It includes strategies for shared implementation teams, action planning, accountability mechanisms, and embedding co-designed practices into policy and culture. Sustaining equity requires persistence and reorganization of norms—not just new programs.

### CHAPTER 7: EVALUATION, MONITORING, AND ITERATIVE IMPROVEMENT

The final phase brings the cycle full circle through participatory evaluation. Using both quantitative indicators and community perception, teams assess the impact of their solutions and refine as needed. This chapter promotes a culture of continuous improvement and accountability—where evaluation is not extractive but empowering, and where community co-design becomes a sustained practice rather than a one-time intervention.

# CHAPTER 1: CULTIVATING READINESS THROUGH CRITICAL SELF-REFLECTION

Before launching any community co-design process, institutions must begin with introspection. Lasting equity work requires that those leading it understand their own identities, biases, and commitments. In practice, this means leaders and team members engage in critical self-reflection about how their lived experiences and assumptions shape their approach to equity. Co-design is not a quick fix or a mere set of activities—it is fundamentally about shifting power and mindsets. Thus, a foundational readiness is needed: stakeholders must be prepared to question the status quo, confront uncomfortable truths about privilege and oppression, and "redistribute power" in decision-making. As Sherry Arnstein famously noted in her Ladder of Citizen Participation (1969), authentic participation entails a transfer of power from authorities to the people, enabling those traditionally excluded to be deliberately included in future decisions. In education and municipal contexts, this requires leaders to critically examine how their policies or practices may have marginalized communities and to commit to doing things differently before co-design ever begins.

**Historical Roots of Co-Design:** The call for such introspection is grounded in the historical roots of co-design and participatory practice. Co-design's ethos draws from movements like 1960s participatory democracy and the participatory design approaches pioneered in 1970s Scandinavia, where designers worked alongside trade unions to democratize workplace innovation. It also aligns with Paulo Freire's concept of critical consciousness, which urges educators and leaders to reflect on power and oppression in order to catalyze liberation. In several Scandinavian countries, early co-design (then called co-operative design) projects were rooted in action research and aimed at empowering workers in decision-making. Those efforts taught a key lesson: true collaboration requires the powerful to share control and critically examine their own role. Similarly, in public institutions today, embracing co-design means leaders must "decenter" themselves and center the experiences of others. This involves developing an awareness of systemic inequities—what Critical Race Theory scholars call the pervasiveness of racism in structures and policies. For example, foundational scholarship in education

by Ladson-Billings & Tate (1995) argued that racial inequity is deeply ingrained in schooling. Such insights underscore why co-design teams must begin by acknowledging these inequities and their own biases. If an institution has historically made decisions unilaterally (perhaps contributing to disparities in outcomes), its leaders should recognize this history and be prepared to yield space to those impacted.

**Critical Self-Reflection in Practice:** Cultivating readiness involves structured reflection activities and capacity-building for the co-design team. This could include:

- **Equity Training and Autobiographies**: Team members engage in equity-focused professional learning, such as exploring personal privilege and bias. Exercises like writing racial or cultural autobiographies (sharing how one's race/culture has shaped one's experiences) help build a common language and surface biases. Glenn Singleton's protocol for Courageous Conversations about Race, for instance, offers agreements and conditions to help educators honestly confront race and racism in their practice, laying a groundwork of openness and trust. The goal is not a one-time training but an ongoing habit of reflection. All team members—especially those in positions of authority—should demonstrate "strong equity consciousness and humility, continually reflecting on their biases."
- **Assessing Mindsets and Commitment**: Before co-design starts, institutions can self-assess their readiness. Are leaders truly bought in, or is equity seen as optional? Do team members believe "those closest to the problem are closest to the solution"? A candid appraisal might reveal gaps—for example, perhaps past initiatives failed due to lack of follow-through or defensiveness when challenged. Teams can use reflection tools (like equity rubrics or readiness checklists) to gauge their starting point. An institution at a "nascent stage" may find many foundational elements missing—e.g., data on disparities hasn't been examined, or community relationships are weak. A critical yet compassionate review of these truths is necessary to prepare for co-design.
- **Building a Shared Equity Stance**: Co-design teams should explicitly discuss and agree on their equity principles and values. This might involve collectively writing an equity vision or commitment statement. By articulating what equity means to them—addressing race, gender, disability, or other dimensions—team members ensure they enter co-design aligned in purpose. For instance, a school district might commit to the principle of targeted universalism, aiming to set universal goals for student success but targeting extra support to students furthest from opportunity. Embracing such a stance requires understanding concepts like why a "race-neutral" approach is inadequate. If someone resists focusing on race or other power imbalances, the team must address that mindset early on. Without a common

understanding of equity, co-design efforts could devolve into superficial tweaks that don't challenge inequity.

Ultimately, readiness is about organizational courage. It means leadership actively supports sharing power with the community (backing it with resources and policy), and participants are willing to be vulnerable and learn. Leaders should ask themselves tough questions: Are we prepared to hear criticism from the community without becoming defensive? Are we willing to change course based on community input? If the answer is not yet, more internal work is needed before moving forward. As one guide notes, co-design teams that excel have "a culture of trust, courage, and shared ownership, meeting all preconditions for success." Reaching that level of trust and humility is the work of Chapter 1. By investing time in critical self-reflection, institutions lay the necessary groundwork of openness and mutual respect that true community co-design demands.

Notably, this internal work connects to the broader vision of co-design as a tool for equity and liberation. The work of co-design is "the work of collective liberation, aiming to dismantle hierarchical decision-making structures, redistribute power, and establish community-centered governance." In other words, co-design is not simply about generating ideas together—it is about transforming how decisions are made. To embark on that work earnestly, those traditionally holding power must first liberate themselves from old mindsets. They need to commit to being learners and listeners. By the end of this readiness phase, a co-design team should have a diverse and representative membership, a clear shared equity vision, leadership buy-in with concrete support, and a set of norms that encourage honesty and value all voices. With these pieces in place, the team is equipped to move to the next phase: establishing the conditions and relationships that will support a successful co-design process.

# CHAPTER 2: ESTABLISHING PRE-CONDITIONS FOR CO-DESIGN SUCCESS

Even with a committed, reflective team in place, effective co-design requires certain preconditions in the environment. Chapter 2 focuses on setting up the structural and relational conditions that enable community co-design to flourish. These preconditions include things like organizational buy-in, resource allocation, trustful relationships with stakeholders, and clarity of purpose. By proactively establishing these elements, institutions "set the table" for co-design so that the subsequent phases can be truly inclusive and impactful.

**Institutional Commitment and Resources:** A critical precondition is formal commitment from the institution's leadership. Equity-focused co-design cannot be an off-the-side experiment; it must be supported as a core strategy. This often means securing policy support or mandates for co-design. For example, a city government might pass a resolution endorsing a community co-design approach for its upcoming strategic plan, or a school board might write co-design into its equity policy. Such actions signal that leadership will support the process even if it challenges the status quo. High-level commitment should also translate into tangible resources: dedicated staff time, funding for meetings and outreach, and access to data and facilities. When leadership provides "time/funding to the process" and even adapts policy (e.g., creating a charter for the co-design committee), it demonstrates seriousness. Conversely, if leadership only offers verbal support but no resources, co-design efforts are likely to falter. An honest assessment of this precondition might involve asking: Has leadership explicitly prioritized this initiative among other duties? Is there a budget line or allocated staff for the co-design work? If not, those should be established now.

**Clear Scope and Equity Focus:** Another precondition is having a clearly defined equity challenge or focus that will guide the co-design work (which Chapter 3 will detail). At the outset, however, stakeholders need agreement on what problem they are addressing and why it matters. Institutions should frame the effort around a compelling equity goal – for instance, closing a racial achievement gap in a school district or improving access to city services for a marginalized community. Importantly, this framing must be explicit about inequities rather than vague or "race neutral." A poorly defined or generic goal (e.g., "improve education for all") can mask the

real equity issues. Early on, teams should review baseline disaggregated data and evidence to ensure they understand who is most impacted by the problem. For example, a district might present data showing that suspension rates for Black students are three times higher than for white students – making clear the focus is on racial discipline disparities. If such data is unavailable, gathering it becomes a precondition itself. In short, the team must establish a shared understanding of the problem grounded in evidence and an explicit equity lens. This often entails unearthing historical context (e.g., how past policies created the current challenge) and aligning on the urgency for change. When done well, it results in a guiding statement like: "We aim to co-design solutions to [specific inequity], so that [affected group] achieves equitable outcomes." With this clarity, the co-design effort has a north star and stays centered on equity.

**Stakeholder Inclusion and Trust-Building:** Co-design is only as strong as the relationships behind it. A key precondition, therefore, is having the right stakeholders meaningfully engaged from the start. In Chapter 1 the team composition was addressed; here the focus expands to broader stakeholder engagement. The institution should identify and reach out to those groups whose participation is essential (community leaders, advocacy groups, student representatives, parent organizations, etc.), if they are not already on the team. Establishing a stakeholder network or advisory group at this stage can formalize roles for community members. For instance, a municipality might convene a community advisory council of residents to partner with officials throughout the co-design initiative. However, simply inviting stakeholders is not enough – the relationships must be built on trust and mutual respect. Many communities, especially those marginalized, justifiably approach engagement with skepticism due to prior experiences of tokenism or broken promises. The institution must therefore invest time in trust-building activities as a precondition to co-design. This could include:

- **Listening Sessions and One-on-Ones:** Before any formal design sessions, conduct preliminary listening meetings where leaders simply hear concerns and hopes from community members. These initial sessions, even if informal, show good faith and help leaders learn about community priorities. They also help community members feel heard early, rather than only being asked to weigh in after ideas are already formed. Chicago's Greater Englewood neighborhood, for example, had suffered years of top-down decisions (like multiple school closures) that bred distrust. In response, organizers initiated a listening campaign before launching any solutions work, to rebuild relationships and validate community experiences. That listening became a trust-building cornerstone (more on this in Chapter 4).

- **Stakeholder Mapping and Outreach:** The team should map out who needs to be involved for the effort to be legitimate and effective. Are voices of those most affected (students, clients, residents from marginalized groups) present? Are there community-based organizations or advocacy groups that should

be partners? Once identified, intentional outreach is needed. This may involve meeting people where they are – visiting community centers, churches, or hosting events in neighborhood venues. Offering food, childcare, or stipends at this stage can lower barriers to participation and demonstrate respect for people's time. These practical considerations – often overlooked in traditional planning – are crucial preconditions for equitable co-design because they enable diverse participation from the outset.

- **Setting Norms of Collaboration:** As stakeholders come together, it's valuable to establish norms and agreements for how the collaboration will function. This might be facilitated in a kickoff workshop where community and staff collectively decide how meetings will run, how decisions will be made, and how conflicts will be handled. Agreeing on norms like "assume best intentions but also acknowledge impact" or committing to consensus decision-making helps create a safer space for shared work. By co-creating these rules of engagement, institutions signal that this will not be business-as-usual. For example, a norm might be that community representatives and officials have equal speaking time in meetings – a simple rule that counteracts hierarchical dynamics. Preconditions like these norms ensure that when co-design activities formally begin, there is already a respectful culture to support them.

**Aligning Policies and Practices:** In addition to people and plans, institutions should examine whether any existing policies, regulations, or power structures would inhibit authentic co-design – and address them upfront. This could be thought of as clearing obstacles out of the way. For instance, if a school district's decision-making bylaws don't allow non-district personnel on certain committees, the district might temporarily waive those rules or formally invite community members into an official task force role. Likewise, consider whether staff need training in collaborative facilitation, or if data-sharing rules need adjustment so community partners can access information. The organization should also evaluate current policies through an equity lens: Are they aligned with anti-racist principles and targeted universalism? If not, leadership should acknowledge these misalignments. Sometimes, early symbolic actions help demonstrate a break from old patterns – such as halting a controversial practice during the co-design period or publicly apologizing for past exclusion. These acts can build goodwill and show that the institution is serious about change. Essentially, institutions must prepare themselves to be good partners. This preparation may involve internal reforms so that the later co-design recommendations won't face immediate bureaucratic roadblocks.

By diligently establishing these preconditions, an institution creates a fertile ground for co-design to take root. One useful tool at this stage is the Co-Design Readiness Rubric (an evaluation tool provided in the Appendix of this guide). Using a rubric, teams can score themselves on factors like team inclusivity, leadership support, clarity of equity focus, and trust levels. If the rubric reveals mostly low scores (1s and 2s – indicating beginning

stages) on these dimensions, it's a sign to strengthen foundations before proceeding. Taking the time to bolster preconditions can make the difference between a co-design process that falters and one that succeeds. It is far better to delay the start of co-design workshops by a month or two to build capacity and trust, than to rush in and have the process break down due to predictable issues (like community members dropping out because they feel tokenized, or internal stakeholders resisting the process midway).

In summary, Chapter 2 emphasizes laying the groundwork: securing commitment, focusing the effort on a clear equity target, engaging stakeholders sincerely, and adjusting any internal structures necessary to support co-design. When these preconditions are met, the co-design team can enter the next phase with confidence and credibility. Now the stage is set to formally define the equity challenge and explore it in depth, which is the focus of Chapter 3.

# CHAPTER 3: DEFINING THE EQUITY CHALLENGE AND CONTEXT

With a prepared team and supportive conditions, the co-design process moves into defining the exact equity challenge to be addressed and understanding its context. This chapter is about developing a shared diagnosis of the problem before jumping to solutions. It involves analyzing data, engaging with the lived experiences of those affected, and pinpointing the root inequities that co-design will tackle. By the end of this phase, everyone involved should clearly grasp what the problem is. Who does it impact most? Why does it exist (contextually and historically)? Establishing this clarity ensures that subsequent co-design efforts target the right issues in the right way.

**Articulating the Equity Challenge:** The first step is to clearly state the equity challenge. Often, institutions begin with a broad issue (e.g., "racial disparities in reading achievement" or "lack of trust between police and community") and must refine it. A good problem definition is specific, measurable, and framed in equity terms. It identifies the undesirable outcome and the affected group(s). For example, rather than saying "improve school discipline," an equity-framed challenge would be "reduce the disproportionate suspension of Black students in middle schools and improve school climate for those students." This phrasing makes it explicit that the current system is inequitable and focuses attention on those most impacted. During this stage, the team should review quantitative data (disaggregated by race, gender, income, etc.) to ground the discussion. They might examine statistics, survey results, or service usage rates. Patterns in the data often reveal which groups are furthest from equitable outcomes—those become the focus. If multiple inequities emerge, the team may need to prioritize. Tools like problem statement templates or fishbone diagrams (which map out factors contributing to a problem) can help refine the challenge definition. It's important that the problem definition not be too narrow (just symptoms) nor too broad (everything at once). Aim for a scope that is actionable but significant in impact. In co-design, defining the right problem is half the battle—as design thinking pioneer Tim Brown notes, "Frame insights to focus the design challenge." A well-framed equity challenge will guide and inspire meaningful solutions later.

**Contextualizing the Issue—Data and Lived Experience:** Once the challenge is defined, the team delves into understanding why the problem exists and persists. This requires looking at both empirical evidence and lived experiences. On the data side, an equity audit is often conducted (which overlaps with Chapter 4's content on audits). An equity audit systematically examines disparities across various metrics (academic outcomes, resource allocation, hiring practices, etc.) to identify patterns of inequity. For instance, a school district might audit advanced course enrollment and find that English learners are under-enrolled in AP classes, highlighting a specific gap. In our co-design context, data analysis should illuminate root causes and not just symptoms. However, numbers alone don't tell the full story. Equally critical is gathering qualitative insights: hearing from those who live the problem every day. This is where community voice comes in during the defining phase. Techniques such as focus groups, interviews, or community forums are used to collect narratives and perspectives. The goal is to contextualize the data with real-world stories. For example, data might show low engagement of residents in a city's public meetings; community interviews might reveal that residents feel meetings are inaccessible or that past input was ignored—providing context about distrust or logistical barriers.

A powerful example of combining data and lived experience comes from the Greater Englewood community in Chicago. After a wave of school closures in Englewood (ten schools closed in a short span), the surface problem was clear—schools were shut down and enrollment dropped. But a deeper look was needed to define the equity challenge. Through a listening campaign in 2018, community members were asked about their priorities and how the school changes affected them. They spoke with remarkable candor, highlighting the need for an elected school board and "real community engagement," insisting on public school investment in their neighborhood, and decrying "racialized attacks on Black communities." These insights reframed the problem from just "school closings" to systemic disempowerment of a Black community in educational governance. The data (number of schools closed, demographic impact) combined with these testimonies painted a full picture: the equity challenge was not simply a facilities issue but a violation of community voice and racial equity. By defining the challenge in these terms, any co-designed solutions would need to address power dynamics and trust—not just reopen a school.

**Root Cause Analysis:** With context in hand, the team engages in identifying root causes. This is a critical analytical exercise to ensure that co-design targets underlying issues rather than superficial fixes. Common methods include the "5 Whys" (repeatedly asking why a problem exists to peel back layers) and constructing cause-and-effect diagrams. For instance, if the challenge is low uptake of city services by immigrant residents, asking "Why?" may surface causes such as language barriers, fear of immigration enforcement, lack of awareness, and prior negative experiences. Each cause can be examined further for its own root (e.g., why is there a lack of awareness—maybe because of poor outreach or no info in relevant languages). It's important the

team consider structural causes (policies, systemic biases) in addition to immediate causes. Often, historical analysis is enlightening here: understanding how things got to be this way. Perhaps a past policy decision or a long-standing resource inequity set the stage for the current problem. In education, for example, one might trace today's achievement gap back to decades of segregated schooling or funding disparities. Teams may bring in research or expert testimony at this stage. Scholarly literature, such as studies on the school-to-prison pipeline or health disparities, can provide evidence of root causes and effective practices to address them. Additionally, critical theories can inform the analysis: for example, intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) reminds us of that overlapping identities (race, gender, class) can compound disadvantage, which might be a root cause of why certain subgroups fare worse. Likewise, a critical race lens might point to institutional racism as a root cause (as Delgado & Stefancic (2017) describe, systemic biases can be deeply embedded in seemingly race-neutral policies). By naming these forces, the team ensures that co-design discussions later won't shy away from the tough issues.

During root cause analysis, visual aids can help. A problem tree diagram, for example, allows participants to map causes (roots) and effects (branches) of the core problem (trunk). This can be done collaboratively with stakeholders, including community members, so that diverse perspectives inform the analysis. One group might emphasize, say, lack of funding as a root cause, while community members might add that lack of cultural competence among service providers is another cause. Both can be true, and both would need different solution strategies. The process of joint root cause analysis is itself a trust-builder—it shows community participants that the institution is willing to dig deep and not avoid inconvenient truths. It also educates institutional staff on perspectives they may not have considered. For example, after Englewood residents raised the issue of "gentrification and racialized attacks" in the listening campaign, city officials involved had to acknowledge that policies outside of education (like housing and economic decisions) were contributing to community instability—a root cause beyond just the school system. This holistic understanding can broaden the scope of co-design or at least ensure cross-sector collaboration.

**Documenting the Baseline:** By the end of the define phase, it's useful to document the findings in a concise way, almost like a brief or narrative that can be shared with all participants. This might take the form of an Equity Challenge Brief that includes the defined problem statement, key data points illustrating the inequity, summaries of community input highlighting context and impacts, and a list of hypothesized root causes. Such a document ensures everyone is literally on the same page going forward. It can also serve as an anchor to return to when evaluating potential solutions: Does this idea address a root cause we identified? Does it serve the population we focused on? If not, the idea might be out of scope or misaligned.

Moreover, clearly defining the challenge and context is a way of drawing a boundary around the co-design effort. It sets expectations about what will (and won't) be addressed. Stakeholders know the mandate of the group. For instance, if the defined challenge is "inequitable disciplinary practices in middle schools," then perhaps issues in elementary schools or other aspects of schooling are acknowledged but set aside for now. Having that clarity helps manage scope creep and keeps the co-design work targeted.

In summary, Chapter 3 is about getting smart about the problem. It's where the co-design team becomes, collectively, an expert on the challenge at hand—blending data analysis with community wisdom. A quote often cited in design circles is, "Fall in love with the problem, not the solution." Here, to "love" the problem means to really invest time and care in understanding it deeply. When an equity challenge is defined with precision and empathy, the subsequent ideation (Chapter 5) will generate solutions that are far more likely to succeed. Additionally, a thorough definition phase builds credibility: when community members see their realities and voices reflected in the problem definition, they trust that this process is different. They see that it's not a predetermined agenda disguised as collaboration, but a genuine inquiry driven by their experiences and evidence. This trust is crucial as the process moves into the next phase: engaging in audits and listening to gather even more insight (Chapter 4), which in many cases happens in parallel or iteratively with defining the challenge.

# CHAPTER 4: CONDUCTING EQUITY AUDITS AND COMMUNITY LISTENING

Defining the problem sets the stage, and now the team dives even deeper through data auditing and intensive listening. Chapter 4 covers two intertwined activities: equity audits—a systematic review of policies, practices, and outcomes to identify inequities—and community listening—engaging with stakeholders (especially those most impacted) to gather their insights, experiences, and ideas. These activities further illuminate the challenge and begin to generate momentum and buy-in for co-creating solutions. By combining hard data with heartfelt stories, the co-design team ensures that their understanding of the issue is well-rounded and rooted in reality. Moreover, these activities embody the mantra "nothing about us without us," demonstrating that the process genuinely values community voice.

## EQUITY AUDITS: UNCOVERING SYSTEMIC INEQUITIES

An equity audit is a comprehensive examination of an institution's data and practices to see where inequities exist. It's essentially an internal diagnostic check for equity. Depending on the context, an equity audit may involve analyzing student achievement by demographic subgroups, reviewing allocation of resources among neighborhoods, assessing staff diversity, examining disciplinary actions, etc. The audit should align with the defined equity challenge from Chapter 3. For instance, if the challenge is about racial disparities in school discipline, the audit will scrutinize discipline referral data, suspension/expulsion rates, types of infractions, and perhaps the consistency of policy enforcement across schools. If the challenge is city services access, the audit might look at which zip codes or populations use each service, wait times, who is on advisory boards, and so on. Several key steps and principles guide the equity audit process:

**Gather Relevant Data:** Collect both quantitative and qualitative data relevant to the issue. Quantitative data could include metrics like test scores, budget figures, enrollment numbers, complaint logs, etc., disaggregated by relevant categories (race, income, disability status, language, gender, etc.). Qualitative data might include policy documents, past survey results, or interview transcripts. For example, a school district might gather school climate survey responses broken down by student subgroups to see if certain groups feel less safe or

respected. The School Equity Audit Tool (SEAT), an existing framework, suggests looking at multiple domains—from classroom practices to family engagement—to get a full picture of equity in a school setting. Our co-design team can use such frameworks to ensure we're not missing a domain.

**Identify Equity Indicators:** Determine which indicators will signal a problem. This might include gaps (differences between groups), thresholds (e.g., any group falling below a certain success rate), or comparisons to benchmarks. For example, one indicator could be the "representation" index"—comparing the percentage of minority teachers to minority students; a large discrepancy indicates an equity issue in staffing. Another indicator: "response time for service requests" in different neighborhoods; slower times in certain neighborhoods point to inequitable service. By laying out these indicators upfront, the team has a clear focus when analyzing data.

**Analyze and Visualize Data:** Once data is in hand, analyze for patterns. Calculate disparities; create charts or maps to visualize them. Often, disparities jump out when visualized—e.g., a bar chart of suspension rates by race might show one bar towering over others. Mapping data can show geographic inequities (like which areas have high vs. low access to parks or clinics). These visualizations are powerful for communicating the need for change. They can also be shared back with the community for validation: "Does this pattern reflect what you experience?" If the community says no, perhaps the data is incomplete; if yes, it reinforces the findings. During analysis, it's crucial to maintain an inquiry stance—numbers should lead to questions. For instance, if an audit finds that one school has much lower achievement for English learners than another, ask why: are there differences in programs, resources, or something else? This can guide further investigation or questions for listening sessions.

**Examine Policies and Practices:** A thorough equity audit doesn't just list disparities; it also reviews the policies or institutional practices that might be causing or perpetuating them. This could involve reading policy manuals, handbooks, or guidelines with a critical eye. Are there rules that, while seemingly neutral, disadvantage a particular group? (For example, a policy requiring parental signature on all homework might inadvertently disadvantage students whose parents' work nights or don't speak English, leading to lower grades for those students). In municipalities, perhaps a permitting process is so complex that only businesses with lots of resources can navigate it, excluding small minority-owned businesses. By flagging such policies, the team identifies targets for change. An audit might also reveal an absence of policy where one is needed (e.g., no translation services policy, meaning important information isn't accessible to non-English speakers).

**Benchmark and Research:** Sometimes it helps to compare with other similar institutions or known standards. If other districts or cities have achieved more equitable outcomes, what are they doing differently? Researching

promising practices can inform the audit. For instance, the team might learn that some districts have eliminated suspensions for minor infractions and see a narrowing of racial discipline gaps. Such knowledge points to practices that could be adopted. The audit phase can thus include compiling research briefs or expert input on what has worked elsewhere, adding to the knowledge base for co-design.

The result of an equity audit is typically a report or at least a summary of findings. This might list key inequities discovered (e.g., "Finding: English learners have disproportionately less access to experienced teachers—45% of EL students are taught by first- or second-year teachers, compared to 20% of non-ELL students"). It could also include infographics or tables for clarity. For our purposes, the audit findings feed directly into the co-design process: they highlight what areas any solutions must address. They also serve as a baseline to later measure improvement (Chapter 7 on evaluation will return to these baseline metrics).

## COMMUNITY LISTENING: CENTERING LIVED EXPERIENCES

Parallel to the data work, community listening activities ensure that the voices and experiences of those who face the inequity daily are front and center. While Chapter 3 likely included initial conversations to define the problem, Chapter 4 involves more structured and in-depth listening efforts. This could take many forms—listening sessions, town hall meetings, empathy interviews, storytelling circles—and is often an ongoing process throughout co-design. The intention is twofold: gather insights and build trust/inclusion. When done sincerely, listening sessions can be transformative, turning skepticism into cautious optimism among community members as they see that this time their input might genuinely influence outcomes.

A signature listening method highlighted in this framework is the Empathy Interview model, developed by Liam Bird and LRFB Equity Consulting, LLC as part of their community co-design approach. Empathy interviews are one-on-one conversations that seek to deeply understand a person's experiences, emotions, and needs regarding a particular issue. Unlike a typical survey or public comment period, empathy interviews are semi-structured, open-ended, and conducted in a safe, respectful manner to elicit honest storytelling. The interviewer might start with an open prompt like, "Tell me about a time when you felt affected by [the issue]," and then gently probe with follow-up questions. This method, rooted in human-centered design practices, "emerged from design thinking" as a way to surface lived experiences that drive systems change. In education and municipal contexts, empathy interviews help policymakers step into the shoes of students, parents, or residents. They draw on techniques from Motivational Interviewing (which emphasizes empathetic, nonjudgmental dialogue) and Appreciative Inquiry (which identifies strengths and hopes). The Empathy Interview Workbook created by LRFB Equity Consulting provides teams with a structured script and questions, ensuring the interviews cover key topics while remaining conversational. For example, it includes core

questions like, "How do you feel about the [policy/system]? Tell me about your experiences with it," and imaginative prompts like "If you could redesign it, what would it look like?" Such questions invite interviewees to share frustrations and also dream about solutions, yielding rich qualitative data.

In our co-design initiative, we embed empathy interviews as a central listening strategy. Suppose the equity challenge is improving special education services in the district. The team would conduct empathy interviews with a variety of stakeholders: students in special education, their parents, special ed teachers, perhaps even students who exited special ed or those who avoided it due to stigma. By assuring confidentiality and using an opening script that explains the purpose (to learn and improve, not to judge), interviewers create a space for candid input. The result might be dozens of stories that reveal common themes—perhaps parents consistently mention feeling left out of the planning process for their child, or students share that they feel labeled and isolated. These insights are gold for co-design. They not only validate the issues identified by data but also uncover subtleties that numbers can't show (like the emotional toll on families or specific instances that illustrate barriers).

Beyond interviews, community forums or listening sessions can gather multiple voices together. These might be facilitated dialogues in which participants discuss the issue and suggest changes. Strategies for inclusive dialogue include using small breakout groups (so that quieter voices have a chance to speak), providing interpretation in multiple languages, and using interactive activities (like placing dots on a chart to vote on priority concerns or creating empathy maps). One effective approach is to present some of the equity audit data at a community meeting and ask for reactions: "Does this data surprise you? Does it resonate with your experience? What's missing?" This validates community members as experts and partners in analysis. It's important that such sessions not be mere box-checking—they should be designed to genuinely inform the process. A good practice is to have notetakers or even audio recordings (with permission) so that all input is captured verbatim. Afterward, the team can synthesize the input to identify key themes or direct quotes that highlight community sentiment.

The Greater Englewood Listening Campaign (2018) serves as a strong example of community listening in action. Led by Liam Bird as principal investigator, the campaign engaged dozens of community stakeholders to discuss education priorities in the wake of school closures. Over several months, interviews were conducted with 8 elected officials and 25+ educators and community leaders connected to Englewood. This extensive outreach ensured perspectives from multiple angles—from aldermen to local school principals—were gathered. The findings, as noted earlier, highlighted community desires for more voice and influence in decisions (e.g., an elected school board) and fears to be addressed (gentrification, disinvestment). By publishing these findings and

presenting them to the Board of Education, the campaign aimed to "support continuous improvement in community engagement." In doing so, it didn't just extract information; it positioned the community's words as a guiding document for policymakers. For our co-design team, referencing the Englewood campaign is instructive: it shows the value of thorough listening and treating the output of that listening as a key input for change. It also models transparency—the Englewood campaign produced a report that was shared publicly, a step we should emulate to close the feedback loop with participants (i.e., "You spoke, we listened, here's what we heard").

**Synthesizing and Integrating Insights:** After or during these listening activities, the team should regularly come together to synthesize what they are hearing. This means distilling raw input into usable insights. Techniques from design research can help; for instance, writing individual anecdotes or quotes on sticky notes and then clustering them by theme. If many people mention "communication problems," that becomes a theme to address. If trust keeps coming up, note it as a barrier. It's crucial to preserve the authenticity of what's said—use direct quotes whenever possible in summaries to keep the human element. For example, a parent's quote like "I often feel like decisions are made for us, not with us" can be a powerful encapsulation of the issue of powerlessness and can drive the team to ensure co-design flips that dynamic. The empathy interview data might also include more optimistic or asset-based insights—like what's currently working or stories of when someone felt heard. These can point to leverage points and bright spots to build on.

The integration of audit data and community input is where the full picture emerges. Perhaps the data showed a problem, and community input explains why that problem persists or what its effects are. Conversely, community members might identify an issue the data didn't capture, prompting the team to find data or evidence to quantify it. Together, these inform the problem narrative that will guide solution design. By the end of Chapter 4's activities, the co-design team should have a detailed understanding of the challenge, backed by both statistics and stories. They should be able to articulate, for example, "We have a discipline system that disproportionately affects students of color; the data shows Black students are 3x more likely to be suspended for the same infractions, and listening sessions revealed that students feel targeted and misunderstood by staff, and families fear punitive responses. Policies like zero tolerance and lack of teacher training on cultural responsiveness seem to be contributing factors." With that level of insight, the stage is perfectly set to brainstorm and co-create solutions that address those specific factors, which is the work of Chapter 5.

Another outcome of robust listening is building a coalition. Those who participated in equity audits and listening are now more informed and often more invested. Community members start to see themselves as co-designers even before formal ideation begins because they contributed to defining the problem and providing

input. This increases the likelihood they will stay engaged through the solution phase and champion the outcomes. It is the beginning of shifting ownership: the problem is no longer "the district's problem" or "the city's problem"—it" becomes our problem, understood collectively.

In conclusion, Chapter 4 reinforces that data and dialogue go hand in hand. Equity audits bring out the facts of inequality; community listening brings out the feelings and experiences behind those facts. Both are indispensable. Institutions often jump to solutions with incomplete information, but by committing to thoroughly listen and learn, the co-design team honors the complexity of the issue and the expertise of the community. This sets a tone of respect and collaboration that will carry into designing solutions together in the next chapter.

# CHAPTER 5: CO-DESIGNING SOLUTIONS WITH THE COMMUNITY

Armed with a deep understanding of the equity challenge and its root causes, the team now moves into the heart of the process: co-designing solutions. In this phase, those most impacted by the problem join with institutional staff to imagine and develop strategies, initiatives, or policy changes that will advance the equity goal. Co-design is where power-sharing becomes concrete – it is not just asking communities for input but working in true partnership to create solutions. This chapter outlines how to facilitate an effective co-design process, ensuring it remains community-centered and oriented toward transformative change rather than token adjustments.

## PRINCIPLES OF AUTHENTIC CO-DESIGN

To set the stage, the team should affirm key principles that will guide the co-design sessions:

- **Shared Power and Decision-Making:** True co-design means the traditional power hierarchy is flattened. The expertise of community members is valued on par with that of professionals. In practical terms, this could mean community members co-facilitate design meetings, or that ideas generated by community stakeholders are given equal weight to those from officials, not overridden or diluted. Institutions must be willing to relinquish control and actively incorporate community leadership. A concrete mechanism is to create a shared governance structure for the design phase – for example, a design committee or task force that grants community representatives real decision-making authority (not just an "advisory" label). This might be formalized in writing: e.g., an agreement that any proposal coming out of co-design will be jointly presented by community and staff to the school board or city council, indicating joint ownership.

- **Trust and Transparency:** By this stage, some trust has been built, but maintaining and growing it is crucial. Co-design discussions should be transparent – all participants have access to the same information (data from the audit, notes from listening sessions, etc.), and there are no hidden agendas. If certain constraints exist (budget limits, legal barriers), facilitators should be upfront about them so the

group can work within or around them creatively. Establishing "design criteria" collaboratively at the outset can help keep the process transparent and focused. For example, the group might agree that any proposed solution must: (a) directly address at least one root cause identified, (b) promote inclusion/belonging for the affected group, and (c) be feasible within certain resource constraints. These criteria, co-created with the community, set a common yardstick for evaluating ideas and ensure everyone knows the goals.

- **Equity and Inclusion in the Process:** The process itself should model equity. This means being intentional about inclusion in every activity. Meetings should be accessible (in location, timing, language, format) to all participants. If certain voices are quieter, facilitators find ways to lift them up (like round-robin sharing or anonymous idea submissions). If technical jargon arises, it's explained or avoided. Culturally responsive facilitation techniques – such as opening with a community norm like a check-in or grounding exercise that resonates with participants – can make the space more welcoming. Remember that for many community members, this may be their first experience being treated as an equal partner in governance; it's important to continually signal respect and appreciation for their contributions. As one framework emphasizes, "students, families, and community partners should lead design processes; participation is authentic, not performative." This might involve alternating meeting venues between official offices and community spaces, or rotating who leads different parts of the agenda (perhaps a student leads the brainstorming segment on improving school climate).

- **Focus on Root Causes and Systems Change:** To avoid co-design devolving into superficial tweaks, the team should keep the conversation anchored on root causes (identified in prior chapters) and aim for systemic solutions. Co-design solutions should not just treat symptoms. For instance, if the issue is lack of representation of minority students in advanced classes, a token solution would be "create a tutoring program" (addressing a symptom of lower prep) whereas a systemic co-designed solution might be "revamp the criteria for advanced class entry and provide honors courses in all neighborhood schools," which tackles root causes like gatekeeping mechanisms and resource distribution. The co-design group should feel empowered to propose changes at the policy or structural level. Of course, quick wins and programmatic ideas are welcome too, but facilitators can pose questions that push for depth: "How does this idea address the root causes we identified?" or "Would this change the system, so the problem doesn't recur?".

## CO-DESIGN SESSION STRATEGIES

Co-design sessions can take many forms, but they often borrow from design thinking and participatory planning methodologies. Typically, multiple sessions or workshops are held, moving from brainstorming to prototyping and refinement. Here are common strategies and how to apply them in an equity-focused way:

- **Ideation and Brainstorming:** Using the insights from the equity audit and listening phase, participants generate a wide range of possible solutions. A hallmark of brainstorming is suspending judgment – encouraging wild ideas and not dismissing anything initially. Techniques like "How Might We" questions are useful to spark creativity. For instance, for Englewood's challenge, the team might ask, "How might we ensure Englewood students have a direct voice in decisions about their schools?" or "How might we invest in Englewood's schools in ways that uplift the community's well-being?". These prompts tie solutions to earlier identified root issues (voice in governance, community investment). Small group breakouts can help diversify idea generation. Each group could tackle a different angle of the problem. It's crucial during brainstorming that community members feel safe to propose bold ideas – even ones that challenge the institution fundamentally. If, say, a student suggests "What if students had a vote on the school board?" That idea should be written down and explored, not immediately shot down for being unconventional. Often, quantity leads to quality – many ideas are put out, and later the group can combine or refine them into stronger concepts.

- **Empathy-Driven Design:** Participants are encouraged to design with specific personas or end-users in mind, often reflecting the most impacted population. For example, in a school discipline co-design, one persona might be "A 9th-grade Black male student who has been suspended before." The group asks, "Would this solution work for this student? How would it impact his experience?" Designing for extreme or marginalized users tends to yield solutions that are more inclusive. This concept is related to targeted universalism – if you design for those furthest from opportunity, the solutions often benefit everyone. Co-designers might even create journey maps of these personas: mapping a day in their life or their journey through a process, to pinpoint moments where intervention is needed. By keeping these perspectives at the center, the solutions are more likely to be equity-focused and grounded in reality. Empathy tools can be reused here: for instance, share a particularly telling quote from an interview (without names) and ask, "Does our idea speak to this person's concern?" If not, how could it be adjusted?

- **Prototyping and Visualization:** Once a set of promising ideas is generated, the group can pick a few to develop into more concrete concepts. Prototyping in a policy or program context means creating a draft

model or visualization of how the solution would work. This could be a simple sketch of a new process, a mock-up of a new form or dashboard, a role-play of a new parent-teacher conference format, etc. The idea is to make the solution tangible enough that people can give feedback on it. Community participants might sketch a new layout for a public aid office waiting room to make it more welcoming or draw a flowchart of a reimagined counseling referral process at school that includes student peer advocates. Prototyping encourages iterative improvement: the group presents the prototype, discusses what they like and concerns they have, then refines it. It is essential to iterate with the community, not internally behind closed doors. For example, if one solution is to create a "Community Oversight Committee" for school disciplinary actions, the co-design group could draft the committee's structure and guidelines, then workshop it together – role-playing a scenario or debating the draft charter – to identify pitfalls or enhancements before finalizing.

- **Feedback Loops:** Co-design should involve continuous feedback. This might be built into sessions (after brainstorming, do a gallery walk where everyone leaves sticky note comments on each idea; after prototyping, have a round of "likes, concerns, suggestions"). Additionally, the group can solicit feedback from a wider circle. Perhaps after a couple of workshops, they present the top ideas back to the broader community (via a survey or town hall) to gauge support and get fresh input. In Englewood's case, for instance, after initial co-design sessions, the group might host a community meeting at a local church to share ideas like "elect local school councils with real power" or "launch a neighborhood school investment fund" and let residents react. This ensures the co-designed solutions have broader buy-in and that no major perspective was missed. It also continues the transparent ethos: the community sees progress and feels a part of it.

- **Expert and Evidence Check:** While community wisdom is front and center, it can be valuable to loop in subject-matter experts or research evidence at certain points to support or challenge ideas. For instance, if the group is designing a new reading curriculum approach to help English learners, an educator or researcher with expertise in bilingual education might be invited to weigh in on the feasibility of the idea or share what has worked elsewhere. This is a delicate balance – experts should not dominate or dismiss community ideas but rather enrich the discussion. Their role is to provide information that the group can then incorporate. Similarly, checking ideas against evidence: do pilot studies or case studies exist for similar ideas? This can help refine them. For example, if a co-designed idea is to implement "restorative justice circles" instead of suspensions, looking at other districts that have tried this (like Oakland USD's known program) will provide insight on what resources are needed and what outcomes to expect.

Throughout co-design sessions, facilitators have to manage dynamics and keep things moving toward actionable outputs. Tensions can arise – say, a community member feels an official isn't truly listening, or an official worry a suggestion is unrealistic. It's critical to uphold the norms and remind everyone of the shared purpose and the process agreements (from Chapter 2). If power imbalances show (maybe officials talking over others), facilitators should address it (perhaps by explicitly giving floor to community voices first in each discussion segment). The process might not always be smooth, but working through those challenges is part of the relationship-building. It's democracy in microcosm – messy but rewarding.

**Case Example – Englewood's Co-Design Outcomes:** Recalling the Englewood scenario helps illustrate co-design in action. After the listening campaign, imagine the co-design team identified two major root issues: lack of community says in school governance, and lack of holistic support for students affected by school closures. They might co-design solutions such as: establishing an Elected Local School Council for Englewood schools with real decision power and creating a wraparound support program for displaced students that includes mentoring, mental health services, and community-led afterschool activities. In developing these, community members would share what governance structures they trust (perhaps drawing on the history of elected school boards in other cities) and design how council members are chosen. For the support program, students might describe what support they wish they had, and community groups might volunteer to lead certain pieces. The result would be a plan far more attuned to Englewood's needs than any top-down policy could be. It differs markedly from central-office mandates because it originates from community-defined priorities. Co-design, at its core, is about redistributing power in how decisions are made – treating community members as designers of policy, not just as beneficiaries or observers.

## REFINEMENT AND FINALIZING PROPOSALS

By the end of co-design workshops, the aim is to have one or several fleshed-out proposals that the group believes will address the equity challenge. These might be detailed initiatives or a set of policy recommendations. It's important to document these proposals clearly, ideally co-written by community and institutional members together to reinforce joint ownership. Each proposal should articulate what is being proposed, how it works, who is responsible, and why it will advance equity (tying back to the challenge and root causes). Including some measure of expected outcomes is good practice, so the evaluation phase knows what to look for.

Refinement involves checking the proposals against the criteria set earlier and the community's inputs. The group might run a final rubric or scorecard exercise: scoring each proposal on criteria like equity impact, feasibility, community support, etc., to help prioritize or improve them. If multiple solutions are proposed, it

may not be possible to do all at once – so prioritization could be needed. The co-design team should make those decisions collaboratively, perhaps deciding on a phased approach (e.g., implement two proposals now, and plan the third for next year). Ensuring that community members agree with the final decisions is paramount. A quick thumbs-up/down or consensus check can verify this. It would undermine the process if, at the end, officials cherry-picked only the ideas they liked. Instead, if there are concerns about any proposal, they should be discussed and either adjusted or consensually tabled. The product of co-design is not just a set of ideas, but a stronger relationship between community and institution – and that should not be compromised at the finish line.

Finally, before moving to implementation, it's worth celebrating the work done so far. The co-design group can present their proposals in a community forum or to leadership in a public way. This moment is both a validation and a handoff – showing transparency and giving credit to all involved (e.g., "This plan was co-created by a team of parents, students, and district staff."). As Chapter 6 will cover, implementation will require sustained collaboration, but the co-design phase often brings a burst of hope and energy. It's the point where people begin to see a concrete path forward, one they designed themselves. For communities that have long felt disenfranchised, that is empowering in and of itself.

In summary, Chapter 5 demonstrates what collaborative innovation looks like in an equity context. By adhering to principles of shared power, fostering creative strategies, and keeping the process grounded in community realities, co-design yields solutions that are innovative, culturally relevant, and likely to have broad buy-in. This is the true promise of co-design – solutions that are not only technically sound, but also legitimate in the eyes of the community, because they had a hand in creating them. Now, with co-designed solutions in hand, the focus shifts to putting them into action and sustaining the change, which we turn to in Chapter 6.

# CHAPTER 6: IMPLEMENTATION AND SUSTAINING PRACTICE

Designing solutions is a significant milestone, but the journey does not end with a plan on paper. Chapter 6 addresses the crucial phase of implementation—turning co-designed ideas into reality—and how to sustain equity practices over the long term. Far too often, well-intentioned plans falter during execution. To avoid this, the same collaborative, equity-centered approach used in design must carry into implementation. This chapter discusses strategies for launching co-designed initiatives, building accountability, and ensuring that the changes become embedded in the institution's culture and operations rather than fading away as a one-time project.

**Collaborative Implementation Teams:** One immediate step is to establish or transition the co-design team into an implementation team. In many cases, the co-design working group continues on, possibly with some additional members who have operational expertise. This helps maintain continuity and community involvement. The people who helped design the solution should ideally be involved in putting it into practice—this keeps the spirit of co-ownership alive. For example, if the solution was to create a new Community Oversight Committee for school discipline, members of the co-design team from the community might become the inaugural committee members or help select them. An implementation team might operate with subgroups focusing on different parts of the plan (e.g., one group handles training staff on the new practice, another oversees outreach to families about it). By organizing in a distributed way, more stakeholders can take active roles.

**Action Planning:** To move from concept to action, a detailed plan is needed. This includes setting timelines, assigning responsibilities, and securing resources. Tools like Gantt charts or simply implementation worksheets can be used. A good practice is to outline immediate steps (next 30-60-90 days) and longer-term milestones. Each component of the co-designed solution should have a clear owner (or co-owner pairing a staff member with a community member). For instance, if a new curriculum is part of the solution, the action plan might state, "By August, Mr. X (district curriculum lead) and Ms. Y (parent representative) will convene a committee to adapt the curriculum, pilot it in 2 classrooms by January, and finalize revisions by May." This paired ownership (staff + community) is a tangible way to keep power shared and ensure multiple perspectives in decision-

making as implementation unfolds. It also distributes labor—community partners may take the lead on pieces that tap into their strengths (like relationship-building tasks, volunteer coordination, etc.), while institutional staff handle bureaucratic or technical tasks, but with mutual input at each step.

**Ensuring Accountability:** Accountability mechanisms are vital so that the equity focus isn't lost during implementation. One effective mechanism is to use the Co-Design Rubric (introduced in the Appendix) as a living tool. The rubric provides indicators of strong practice at each phase (like implementation & accountability, monitoring, etc.). The team can periodically self-assess using the rubric to check how they are doing—for example, are they at a "Proficient" level for stakeholder involvement in implementation, or slipping to "Developing"? If a pattern of low scores emerges (say, they realize community members are being left out of key decisions, which would be a 1 or 2 on the rubric's scale for inclusion), they can course-correct deliberately. Another accountability structure is to maintain transparent communication about progress. This might involve regular public updates—posting minutes of implementation meetings, sending newsletters to the community, or reporting to the school board or city council on status. Knowing that progress (or lack thereof) will be visible can motivate the institution to follow through. Additionally, community members can act as accountability partners. If certain commitments were made (e.g., funding a new program), those community partners should feel empowered to speak up if they see backtracking or delay.

In some cases, formal agreements or policy changes are put in place to lock in the commitment. For example, the city might pass an ordinance establishing the new program with a dedicated budget line, or the school board might adopt a policy change that enshrines the new approach. These formalizations ensure the work isn't just voluntary or vulnerable to leadership change. It answers the question: What stops an institution from reverting to old ways in a year or two? By institutionalizing the co-designed changes, they become part of "how we do business." One community member might quip, "Put it in" writing!"—getting key elements codified is indeed crucial for sustainability.

**Capacity Building and Training:** Implementing equity-centered solutions often requires people to learn new skills or approaches. For example, if the solution involves a restorative justice approach in schools, staff and even students will need training in the facilitation of circles and conflict mediation. If the solution involves a new data dashboard for transparency, someone needs to develop and maintain it, and stakeholders need to learn how to interpret it. Thus, the implementation plan should include a capacity-building component. This might entail workshops, professional development sessions, or bringing in coaches. The co-design group should ask, Who needs to be equipped to make this successful? And what support do they need? Sometimes, community members themselves may need support to participate fully in implementation roles (e.g., training community

volunteers to serve on committees or to understand budgeting processes if they co-monitor spending). Providing that support is part of sustaining the effort.

Moreover, maintaining an equity lens may require ongoing equity training or reflection even during implementation. As new people get involved (maybe a new principal at a school or turnover in city staff), they should be brought up to speed on the equity foundations of the project. Including them in a mini version of Chapter 1's reflection or a briefing on why this work matters can align new actors with the vision.

**Monitoring Progress and Adjusting (Continuous Improvement):** Implementation should be treated not as a linear execute-and-done but as an iterative process of improvement (connecting forward to Chapter 7). Early on, decide what short-term indicators of progress to track. For example, if implementing a new policy, maybe track the number of participants using it or immediate feedback. Plan for regular check-ins (monthly or quarterly) where the team reviews these indicators and any feedback gathered, then makes adjustments. This agile approach prevents minor issues from derailing the project. It is essentially applying continuous improvement cycles (Plan-Do-Study-Act) to the implementation itself. This also keeps stakeholders engaged—they see that their input still matters as tweaks are made along the way.

**Institutionalization and Culture Change:** Sustaining equity practice means making it part of the organizational DNA. Beyond the specific solution, the organization should consider what structures or norms need to change to support ongoing co-design and equity work. This could involve setting up permanent channels for community input (like a standing equity advisory council or annual community forums) so that the collaboration doesn't end after this project. It might also involve aligning other policies or budget priorities with the co-designed initiative. For instance, if a district co-designed a new approach to student support, the district might integrate that approach into its strategic plan and allocate funding for it in future budgets (not just grant-funded pilots).

Cultural change is harder to quantify but critical. The experiences of co-design and joint implementation can begin to shift organizational culture toward one of partnership and responsiveness. Leadership should highlight and celebrate this shift—e.g., superintendents or mayors can acknowledge how community co-design improved outcomes, giving credit to the collaborative approach. Storytelling is a tool here: sharing success stories from the implementation where community and staff solved a problem together reinforces the value of the new way of working. Over time, as staff see positive results (such as better outcomes or less public conflict), they may become champions of co-design approaches for other issues. The end goal is for the institution to view co-design not as an extraordinary process for a special project, but as a standard practice for tackling challenges. In

an ideal scenario, when a new policy issue arises, leaders instinctively say, "We need to co-design a response with those affected," because it has been normalized as how things are done.

**Maintaining Community Engagement:** One risk is that once the excitement of design is over, community members drift away during the grind of implementation. To counter this, sustain the engagement by continuously valuing their role. This can be done by keeping meetings engaging and not overly bureaucratic, by showing how their involvement is leading to tangible change (quick wins or visible actions help), and by acknowledging their contributions (a simple public thank-you or a certificate of appreciation can go a long way, but more substantially, perhaps offering continued stipends or positions for community leads if feasible). Also, celebrate successes together. When the first milestone is hit—e.g., the new program launches—hold a community ribbon-cutting or event that marks the achievement and reiterates that it was co-designed and is now co-implemented by everyone. These gestures reinforce mutual commitment.

Let's illustrate with a concrete example from our running case: Suppose Englewood's co-designed solutions (from the Chapter 5 example) are being implemented—an Elected Local School Council (ELSC) and a Student Support Program. For the ELSC, the implementation includes drafting bylaws, conducting elections, and training council members. The co-design team might continue as the steering group, ensuring this happens. They'd set a timeline: bylaws by March, nominations by May, elections by June, and the first meeting by September. They'd likely need to secure the school district's legal approval (which, given district leaders were in the co-design team, is more likely). To sustain it, the district might embed the ELSC model into district policy for all schools in that region. The accountability might be that the ELSC has a formal role in school budget approval, etc., ensuring it has teeth. Meanwhile, for the Student Support Program, maybe a community organization takes on running mentorship while the district hires a social worker for mental health support—a shared implementation. They'd track the number of students served and early outcomes (attendance, well-being surveys), reviewing these monthly and adjusting (if few students attend after school, maybe adjust timing or transportation). Community members on the implementation team could check with students informally to gather feedback, then suggest changes (e.g., different types of activities or snacks to improve attendance). Over a couple of years, these initiatives, if successful, could become permanent fixtures. The Englewood community might then push to replicate them in other neighborhoods—a sign that the co-designed solutions had not only local impact but also influence on wider policy.

One more aspect of sustaining practice is planning for leadership transitions. People in key roles (on both the community and institution sides) may eventually move on. By documenting processes, creating manuals, or institutional memory, the practices can endure. For instance, if a principal who championed the co-design effort

leaves, the district should brief the new principal thoroughly on the project and ideally recruit them into the same philosophy. Community partners can help here too by meeting with new officials to share the history and successes, basically onboarding them into the culture of co-design that's been established.

In summary, Chapter 6 emphasizes that equity work is a marathon, not a sprint. Implementation is where the rubber meets the road, and it requires persistence, adaptation, and steadfast commitment to the values of equity and collaboration. By keeping the community as co-implementers, building strong accountability loops, and embedding changes into the system, the co-design effort transitions from a project to a sustained practice. As the chapter concludes, the stage is set for Chapter 7, which will focus on evaluation and iterative improvement—essentially, how to learn from the implementation and keep the cycle of equity-focused innovation going.

# CHAPTER 7: EVALUATION, MONITORING, AND ITERATIVE IMPROVEMENT

The final phase of the community co-design cycle is dedicated to evaluation, monitoring, and iterative improvement. In many ways, this brings the process full circle: the team reflects on what has been implemented, assesses its impact on the equity challenge, and uses those insights to refine and improve the work continuously. Importantly, this phase should remain participatory co-evaluation is as critical as co-design. By engaging stakeholders in examining results and deciding on next steps, the process ensures accountability to the community and fosters a culture of learning and adaptation rather than one-off solutions.

**Participatory Evaluation:** Traditional evaluation might involve outside experts measuring outcomes. In an equity-centered co-design approach, we instead lean towards participatory evaluation, where community members and institutional stakeholders collectively define what success looks like and examine progress. Early on (back in Chapter 3 or 5), the team likely set some goals or indicators of success for their solutions. Now is the time to gather data on those indicators. This could include quantitative data (e.g., has the racial disparity in discipline decreased? Did more families engage in school meetings? and qualitative feedback (e.g., do students feel a greater sense of belonging? How do community members perceive the changes? A participatory evaluation might involve community surveys, focus groups, or town halls to get broad input on how people experience the changes.

What makes it participatory is not just gathering feedback from the community but involving community representatives in the design of the evaluation and interpretation of data. For example, if a survey is used, community members can help craft the questions to ensure they're culturally appropriate and relevant. When results come in, a mixed group of community members and staff can convene to review the data together. This joint analysis is powerful—community members might see patterns or raise interpretations that staff alone might miss, and vice versa. It also continues to build trust, as there is transparency in discussing what worked and what didn't. Culturally responsive evaluation practices emphasize using methods that respect participants' culture and context. In our setting, this might mean conducting feedback sessions in multiple languages or having community facilitators lead discussions, so participants feel more open.

**Tracking Equity Indicators:** Using the baseline data from the equity audit (Chapter 4) as a starting point, the team now looks at those same metrics post-implementation. Did the metrics move towards equity? For example, if the baseline showed 15% of Black students in advanced courses (versus 40% white), what is it now after implementing the co-designed recruitment and support program? If there is little movement, why might that be? If there is improvement, can it be attributed to the changes made? The group should be careful to consider external factors too (maybe a pandemic interrupted the program, affecting results, etc.). The aim is not to assign blame but to understand impact. The School Equity Audit Tool (SEAT) process, which our approach complements, similarly calls for checking data in later phases to measure progress. If certain goals haven't been met, that's not a failure but an indication that further work or different strategies are needed.

**Community Perception and Experience:** Numbers are important, but so is how people feel. An initiative might statistically reduce a gap but still not be viewed as legitimate by the community if the process soured or other issues remain. Thus, evaluation should explicitly include questions about trust, satisfaction, and empowerment. For instance, ask community participants, "Do you feel the institution is more responsive to your voice now than before this process?" or "How confident are you that the changes made will be sustained?" Improved community trust and empowerment are themselves outcomes of interest in equity work. They indicate a strengthening of democratic engagement. One could measure this via surveys or more qualitatively via interviews. Participatory evaluation might even involve training some community members as co-researchers who conduct interviews or analyze qualitative data—further building capacity and insight on the ground.

**Reflecting on the Co-Design Process:** The team should also evaluate the process, not just the outcomes. What went well in the co-design approach? What could be improved next time? This meta-reflection turns the lens inward. Maybe participants note that the listening phase should have included more youth or that communication between meetings could be better. Perhaps staff realized they needed more training in collaborative facilitation. Documenting these lessons will help refine the co-design model for future cycles. In fact, building an organizational memory of these processes is part of becoming a learning organization. Some places create a brief "after-action report" or case study of their co-design initiative to summarize outcomes and process learnings. This not only helps internal improvement but can be shared to help others (and contributes to the growing field of practice around co-design in governance).

**Continuous Improvement Cycles:** Once evaluation data and feedback are gathered, the question is, what now? Co-design for equity is an iterative cycle, meaning the work is continuous. If the outcomes are positive but not yet at the goal, the team can iterate on the solutions. If something didn't work as expected tweak or try a new approach—essentially, go back to some of the earlier phase tasks with the new knowledge. For example,

suppose the evaluation finds that while overall discipline incidents went down, the disparity by race persisted. The team might reconvene some listening sessions to understand why (maybe certain root causes weren't fully addressed) and then brainstorm additional or revised strategies (essentially a mini co-design loop). This doesn't mean starting from scratch, but rather refining. It's akin to an engineering process of prototyping -> testing -> improving.

By establishing a continuous improvement mindset, the group avoids the trap of "one and done." Equity challenges, especially those that are longstanding and systemic, often require sustained effort and multiple interventions over time. The co-design approach sets up a framework for that: implement, evaluate, redesign, re-implement, and so on. Many improvement science methodologies (like PDSA—Plan, Do, Study, Act cycles) align with this thinking. Here, our "Plan" was the co-design plan, "Do" was implementation, "Study" is this evaluation, and "Act" is adjusting based on what we learned. Then the cycle repeats. An essential element is documenting changes and results each cycle, so progress (or lack thereof) is visible.

**Monitoring and Transparency:** While formal evaluation might happen at certain endpoints (e.g., the one-year mark), ongoing monitoring should occur in real-time. That means regularly reviewing data or community feedback as described in Chapter 6's continuous check-ins, which flows into this chapter. A transparent monitoring system could be something like a public dashboard or report card for the initiative. For instance, the city might publish quarterly updates on an equity initiative's key metrics (similar to how some cities track performance on their websites). This transparency serves both as a communication tool and an accountability tool, as mentioned. When stakeholders see updated information, they know the work hasn't stalled. If targets are set (like "by 2025, double the percentage of minority-owned businesses getting city contracts"), then yearly progress can be publicly tracked.

It's also valuable to monitor unintended consequences. Sometimes an intervention can have side effects—positive or negative—that weren't anticipated. The team should stay attuned to those by keeping open communication channels. Perhaps a new policy solved one issue but inadvertently caused extra work for teachers, leading to some pushback. Or maybe a program aimed at one group ended up benefiting another as well (the curb-cut effect, where solving for a marginalized group benefits many, could be observed). Recognizing these helps adjust and also capture the full value of the efforts.

**Celebrating and Spreading Success:** Evaluation isn't only about finding problems; it's also about recognizing success. When goals are met or substantial progress is made, the team and community should celebrate and acknowledge it. This reinforces the effort and motivates everyone to continue. Moreover, success can be used to advocate for scaling or replicating the approach. If a co-designed initiative in one school yields great results,

perhaps it should be expanded district wide. The evaluated results provide the evidence to make that case. It can also influence policy beyond the local context—documented success can be shared in conferences, networks, or with other agencies, contributing to broader change. For example, Englewood's efforts, if shown effective in rebuilding trust and improving student outcomes, could be shared with other communities facing school closures, potentially influencing city-wide policy on how such closures are handled (with more community voice). In this sense, the co-design project can serve as a pilot or model. Angela Glover Blackwell's concept of "the curb-cut effect" reminds us that focusing on equity for one community often generates innovations that benefit all. By evaluating thoroughly and sharing lessons, the impact of a co-design effort can extend far beyond its original scope.

**Re-engage and Reiterate:** After reflecting on outcomes, it's wise to loop back to stakeholders, especially the broader community, to close the feedback loop. Present the evaluation findings to them: "Here's what we achieved together, here's where things fell short, and here's how we propose to move forward." This transparency respects the community's role and keeps them engaged for the next cycle. It also allows community members to voice their perspective on the outcomes—they might validate that yes, things feel better, or they might say, "No, we still aren't seeing the change." Both are important to hear. This could be done in a town hall or via a public report with a request for comments. The empathy interview model could even come back here doing another round of empathy interviews after implementation to gather stories of how the changes affected individuals, which is a rich form of evaluation data.

By the end of Chapter 7's activities, the co-design team ideally transitions into an ongoing Equity Leadership Team for the institution, if one doesn't already exist. This group, having been through the entire cycle, is now well-equipped to guide future equity initiatives and to mentor others. The process has built capacity not just to solve one problem, but to address equity challenges systematically. In essence, the institution and community have practiced "doing democracy" together and can continue to do so.

To conclude the guide, we circle back to the larger significance: In an era of eroding public trust in institutions, community co-design is not just a feel-good exercise—it is a rigorous practice for systemic change. It operationalizes the belief that the people closest to a problem are often closest to the solution. We have seen through each chapter how that belief is put into action: from introspection and shifting mindsets (Chapter 1), to setting up an inclusive process (Chapter 2), to defining problems with those affected (Chapter 3), to gathering evidence and stories (Chapter 4), to inventing solutions together (Chapter 5), to implementing with shared ownership (Chapter 6), and finally to evaluating and learning as a community (Chapter 7). This cycle can

become a continuous journey toward educational equity and justice, with each loop of the cycle driving further progress.

When done well, the outcome is not only specific equity improvements (important as they are) but also a transformed relationship between communities and institutions—a partnership characterized by trust, shared power, and a mutual commitment to targeted universalism (achieving universal goals by focusing on those most in need). In short, community co-design positions families, students, and front-line residents as co-authors of system transformation. As this framework has laid out, that is both the means and the end: means, because their involvement is how we design better solutions; end, because a truly equitable system is one where those with lived experience of inequity are in the driver's seat of change. The work of equity is never "finished," but through continuous co-design, we create systems that can learn, adapt, and inch ever closer to the ideals of justice and inclusion.

# CONCLUSION: RECLAIMING GOVERNANCE, REDISTRIBUTING POWER

Community co-design is not a strategy of convenience—it is a reclamation of agency, dignity, and democratic governance. Across these seven chapters, I've outlined a framework not just for redesigning policies and practices, but for transforming how decisions are made and who holds the power to shape them.

This work begins with critical self-reflection—an inward reckoning that requires institutions and leaders to interrogate their own roles in maintaining inequity. From there, it moves through intentional groundwork, stakeholder trust-building, and deep listening before arriving at the heart of the process: shared ideation, implementation, and continuous improvement. At every phase, the approach insists that those most impacted by systemic harm be not only heard but empowered as co-architects of the solutions.

I first put this approach into practice during the Greater Englewood Listening Campaign—a community-driven inquiry launched in response to a history of disinvestment and top-down school closures. That campaign, grounded in empathy interviews and community codesign, redefined the problem not as a facilities issue, but as a violation of democratic agency and racial equity. What emerged wasn't a list of complaints—it was a clear, community-authored blueprint for change rooted in collective wisdom and lived experience.

That experience shaped my trajectory as both a practitioner and systems leader. I went on to serve as the founding Equity Policy Strategist and later as Director of Racial Equity Initiatives at Chicago Public Schools. From 2019 to 2023, I led the creation and implementation of the CPS Equity Policy Review Process—a systemwide transformation requiring all district policies to undergo community-informed equity analysis. Every policy was reviewed through listening campaigns, empathy interviews, and co-design labs rooted in this very framework. Under my leadership, this process directly shaped more than half of CPS's 150+ policies, as well as multiple board rules and resolutions—anchoring community voice at the core of district governance.

That is the promise of community co-design: not just better policies, but a different kind of institution—one that is relational, responsive, and reimagined. When done well, this work doesn't just reform systems—it

redistributes power. It builds a culture where those traditionally excluded are recognized as experts in their own lives and vital stewards of shared futures.

But equity is not a destination. It is a continuous cycle of reflection, engagement, repair, and redesign. As conditions evolve, we must keep returning to this process—not out of obligation, but out of commitment to liberation, belonging, and justice. The tools, practices, and strategies outlined here are meant to support that long arc. But in the end, the work doesn't live in a rubric or a workbook—it lives in people.

It lives in students who speak their truths. In families who organize for their children's futures. In leaders willing to learn, listen, and let go of control. It lives in you.

***Let's co-design what's next.***

# APPENDIX I: GLOSSARY

**Accountability Loop:** A structured process that ensures follow-through on co-designed commitments. In this framework, accountability loops often involve regular check-ins, public reporting, and shared ownership of progress metrics between institutions and community members.

**Belonging:** A systemic condition in which people feel recognized, respected, and necessary within the structures that govern their lives. Belonging is not the same as inclusion—it requires that systems adapt to meet the needs and aspirations of those furthest from opportunity, not the other way around.

**Co-Design:** A participatory process in which community members—especially those most impacted by systemic inequity—collaborate with institutional stakeholders to define challenges, generate solutions, and implement change. Co-design centers shared power, collective authorship, and equitable process.

**Co-Design Lab:** A structured, facilitated space for community and institutional stakeholders to ideate, prototype, and refine solutions together. Labs may include design thinking protocols, small group work, and empathy-driven feedback cycles.

**Community Epistemology:** The recognition that communities—particularly those historically excluded—possess valid and essential knowledge about their lived realities. This framework treats community experience as a form of expertise equal to empirical data.

**Critical Self-Reflection:** A practice of individual and collective introspection that examines how identity, privilege, bias, and positionality shape one's approach to equity work. It often involves autobiographical exercises, professional learning, and organizational assessment.

**Cultural Responsiveness:** An approach that values and incorporates the cultural strengths, languages, histories, and traditions of all communities into policies, programs, and practices. In equity work, cultural responsiveness is foundational to authentic engagement.

**Disaggregated Data:** Data that is broken down by demographic subgroups—such as race, ethnicity, gender, language, income, disability status, or geography—to expose disparities hidden in aggregated averages.

**Empathy Interviews:** A signature method developed and implemented by the author to surface deep, narrative-based insights through one-on-one, open-ended interviews. Designed to center the lived experience of those furthest from opportunity using techniques adapted from motivational interviewing and appreciative inquiry.

**Equity Challenge:** A clearly defined systemic inequity, framed with specificity, that the co-design process seeks to address. An equity challenge should be measurable, contextualized, and grounded in disaggregated data and community narrative.

**Equity Indicator:** A data point or measure used to track the presence, absence, or severity of inequity. Indicators may include representation gaps, access rates, outcome disparities, or qualitative themes drawn from community listening.

**Equity Lens:** A perspective that prioritizes fairness and justice, particularly across lines of race, class, disability, and other dimensions of oppression. Applying an equity lens means interrogating who benefits, who is burdened, and whose voice is centered in any decision or policy.

**Equity Stance:** An explicit statement of values, commitments, and beliefs that guide a group's approach to equity. In this framework, an equity stance is co-developed by the co-design team at the start of the process to build alignment and shared accountability.

**Greater Englewood Listening Campaign:** A foundational community-based inquiry, led by the author in 2017–2018, that engaged dozens of stakeholders across Chicago's Englewood neighborhood. It modeled the power of community listening to reframe problems, build trust, and lay the groundwork for systemic policy reform.

**Historical Root Cause Analysis:** A method for tracing present-day inequities back to historical, policy-driven, or structural origins. This approach rejects ahistorical explanations and surfaces the legacies of disinvestment, racism, and exclusion that shape current outcomes.

**Human-Centered Design:** A creative problem-solving approach that prioritizes empathy, collaboration, and iteration. In this equity framework, human-centered design is adapted to include power analysis and targeted universalism.

**Implementation Team:** A cross-functional group—ideally including community members—responsible for turning co-designed solutions into practice. This team oversees timelines, task ownership, accountability loops, and ongoing capacity building.

**Iterative Improvement:** The practice of continuously refining strategies based on feedback, evaluation, and reflection. In this framework, improvement is not linear but cyclical, responsive to community voice and changing conditions.

**Lived Experience:** The firsthand knowledge individuals carry is based on their direct interactions with systems, structures, and conditions. Lived experience is central to community co-design and should be treated as equally valid to formal research.

**Participatory Evaluation:** An approach to assessment in which community members are involved in defining success, collecting data, interpreting findings, and recommending changes. Participatory evaluation reinforces transparency, trust, and shared learning.

**Policy Equity Review:** A structured analysis of existing or proposed policies using an equity lens. At CPS, this involved listening to campaigns, empathy interviews, and rubric-guided review to ensure policies supported equitable outcomes.

**Problem Statement (Equity-Framed):** A precise articulation of the equity challenge, grounded in both data and narrative, that avoids race-neutral framing and centers the perspectives of those most impacted.

**Rubric (Co-Design Readiness & Evaluation):** A scored tool used to assess progress across multiple domains, including team readiness, stakeholder inclusion, leadership commitment, and implementation integrity. The rubric supports self-assessment, prioritization, and accountability.

**Stakeholder Mapping:** The process of identifying individuals, organizations, and communities who are impacted by or should be involved in a co-design effort. Effective stakeholder mapping ensures that power is not hoarded and that all relevant perspectives are included.

**Structural Inequity:** Patterns of disadvantage and exclusion that are embedded in policies, institutional practices, cultural representations, and norms. Structural inequities are not accidental—they are the result of deliberate design and must be intentionally dismantled.

**Targeted Universalism:** A strategy that sets universal goals for all while using targeted approaches to meet the unique needs of those furthest from opportunity. This concept is central to equitable policy design and is woven throughout this framework.

**Trust-Building:** The ongoing process of repairing or strengthening relationships through transparency, follow-through, deep listening, and vulnerability. Without trust, no co-design process can succeed.

**Vision of Equity:** A collectively articulated aspiration that outlines what equity looks and feels like in a given context. This shared vision guides decisions, priorities, and accountability measures throughout the co-design process.

# APPENDIX II: COMMUNITY CO-DESIGN RUBRIC WORKBOOK

To support practitioners in assessing and strengthening their co-design for equity efforts, this appendix presents a Co-Design Rubric Workbook. It uses a 1–4 scoring scale (1 = Inadequate/Beginning, 4 = Exemplary) across key dimensions of the co-design process. Teams can use this rubric both as a planning tool (to ensure readiness and preconditions) and as an evaluation tool (to reflect on progress and areas for growth). Each dimension corresponds to a critical component of the framework detailed in Chapters 1–7. By scoring each dimension, teams can identify their current stage and then target strategies to advance their practice. The goal is to facilitate honest dialogue and continuous improvement, not to serve as a judgment. We encourage teams to revisit this rubric at multiple points in the journey – e.g., at the outset, mid-way, and post-implementation – to monitor growth and adapt their approach.

**How to Use the Rubric:** For each dimension, read the guiding question and the descriptors for each level (1 through 4). Circle or highlight the level that best matches your current status. If you find your practice is between levels, you might assign a mid-score (e.g., 2.5) or note aspects of both. After scoring all dimensions, look at your overall profile. Celebrate areas of strength (3s and 4s) and identify areas that need attention (1s and 2s). Use the insights to create an action plan – perhaps by strengthening team capacity where scores are low, or maintaining momentum where scores are high. Remember, the aim is to progress over time. Re-assess periodically to see if scores improve as you implement co-design, which would indicate growth in your equity-centered practices.

Below is the rubric in tabular form for clarity and ease of use. Each dimension is presented with its guiding question and the descriptions of what 1 (Inadequate), 2 (Developing), 3 (Proficient), and 4 (Exemplary) look like in practice.

| **DIMENSION** | Team Readiness & Stakeholder Inclusion | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **ANCHOR QUESTION** | Does the co-design team have the right representation and commitment to equity to begin the work? | | |
| **LEVEL DESCRIPTION** | | | |
| **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| The co-design team is not meaningfully representative of those most impacted by the issue. Key voices (e.g., students, families from marginalized groups) are missing or there is only a token presence. Team members have not engaged in equity self-reflection or established shared norms. Leadership support is absent or superficial (equity work is seen as optional or a one-off exercise). | Some effort has been made to include diverse stakeholders, but important groups remain under-represented. The team shows partial understanding of equity (perhaps via a one-time training), but not all members have a clear equity stance. Leadership expresses verbal support for co-design but has allocated minimal resources or authority to it. Basic group norms exist but may not fully empower marginalized voices. | The co-design team includes a range of stakeholders reflecting those affected by the inequity (e.g., multiple community members, students, front-line staff, etc.). Team members have each articulated an equity stance and engaged in foundational equity learning (such as discussing personal biases or doing equity workshops), creating a common language. Leaders are on board and have dedicated time/funding to the process. The team has agreed on inclusive norms and decision-making processes that elevate voices furthest from power. | The co-design coalition is truly inclusive and community-led – those historically marginalized form a significant portion of the team and hold real authority. All members demonstrate strong equity consciousness and humility, continually reflecting on their biases and power. Leadership commitment is evident in formal policy (e.g., a charter or mandate for co-design) and in practice (substantial resources and political capital invested). The team's culture is one of trust, courage, and shared ownership, meeting all preconditions for success. |

| **DIMENSION** | Equity Focus & Problem Definition | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **ANCHOR QUESTION** | Is the equity challenge clearly defined, with a focus on those most impacted and informed by data and context? | | |
| **LEVEL DESCRIPTION** | | | |
| **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** |
| The problem is ill-defined or framed in general terms that mask the equity issue (e.g., described in race-neutral language). Little or no disaggregated data has been used – the team lacks insight into which groups are most affected. No clear equity goal or target outcome is articulated. Contextual factors (history, socio-economic conditions) are ignored, leading to a shallow or misinformed understanding of the issue. | The equity challenge is defined but may still be too broad or not explicitly centered on those most impacted. Some data analysis has been done, showing disparities, but certain data gaps remain. The team has a general goal (e.g., "improve X for Y group") but it may not be sharply quantified, or time bound. Some context analysis has been considered, but the historical or root cause perspective is limited. | The team has a clear, specific definition of the equity challenge, explicitly naming the affected group(s) and the disparity to be addressed (e.g., "reduce dropout rates for English learners by 50%"). Disaggregated data and evidence have been analyzed to ground the understanding of the problem. The equity goal is well-defined and linked to identified disparities. The historical and contextual factors contributing to the issue have been researched and acknowledged (e.g., past policies, community demographics, etc.). | The equity challenge is defined with precision and nuance, co-created with community input to reflect lived realities. It centers the experiences of those most impacted and includes qualitative and quantitative evidence of the gap. The goal is ambitious yet concrete, with clear metrics for success. The team demonstrates deep contextual knowledge – including historical injustices, power dynamics, and cultural factors – that frame why the problem exists. This rich understanding guides all subsequent work. |

| **DIMENSION** | Root Cause Analysis & Equity Audit | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **ANCHOR QUESTION** | Has the team thoroughly investigated root causes of the inequity, using data (equity audit) and community voice to inform understanding? | | |
| **LEVEL DESCRIPTION** | | | |
| **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** |
| No formal root cause analysis has been conducted. The team may be guessing at causes or focusing on surface symptoms. An equity audit (systematic review of data/policies) was not done or was done narrowly without examining systemic factors. Little to no community | The team has identified some potential causes of the problem, but the analysis might not be comprehensive. They have conducted an equity audit or data review in some areas, but possibly missed key domains (for example, looked at student | A thorough root cause analysis has been completed, using tools like fishbone diagrams or "5 Whys" with participation from diverse stakeholders. The equity audit spanned multiple domains (policies, practices, outcomes) to | Root cause analysis was participatory and exhaustive. Community members and staff together analyzed data and mapped causes, ensuring that lived experiences directly informed the interpretation of data. The equity audit was expansive, examining |

| | | | |
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| input has been incorporated in diagnosing causes. As a result, the understanding of why the problem persists is limited or off-target. | outcomes but not at resource allocation or policy). Community perspectives on causes have been heard informally or from a limited group. The team recognizes some systemic factors but might not see the full picture (e.g., identifying academic gaps but not the bias in expectations or curriculum that contribute). | uncover where inequities lie. Data findings have been triangulated with community input – e.g., listening session themes align with and explain the data patterns. The team has identified a set of underlying causes (structural, cultural, policy-related) that drive the inequity, and these are documented and agreed upon. | everything from quantitative metrics to written policies to informal practices, revealing systemic biases or gaps. The analysis explicitly linked current inequities to historical and structural root causes (e.g., segregation, funding formulas, institutional biases). There is strong consensus on root causes, and the team has a shared theory of why the inequity exists, which drives solution-generation. |

| **DIMENSION** | Community Co-Design & Power-Sharing | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **ANCHOR QUESTION** | Were solutions co-designed with authentic power-sharing between community stakeholders and institutional actors? | | |
| **LEVEL DESCRIPTION** | | | |
| **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** |
| Solutions were mostly devised by institutional staff or experts, with minimal input from community stakeholders (feedback might have been sought after ideas were mostly formed). The process was top-down or only superficially participatory (e.g., a single community meeting with no decision-making power). Traditional power dynamics remained – community members had little influence over outcomes. This could be characterized as tokenism rather than true co-design. | The process included community stakeholders in brainstorming or discussions, but significant decisions may still have been made by the institution. There was some attempt at collaboration, perhaps workshops or committees with community representation, but power-sharing was not fully realized (for example, community input was taken but final proposals were filtered heavily by officials). Some community ideas are reflected in solutions, but others may have been disregarded without clear rationale. | Solutions were developed in a collaborative setting where community members and staff worked side by side in design sessions. Community stakeholders had a substantial role in generating ideas and shaping proposals. Structures for shared decision-making were implemented – e.g., a co-design committee had equal votes from community and institutional members on which solutions to advance. Power imbalances were actively addressed (facilitators ensured equitable participation, leadership listened more than spoke). The resulting solutions show clear influence of community-identified priorities and knowledge. | The co-design process was community-driven and exemplified flattened hierarchy. Community members not only participated but often led discussions or activities. A formal power-sharing arrangement was in place (such as co-chairs from community and institution, consensus decision-making, or delegated authority to the co-design group for final recommendations). The process was transparent and accountable to the broader community (regular updates, feedback loops). The solutions that emerged are truly co-authored – community participants can see their fingerprints all over the outcomes, and these outcomes challenge the status quo in meaningful ways (not watered-down compromises). The co-design experience itself built community capacity and leadership for future endeavors. |

| **DIMENSION** | Implementation & Accountability | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **ANCHOR QUESTION** | Are co-designed solutions being implemented with fidelity, and are structures in place to ensure accountability to equity goals? | | |
| **LEVEL DESCRIPTION** | | | |
| **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** |
| Implementation of the solutions has been weak or not started. Plans may exist on paper but there is little action or resource commitment. Community partners have been largely cut out or left behind after the | Some elements of the co-designed plan are being implemented, but progress is spotty. Responsibilities might be assigned primarily to institutional staff, with limited community role in | The co-designed solutions are in active implementation with a clear action plan. A joint implementation team (including community representatives) is overseeing the work, meeting regularly | Implementation is robust and truly collaborative. Community stakeholders continue to play key roles in executing and overseeing the solutions (e.g., co-implementing programs, sitting on oversight committees |

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| design phase – the implementation is institution-driven with minimal transparency. There are no clear accountability measures or oversight for the implementation; it's unclear who is responsible for what, and equity goals risk being lost. | implementation. There is some monitoring, but it may not be systematic – e.g., internal check-ins occur, but community stakeholders aren't regularly involved in accountability checks. Implementation may be facing hurdles (lack of training, partial buy-in) that aren't fully addressed, putting consistency at risk. | to manage progress. Accountability structures are in place: specific equity targets are being monitored, and responsibilities for tasks are clearly assigned. The institution has allocated necessary resources (budget, personnel) to support the changes. There is ongoing communication about implementation status to stakeholders (for example, public progress updates). When challenges arise, the team addresses them collaboratively, and there is commitment from leadership to stick with the effort. | with decision authority). Accountability for equity outcomes is embedded at multiple levels – from public dashboards tracking progress to leadership performance metrics tied to the initiative. The initiative's activities are fully resourced and integrated into the institution's operations (not an ad-hoc add-on). The institution demonstrates high fidelity to the co-designed plan, and any deviations are openly discussed and agreed with the stakeholder team. There is a culture of accountability where everyone, from executives to community members, feels responsible for the success of the effort. |

| **DIMENSION** | Monitoring & Transparency | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **ANCHOR QUESTION** | Is the process of monitoring outcomes and sharing results transparent, inclusive, and oriented towards learning? | | |
| **LEVEL DESCRIPTION** | | | |
| **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** |
| Little to no monitoring of outcomes is happening post-implementation. Data that could show progress (or lack thereof) is not being collected or analyzed. There is a lack of transparency – stakeholders are largely in the dark about whether the effort is making a difference. The institution may be hesitant to share results, especially if problems persist, leading to a breakdown in communication and trust. | Some monitoring mechanisms exist (such as periodic reports), but they may be irregular or not fully participatory. Data is being collected on basic metrics, but analysis might stay internal or high-level. There is some transparency – perhaps an annual report or meeting – but not a continuous open flow of information. If goals are not being met, the communication about it may be limited or defensive rather than inviting collaborative problem-solving. | A monitoring plan is in place, with clear indicators aligned to the equity goals being tracked over time. Results are shared with the co-design stakeholders and broader community on a regular schedule (e.g., quarterly progress updates or dashboards). The process is reasonably transparent – both successes and challenges are communicated. The monitoring involves stakeholders to some extent; for example, community members review data in oversight meetings or provide feedback on the progress reports. There is an evident commitment to learning – when data shows shortfalls, the team discusses why and what can be improved. | Monitoring and evaluation are fully transparent and participatory. Community and institutional representatives jointly define what metrics matter and review them together. Data on progress is publicly accessible (open dashboards, community meetings presenting data) to ensure the wider community can hold the institution accountable. The initiative actively solicits community feedback on how the change is experienced on the ground, treating qualitative input as equally important to quantitative metrics. There is a strong culture of learning and continuous improvement – setbacks or unmet targets are not hidden; instead, they're openly analyzed with stakeholder input to adjust strategies. This openness further builds trust as it signals the institution's willingness to be held accountable and to keep improving. |

| **DIMENSION** | Iterative Improvement & Adaptation |
|---|---|

| ANCHOR QUESTION | Does the initiative incorporate continuous improvement, and is there evidence that learning from the process is leading to adaptations or new cycles of co-design? | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **LEVEL DESCRIPTION** | | | |
| **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** |
| The effort is treated as finished once initial implementation is done. There is little intention or mechanism to revisit and improve the strategies. If equity outcomes haven't fully been achieved, there is no clear plan to refine or iterate; the initiative risks stagnation or being deemed a one-time project. The organization shows signs of reverting to "business as usual" rather than incorporating the lessons learned. | There is recognition that further work may be needed, but the approach to iteration is ad-hoc. Perhaps some issues noted in evaluation are being addressed with minor tweaks, but a structured continuous improvement cycle is not in place. The team may reconvene sporadically to discuss adjustments, or plan a follow-up project in the future, but it's not yet an ongoing cyclical practice. The mindset is moving towards continuous improvement but not fully realized in action. | The initiative has entered a phase of iterative improvement. Based on evaluation findings, the team has made specific adaptations to strategies or is in the process of a second co-design cycle to tackle remaining issues. Continuous improvement methods (like PDSA cycles) are being used deliberately – Plan changes, Do/implement, Study results, Act on them. The organization has incorporated some of the co-design practices into other work streams (e.g., using community input for other decisions), showing that learning is spreading. The stakeholders remain engaged and there's momentum to maintain or deepen the work until equity goals are fully reached. | Iteration and adaptation are ingrained in the process – the co-design initiative has evolved into a continuous effort for equity. The team, or a successor equity team, has already launched new cycles of inquiry and design to refine solutions or to address related equity challenges. There is a long-term roadmap that acknowledges equity work as ongoing; success is viewed as progress, not an endpoint. The organization has formally adopted continuous co-design or equity review as a standard practice (for instance, committing to annual equity audits and co-design sessions as part of its governance). This dimension also reflects that the institution and community have developed strong mutual resilience – setbacks or new challenges are met with a collaborative problem-solving spirit, indicating that co-design for equity has become a way of governing, not just a project |

**Using the Scores:** Once you have self-assessed each dimension, you can tally an overall score or simply use the profile descriptively. For a rough guide: totals in the highest range (for example, 38–48 if each dimension were scored 1–4) suggest the initiative is operating at a model level across the board. Lower totals (e.g., 12–19) indicate foundational elements need significant strengthening before expecting transformative results. Most will find themselves in the middle (20–37), with some strong areas and some weaker ones, reflecting partial implementation of best practices. The purpose of this rubric is not to label or grade efforts, but to guide reflection and continuous learning. Teams can discuss dimension by dimension: "What would it take for us to move from a 2 to a 3 in this area? What actions can we commit to?" In doing so, the rubric itself becomes a tool for co-designing the improvement of the co-design process, closing the loop on meta-learning.

Finally, it's worth noting that this rubric is a starting point. Users should feel free to adapt it – adding dimensions (perhaps specific to their context, like "Student Leadership" separately if working in a school) or modifying descriptors to better fit their environment. The core idea is to remain equity-centered in our self-assessment: to bravely examine where we are falling short of our equity ideals and to collaboratively chart a path forward. In the spirit of equity and co-creation, we invite you to contribute back any improvements or context-specific rubrics you develop, thereby enriching the practice for others.

Through tools like this rubric and the collective journey outlined in this guide, municipalities, schools, and organizations can navigate the complex work of equity systematically and collaboratively – ensuring that those who have historically been furthest from opportunity are now centrally involved in designing a more just future for all.

# APPENDIX III: CO-DESIGN TOOLS

## COMMUNITY CO-DESIGN RUBRIC WORKBOOK: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### PURPOSE:

The Rubric Workbook is a diagnostic and progress-monitoring tool that evaluates the quality, equity orientation, and transformational potential of a co-design effort. It helps teams self-assess, track growth, and remain grounded in equity principles across all phases.

### KEY RUBRIC DOMAINS:

| Phase | Criteria | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Readiness Through Self-Reflection* | Team has engaged in structured equity reflection activities | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| | Team demonstrates awareness of institutional privilege and power dynamics | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| *Preconditions for Success* | Leadership has committed time, resources, and authority to the co-design process | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| | Stakeholder trust-building and norm-setting have been initiated | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| *Defining the Equity Challenge* | The equity challenge is clearly defined, disaggregated, and tied to root causes | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| | Community voice and historical context are meaningfully included in problem framing | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| *Equity Audits & Listening* | Quantitative and qualitative data collection includes multiple equity indicators | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| | Empathy interviews or other listening practices have shaped problem understanding | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| *Co-Designing Solutions* | Community members co-facilitate and co-author solution development | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| | Solutions are equity-centered, address root causes, and use inclusive design strategies | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| | Implementation is led by a shared community-institution team | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Implementation & Sustaining Practice* | Actions are resourced, time-bound, and include mechanisms for community accountability | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| *Evaluation & Iteration* | Community feedback and outcome data are used for real-time improvement | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| | The co-design process is institutionalized for sustainability beyond the pilot phase | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |

### Overall Rubric Score Interpretation

Your total score (out of 56) provides a snapshot of where your team or institution stands in operationalizing community co-design for equity. Use the categories below to assess your current status and next steps:

| Score Range | Interpretation | Implications |
|---|---|---|
| *48–56* | Transformative Practice | Co-design is embedded, equity is centered, and community partners are empowered as co-leaders. Your institution is modeling equitable governance. Focus on sustaining and scaling. |
| *36–47* | Proficient with Growth Areas | Strong foundation and practices in place. Some dimensions may need deeper implementation or community alignment. Prioritize continuous feedback and power-sharing. |
| *24–35* | Emerging Foundations | Co-design practices are underway, but many are early-stage or inconsistent. Build internal capacity, deepen reflection, and strengthen authentic community partnerships. |
| *Below 24* | Beginning Stage | Minimal structures for co-design or equity-centered governance are present. Consider pausing implementation to focus on readiness, trust-building, and leadership alignment. |

# COMMUNITY CO-DESIGN POLICY PLAN TEMPLATE: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## PURPOSE:

The Community Co-Design Policy Plan Template is a structured planning tool for public institutions redesigning policies or systems through equity-centered co-design. It enables teams to build transparent, participatory, and accountable processes that center those most impacted by inequities.

## OVERVIEW:

The template operationalizes the full lifecycle of equity-based redesign through a series of guided prompts, planning tables, and RACI (Responsible–Accountable–Consulted–Informed) matrices. It is grounded in the *Community Co-Design for Equity Framework* and maps directly to its seven phases—from readiness and defining the equity challenge to solution development, implementation, and evaluation.

## KEY COMPONENTS:

1. **POP Planning:** Clarifies Purpose, Outcomes, and Process collaboratively.
2. **Equity Challenge Definition:** Teams analyze current inequities, opportunity indicators, and root causes.
3. **Phase-Based Timeline:** Each co-design phase (Preparation to Iteration) includes planning tables with space for responsible parties, due dates, and progress tracking.
4. **RACI Role Clarity:** Users assign leadership roles for empathy interviews, co-design labs, and surveys.
5. **Stakeholder Engagement:** Ensures transparent recruitment, inclusive outreach, and sustained feedback loops.
6. **Evaluation & Metrics:** Teams identify equity indicators and disaggregation methods.
7. **Risk & Accountability:** Plans include contingencies and public accountability mechanisms.

**Alignment to Framework:** This template brings the framework to life by converting theory into an actionable planning structure that institutions can use to build a transparent co-design roadmap. It embeds power-sharing, community leadership, and iterative development into each planning phase.

# EMPATHY INTERVIEW WORKBOOK: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## PURPOSE:

The Empathy Interview Workbook is a field-ready, justice-centered tool for conducting narrative-based interviews with those most impacted by a given policy or equity challenge. It provides a semi-structured format to capture lived experiences, emotions, and redesign ideas that can inform systemic change.

## OVERVIEW:

Rooted in human-centered design, Motivational Interviewing, and Appreciative Inquiry, this tool provides a protocol for meaningful, non-extractive inquiry. It aligns with the *Community Co-Design for Equity Framework*—especially Phases 3 and 4—supporting problem definition and community listening.

## CORE FEATURES:

1. **Opening Script and Grounding Protocol:** Establishes consent, safety, and purpose of the conversation.
2. **Question Sequence:**
    a. Warm-up (e.g., a moment of pride)
    b. Core policy reflections
    c. Systemic impact and redesign ideas
3. **Likert Reflection Section:** Captures quantitative responses on perceived fairness and effectiveness.
4. **Closing Prompts:** Invite participants to name what's missing and offer additional context.
5. **Coding & Synthesis Method:** Includes a 6-step process for turning responses into themes using a binary matrix, disaggregated analysis, and synthesis alongside surveys and co-design lab findings.

## Alignment to Framework:

This workbook is critical to Phases 3 (Defining the Equity Challenge) and 4 (Community Listening). It activates the principle that those closest to the problem carry essential expertise. The structure supports ethical data collection, power-aware facilitation, and narrative rigor.

**Access to full length tool:** [link]

# WORK CITED


1. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) introduced the theory of intersectionality, illuminating how overlapping identities (race, gender, etc.) expose people to intersecting forms of discrimination.

2. Gloria Ladson-Billings & William Tate (1995): Pioneered Critical Race Theory in education, arguing that institutional policies often reinforce racial inequity unless consciously countered.

3. bell hooks (2000) emphasized the need for intentional, critical practice in institutions to challenge ingrained biases (see Where We Stand: Class Matters).

4. john a. powell & Heidi L. Ake (2021): Advocated for targeted universalism – setting universal goals pursued by targeted strategies – as a means to achieve structural equity.

5. Barbara Ransby (2003): Historian of the civil rights movement (biographer of Ella Baker), highlighting how grassroots, community-led organizing (e.g., SNCC) redistributed power in the 1960s.

6. Alicia Garza (2014): Co-founder of #BlackLivesMatter, articulated the value of horizontal, community-driven leadership in modern racial justice movements.

7. C. Wright Mills (1959): Sociologist who urged connecting personal troubles with public issues (the "sociological imagination"), a principle echoed in linking individual stories to systemic inequity.

8. Eve Tuck & K. Wayne Yang (2012): Warned against superficial fixes to deep injustices ("Decolonization is not a metaphor"), underscoring the need to confront root causes and institutional resistance.

9. Eugene Bardach (2012): Developed the Eightfold Path for policy analysis – a stepwise method (define problem, gather evidence, identify alternatives, etc.) that informs the structured approach to policy change.

10. Frances Fowler (2013): Expert on education policy who notes that power dynamics and political contexts must be navigated for reforms to take hold in school systems.

11. Claude Steele (2010): Demonstrated how stereotype threat and lack of belonging can undermine marginalized groups; calls for creating environments where everyone feels safe to contribute (see Whistling Vivaldi).

12. Glenn E. Singleton (2015): Developed frameworks for courageous conversations about race, providing tools for honest intra- and inter-group dialogue in institutions.

13. Derald Wing Sue (2010): Scholar of microaggressions and bias; emphasized that marginalized people often carry the burden of educating others, a dynamic to avoid by encouraging privileged groups' self-reflection.

14. Muhammad Khalifa (2018): Advocate for culturally responsive school leadership; emphasizes examining institutional blind spots and centering marginalized students in school change efforts.

15. Angela Glover Blackwell et al. (2017): Explained the "curb-cut effect" – how solutions designed for those most disadvantaged (curb cuts for wheelchair users) end up benefiting everyone, illustrating targeted universalism in practice.

16. Tara J. Yosso (2005) Introduced the concept of Community Cultural Wealth, recognizing the value of the knowledge and experiences of marginalized groups as crucial assets in change efforts.

17. Joseph A. Maxwell (2013): Promoted interactive and iterative approaches to qualitative research design, aligning with the need for continuous feedback and adjustment in equity work.

18. Colin Robson (2011) Emphasized real-world research methods and mixing quantitative and qualitative data to solve practical problems, as in an equity audit.

19. Virginia Eubanks (2018): Showed how supposedly neutral technologies and policies (in welfare, housing, etc.) can perpetuate inequality unless scrutinized (see Automating Inequality).

20. Benjamin Bloom (1956): Developed a taxonomy of educational objectives (cognitive, affective, etc.), reminding us that true success should be measured not just in numbers but in changes in understanding, attitudes, and skills.